

Gender, Empire and Citizenship Issues: A Survey of Research Paths and Scholarly Debates on the Italian Case Study in Comparative Perspective*

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ABSTRACT

Diese Sammelbesprechung untersucht eine Auswahl an einschlägigen Werken, die sich mit den kaum zu trennenden Themenfeldern Gender, Empire und Staatsangehörigkeit innerhalb der italienischen Kolonialerfahrung auseinandersetzen. Der Untersuchungszeitraum umfasst die 1920er und 1930er Jahre, mit vereinzelten Rückblenden in die vorausgehenden liberalen Jahrzehnte. Es werden insbesondere Veröffentlichungen in italienischer und englischer Sprache besprochen, um darin vorkommende Forschungstraditionen und akademische Debatten herauszuheben die sich mit dem italienischen Fall beschäftigen. Diese werden wiederum vergleichend betrachtet und in Relation zu der etablierten Forschung zum britischen und französischen Imperialismus gesetzt, zu der sie Ähnlichkeiten, aber auch Unterschiede aufweisen.

Gender, empire, and citizenship are intertwined issues that have been studied together only in relatively recent times, within a growing literature that promises to be fertile ground for new scholarly discoveries. This neglect and late arrival on the academic roundtable is not surprising bearing in mind that “gender”, a useful category of historical analysis, has become the object of systematic reflection merely in the last four decades, and most notably following the 1975 pioneering research of Natalie Zemon Davis, and the famous 1986 article of Joan W. Scott.¹ Moreover, whereas a gendered reading

* This contribution is dedicated to the memory of University of Cambridge PhD candidate Giulio Regeni, to the pursuit for truth and justice about the brutal murder of Giulio in Egypt while carrying out his doctoral research, and to the assaulted principles of human life and academic freedom.

of citizenship has already produced a well-established scholarship,² the research strand taking into consideration the gender and citizenship variables in relation to empire has been less substantial, and in certain national historiographies has still a rather marginal place. In the Italian context in particular, one should additionally bear in mind that non-hagiographic and non-ideological Italian scholarship about colonialism and imperialism in general started only from the 1970s onwards, due to certain myths, suppressions, and denials of the Italian colonial past, as Angelo Del Boca has highlighted.³

The purpose of this review is to offer a survey of research paths and academic debates that have delved into the multifaceted phenomenon of Italian imperialism from the perspective of gender, and, in diverse forms, through notions of citizenship and colonial subjecthood as well. Since scholars have mainly focussed on the African sites of the Italian empire, Part One explores the scholarship concerning the Horn of Africa and colonial Libya. In Part Two, in order to encourage the comparative approach, the review turns to some of the academic works on the British and the French empires, and underlines a number of similarities and differences with the debates about the Italian case. The overall objectives of this article are to point at those discussions that have started challenging readers to look at Italian imperialism with new eyes, from the fresh and refreshing perspectives of gender studies and citizenship; to draw attention to the Italian-language scholarship that for linguistic reasons might be less known to the wider international and non-Italian readership; and finally, to appreciate the use of the comparative focal lens so as to emphasise parallels and variations across the scholarly dialogue on “minor” and “major” imperial cases.

Before starting our review, however, it is useful to clarify the terms “gender” and “citizenship”. Studying “gender” not only means acknowledging the actions and presence of women as historical protagonists (victims or agents) left voiceless and invisible for a long time, but also entails taking a *gendered* perspective to explore women and men as *gendered* beings. In other words, it involves examining the cultural and social understandings of sexual differences (i.e. women and men’s gender roles) along with related constructions of femininity and masculinity as they were shaped within the imperial context.⁴ “Citizenship,” as applied to colonial times, refers to a many-sided political

1 N. Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays*, Stanford 1975; J. W. Scott, *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis*, in: *American Historical Review* 91 (1986) 5, pp. 1053–1075.

2 See, among many, U. Vogel, *Is Citizenship Gender-Specific?*, in: U. Vogel and M. Moran (eds.), *The Frontiers of Citizenship*, London 1991, pp. 58–85; U. Vogel, *Marriage and the Boundaries of Citizenship*, in: B. van Steenberg (ed.), *The Condition of Citizenship*, London 1994, pp. 76–89; D. T. Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities*, London 1993; and N. Yuval-Davis, *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, in: *Feminist Review* 57 (1997) 1, pp. 4–27.

3 A. Del Boca, *The Myths, Suppressions, Denials, and Defaults of Italian Colonialism*, in: P. Palumbo (ed.), *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, Berkeley 2003, pp. 17–36.

4 See the reflections of P. Levine, *Introduction: Why Gender and Empire?*, in: P. Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire*, Oxford 2004, pp. 1–2. As Margaret Strobil notes, “[...] Gender history can be about men, even exclusively about men, if it deals with men as gendered beings, with masculinity.” M. Strobil, *Women’s History, Gender History, and European Colonialism*, in: G. Blue, M. Bunton, and R. Crozier (eds.), *Colonialism and the Modern World: Selected Studies*, New York 2002, p. 52.

and legal institution stretching from the metropole to the overseas empire, which incorporated “metropolitan citizens”, “colonial citizens”, and “colonial subjects” in different ways. Each of these three expressions carries a specific historical meaning, is shaped by specific rules of acquisition (such as, *jus sanguinis*, *jus soli*, marriage), points to specific rights and duties, and provides in various manners a multi-layered identity in relation to the national and/or imperial community under examination.⁵

Part One: Literature on gender, empire and citizenship issues in the Horn of Africa and colonial Libya

Scholarly investigations on the history of Italian imperialism from the above-mentioned perspectives have largely focussed on the African continent. The major monographs and articles pertain to the Horn of Africa (i.e. Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia /later Italian East Africa) and to North Africa (i.e. Cyrenaica and Tripolitania /later Libya). Most of them cover the liberal and the fascist epochs of Italian colonialism, including therefore the 1920s and the 1930s, with a majority of publications examining the late fascist era, and more particularly the years that followed the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia. These works are built upon a variety of methodological frameworks, providing a set of literature that, albeit less substantial than the scholarships concerning the British and the French empires, is stimulating and rich with insights. Most importantly, bearing in mind that Italian colonialism, as other European examples, has been dealt with in the past by (mainly) military and political historians and on the basis of (mainly) European colonial archives, it is pertinent to stress that the historiography of the Italian empire – like that of other imperial countries – is slowly opening up to new concepts and instruments of historical analysis, allowing extension of inquiries from military and political aspects to social and cultural facets.

The pioneering book *Parole e corpi* by Barbara Sòrgoni⁶ deserves merit for first stimulating this field of study in Italy, and inspiring in multiple ways most of the research surveyed here. In her monograph, Sòrgoni employs the approach of historical anthropology to offer a vivid account of the anthropological and juridical discourses produced during Italian colonialism on sexuality and interracial unions between the Italian colonizers and African colonial subjects in Eritrea, and on so-called *meticci* (mixed-race children) born in the colony. Largely based on unexplored ethnological writings of authors who had direct contact with the indigenous populations, Sòrgoni’s work sheds light on metropolitan ideas and representations surrounding the *madamato* phenomenon (i.e. interracial relationships) and marriage issues, as well as the ambiguous citizenship position of the

5 For a recent discussion on citizenship as a “term” and as a “concept” in historical perspective, see S. Donati, *A Political History of National Citizenship and Identity in Italy, 1861–1950*, Stanford 2013, especially pp. 1–3, pp. 8–20 and pp. 121–122.

6 B. Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi: Antropologia, discorso giuridico e politiche sessuali interrazziali nella colonia Eritrea (1890–1941)*, Naples 1998.

Italo-Eritrean progeny. The chosen periodization is also worth noting, because Sòrgoni's inquiry covers two periods of colonial rule – 1890–1934 and 1935–1941 – with the turning point being not so much the First World War or the rise of Fascism to power in 1922, but the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

Whereas Sòrgoni excavates Italian anthropological and juridical discourse, leaving aside the direct voice of colonial women (“[...]we talk about them and their bodies, but we do not hear their voice”)⁷, Giulia Barrera takes the perspective of social history and recovers some of the voices and experiences of the African women. In her 1996 study *Dangerous Liaisons*,⁸ the author attends to the history of *madamato* across the liberal and the fascist periods, as well as enriches her narrative with a number of interviews from Italy and Eritrea. These female testimonies, though limited in number, are very useful, since they include the Eritrean wife of a *ascari* husband (i.e. indigenous soldier within Italian troops); an Italo-Eritrean woman (a *meticcina*), born in Asmara in 1917, and brought up in the empire throughout the entire fascist colonial period; and another former *madama* who had a metis boy from an Italian father, and who was abandoned by the latter. Subsequently, in two further works that detail the upbringing, identity and citizenship issues of metis children on the one hand, as well as questions of citizenship, sexuality, and the state in colonial Eritrea on the other, Barrera deepens her historical examination of the liberal years and the fascist *ventennio*, drawing on untapped archival documents and oral history, the latter giving voice to several Italo-Eritreans born in the colony during the 1930s and the 1940s, and to their African mothers.⁹

Along with the approaches of historical anthropology and social history, further cross-disciplinary perspectives have been adopted in the literature, bridging gender studies and cultural history. In her monograph *Colonia per maschi*, published in 2007, Giulietta Stefani investigates Italy's colonial experience as it was lived by Italian militaries and civilians in Ethiopia during the 1930s, and examines it through the innovative lens of *mascolinità* (masculinity).¹⁰ Since the latter concept is “invisible” in many sources, Stefani skilfully uses and creatively rereads a variety of scattered material, including colonial archives' documents, contemporary newspaper articles, a corpus of diaries, as well as the famous postcolonial novel of Ennio Flaiano, *Tempo di uccidere* (*Time to kill*). Thanks to this multiplicity of sources, the author is able to discuss both public discourse and private memory with the aim of complicating the story of the Italian empire with a colourful mosaic of male experiences and male perceptions on the Italo-African encounter.

7 Ibid., p. 7.

8 G. Barrera, *Dangerous Liaisons: Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea, 1890–1941*, Program of African Studies Working Paper 1 (1996), pp. 1–79.

9 G. Barrera, *Patrilinearità, razza e identità: L'educazione degli italo-eritrei durante il colonialismo italiano (1885–1934)*, in: *Quaderni storici* 109 (2002) 1, pp. 21–53; G. Barrera, *Sex, Citizenship and the State: The Construction of the Public and Private Spheres in Colonial Eritrea*, in: P. Wilson (ed.), *Gender, Family and Sexuality: The Private Sphere in Italy, 1860–1945*, Basingstoke 2004, pp. 157–172.

10 G. Stefani, *Colonia per maschi. Italiani in Africa Orientale: Una storia di genere*, Verona 2007.

Moving from Italy's East African colonies to the North African context of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, Barbara Spadaro thoughtfully addresses not only the history of women between Italy and Libya to make the female protagonists "visible", but also the relational construction of gender and related notions of femininity, shaped historically by class, religion, culture and race.¹¹ In particular she sets herself the task of examining the imperial *imaginaire* of the Italian female colonizers, with an emphasis on representations and auto-representations by the Italian bourgeoisie and the colonial world of administrators, traders, professionals and teachers in Libya, from the beginning of Italian occupation in 1911 to the eve of World War Two. In line with the methodological challenges faced by the other scholars, Spadaro also emphasises the marginality of women in colonial archives, and reiterates the necessity to look for complementary historical sources. She therefore combines an analysis of contemporary press and memoirs with an examination of colonial private photographs and family albums. Her research is enhanced by several personal interviews with Italian colons who lived in Libya for years (the owners of the family albums), providing the reader with multiple gazes on imperial realities.

1a. Representations of women, gender roles, and men within the Italian imperial context

Imperialism meant encounters. In studying the interaction between the Italian colonizers and the colonized Africans through the lenses of gender and citizenship, most of the works under review pay particular attention to Italian representations and perceptions about the "African Other". Sòrgoni tackles the question of how East African women were perceived by Italian men; Spadaro deals with the way in which female Libyans were depicted by their Italian metropolitan "sisters"; Stefani discusses how male indigenous soldiers (the *ascari*) were portrayed by Italian military men.¹² This emphasis on cultural constructions and representations is of great importance because, as Stefani reminds us, forms of knowledge and subjective perceptions are valuable instruments of analysis to grasp the political, economic and social processes of imperialism, in line with Michel Foucault's philosophical writings and Edward Said's *Orientalism*.¹³

Through the eyes of Italian colonial observers and related ethnological writings, Sòrgoni's research underlines the image of the indigenous African woman as the exotic and the erotic Black Venus always seductive and available, as well as the numerous descriptions of the gender roles that the encountered female colonial subjects were perceived to have in their local society. In particular, the scholar helps readers to comprehend the way in which the Italians, in the colony and in the metropole, presumed and understood the sexual and matrimonial relations of the colonized populations, and consequently construed indigenous women's behaviour and attitude. All these discourses pertained to female colonial subjects and their bodies, and provided the "information" that Italian

11 B. Spadaro, *Una colonia italiana. Incontri, memorie e rappresentazioni tra Italia e Libia*, Milan 2013.

12 Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*; Spadaro, *Una colonia italiana*; Stefani, *Colonia per maschi*.

13 Stefani, *Colonia per maschi*, pp. 20–21.

officials, administrating the colony, used extensively in order to define and prescribe licit and illicit forms of contact between the Italian citizens and the East African subjects.¹⁴ Concentrating on the encounter between female Italians and their Libyan “sisters”, Spadaro considers instead the contours and the content of representations and auto-representations endorsed by Italy’s metropolitan women. More particularly, thanks to the diaries of two female Italians who travelled to different parts of Libya with their respective Italian husbands in the 1910s and in the 1930s, Spadaro is able to underscore the moral order, gender ideas, and models of femininity that were regarded by these Italian women as appropriate for the definition of the colonizers’ whiteness (*bianchezza*) and their belonging to Europe.¹⁵ Within this female vision of (Christian) Europeans, one can remark that ideas of marriage, love and sexual relations were used to measure the level of civilisation of “the Other”, a point equally raised by Sòrgoni.¹⁶ So, the Muslim women of Bengasi, to take an example discussed in Spadaro’s research, are described in Orientalist terms, denied any subjectivity, and seen as passive creatures within arranged marriages.¹⁷ Also, the picture is further complicated by the encounter of female Italians with indigenous feminine sensuality, either at the sight of black *sciarmutte* (prostitutes) in the town of Murzuck in the Fezzan area, or in watching the belly dance performances of Arabic women in Tripoli. In these occasions, the words and the photos of the Italian female protagonist stigmatize different types of North-African nudity as primitive and degrading in order to highlight the distance between “them,” local women of low rung, and the Italian metropolitan “ladies”.¹⁸

These scholarly debates touching upon discursive representations about African women in the East and in the North of Italy’s African empire have now been extended to African men too, and in particular to the group of the *ascari*. The military policy to recruit local African soldiers within a European Power’s Army was very common in the colonial era, based on the tactic of choosing some ethnic, linguistic, and social groups to conquer other native populations. As convincingly demonstrated by Stefani, this military strategy was often accompanied by a discourse that tended to praise or to depreciate the quality of a particular group through representations of their supposed “masculine” or “feminine” characteristics.¹⁹ The objective of this “discursive politics” was to create precise hierarchies, not only between the colonizer and the colonized but also within the different populations making up the multi-ethnic imperial community. How were the *ascari* perceived by those Italian military men who shared a variety of experiences with them within a context of domination? Stefani discusses this point by emphasizing how the colonizers’ discourse was shaped not only by notions of racial difference and superiority, but also by the concept of gender and related notions of *femminilità* and *mascolinità*. In

14 Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*.

15 Spadaro, *Una colonia italiana*.

16 Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*.

17 Spadaro, *Una colonia italiana*.

18 Ibid.

19 Stefani, *Colonia per maschi*.

particular, she argues that Italian discourses “feminised” at times these indigenous men but not in a denigrating way. In fact, in the majority of the cases these soldiers were represented in positive terms and with “masculine connotations,” specifically exalting their stature as warriors. This praising Italian discourse was instrumental, says Stefani, to the politics of military recruitment, and also important for justifying to Italian public opinion the presence of Africans by the side of Italians. Stefani also asks why the late fascist regime did not embrace in its discourse the “feminisation of the colonized enemy” (i.e. the Ethiopians) as opposed to the “masculinisation of the colonized friend and ally” (i.e. the *ascari*), within the usual logic of *divide et impera*. Why didn’t the Italians describe the Abissinians as “women” in order to defame them? Stefani does not give a definitive answer to the question, but she formulates several hypotheses that are certainly pertinent: the weakness of Italian colonialism can explain Italy’s politics of discourse as more direct to get allies through eulogy, rather than to denigrate enemies; also, the foes to colonize were the Ethiopians who had defeated the Italians in Adowa – it was therefore more appropriate to imagine them as “cruel men” rather than women, to avoid a double historical shame.²⁰

1b. Interracial unions, formal marriage, and the wife’s citizenship status

Imperialism not only provided the background for the Italo-African encounter, shaping representations and auto-representations of protagonists; it also framed the physical, political and juridical issues of sexuality, interracial unions, formal marriages, and female citizenship position, so central to the actual politics of managing imperial relations. The research of Sòrgoni and Barrera on East Africa are fundamental in this respect,²¹ and both authors identify how controversial and debated these themes were among Italian officialdom. From the viewpoint of the colonizers, what kind of relationships, “morally acceptable” and “politically appropriate”, could the metropolitan (male and female) citizens have with the colonial subjects? Also, what consequences would the citizenship status of women have upon marriage – a question that already concerned the wife in the metropole, and was now stretching across the imperial territories?

An important aspect to underline is that the thinking and talking about these matters, alongside regulations and norms, were shaped in the empire by a basic and constant discrimination to differentiate the unions of white men with African women on the one hand, and the unions of white women with black colonial subjects on the other. Both unions were interracial, involving “white” Italians and “black” Africans, but the two types of relationship were not dealt with in the same way.

As regards the widespread cases of the Italian man in union with an African woman, the literature highlights the fact that Italy’s politics favoured the temporary informal partnerships of *madamato* as well as discouraged formal marriages indirectly, by giving the

20 Ibid.

21 Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*; Barrera, *Sex, Citizenship and the State*; Barrera, *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*; Barrera, *Dangerous Liaisons*.

opportunity to the Italian male citizen to opt for the indigenous tradition of short-term arrangements, and to legitimize his metis children without having to marry the black mother, as was the case in the metropole. The formal marriage with an African woman was in fact perceived as “improper” and “inappropriate”, thus to be disapproved of, even though in reality marriages between male Italians and African women were very rare, purely religious, with no legal validity, and often celebrated *in articulo mortis*. As part of an imperial strategy, these guidelines encompassed both the liberal and the fascist eras of Italian colonialism until the historical breakpoint of the invasion of Ethiopia and the consequent demographic changes within the empire led to the well-known radicalised program of the late fascist regime (i.e. the 1937 legislation making *madamato* a crime, and the 1938 norms prohibiting the marriage between Italian Aryans and a person belonging to another race).

Also, even if infrequent, the marriage of an Italian man with an African woman had to be discussed and regulated because it had an impact on the citizenship status of the indigenous wife. In general, upon marriage a woman always followed the citizenship of her husband: this principle was in force in the metropole, as the notion of “family unity in citizenship matters” made female citizenship dependent upon the nationality of the bridegroom. In the East African colonies, though, the picture was more complicated, as specified by Sòrgoni;²² in fact, in a 1905 project of colonial civil code for Eritrea, a proposition was made not to apply this tenet so that the female African subject who married an Italian citizen did *not* acquire Italian metropolitan status. Subsequently, though, in the final text that was approved in 1909, a different rule was introduced for making the African woman an Italian metropolitan citizen upon marriage with an Italian. Upon widowhood, however, she would lose the metropolitan status on the basis of the belief that the widow of a white man went back to her original African tribe and “semi-barbarous” status. Notions of imperial prestige, intertwined with concepts of European civilisation, African barbarity, race and gender, framed all these directives and debates.²³

Regarding the union between the Italian woman and the black African subject, Sòrgoni notes that Italy’s imperial politics was largely not challenged by this type of relationship, since practically it was extremely rare, and, at the beginning of the colonial period, almost inexistent. However, the issue came to be discussed and controlled because both informal unions and formal marriages involving female Italian citizens were regarded as “more problematic” than those concerning Italian men, on the basis of the already-mentioned discourses about imperial dignity, racial superiority, and gender. This is why in 1905 specific norms were formulated to explicitly prohibit the marriage between an Italian woman and a black colonial subject.

Subsequently, the related issue of Italian women’s citizenship status upon marriage was also debated. In the case of a mixed marriage between an Italian female citizen and an African male subject, it was asked, should the Italian woman lose her Italian metropoli-

22 Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*.

23 Ibid.; Barrera, *Sex, Citizenship and the State*; Barrera, *Patrilinearity, razza e identità*; Barrera, *Dangerous Liaisons*.

tan citizenship to follow the native status of her black husband on the basis of gender considerations upheld in the metropole? Or should the racial ideology be predominant so that the Italian woman would keep her Italian citizenship upon marriage with an African, and acquire juridical independence from her black husband in the name of white superiority and European civilisation, but contrary to her Italian sisters living in the Italian peninsula? Sòrgoni points out variations and changes of historical importance: the racial ideology seems to have been the determining factor in the 1909 text of colonial code; in the 1933 legislation and subsequent 1936 norms, priority is given to gender principles; following the radical turn of the late fascist regime, marriages were prohibited between Aryan Italians and African stocks.²⁴

1c. Metis children (boys and girls) and their citizenship status

Sexual encounters between Italians and Africans resulted in the birth of thousands of *meticci*, the mixed-race progeny of Italy's empire. In discussing the issue of *meticciato* in East Africa together with related questions of citizenship, Sòrgoni²⁵ highlights how in the colonial settings the presence of the metis, boys and girls alike, threatened to destabilize Italian national identity and imperial categories of ruler and ruled. The *meticci* made up the "grey zone" of imperialism – the intermediary zone between whites and blacks, and between those who commanded and those who were ruled – since they ambiguously straddled, crossed and menaced the imperial divides. Like in other colonial settings, these kids challenged racial frontiers, cultural borders, notions of European family order, concepts of paternity and maternity, as well as contours of metropolitan citizenship and ideas of colonial subjecthood.

As to the viewpoints and norms framing this progeny's juridical status, Sòrgoni and Barrera draw attention to the fact that until the 1920s, it was widely thought that metis children born to an Italian father and an African woman were "whiter" than those born to the inverse union, and that the features of the male parent prevailed over those of the mother, so that the sexual, racial and moral superiorities of the white fathers were predominant. Racial and gender ideologies were thus combined in thinking and talking about mixed-race offspring.²⁶ Until the 1920s, Italian imperial politics was relatively open vis-à-vis these infants, trying to find a place for them in the Italian colonial community. For instance, the children of an Italian father and born within marriage were automatically Italian citizens; but this was extremely rare because informal *madamato* was actually the rule. Hence faced with the issue of illegitimate children of Italian fathers, Italy introduced in the colonies the possibility of legitimizing the kids without the father having to marry the African mother. Furthermore, legal acknowledgement by the father was an alternative way of making the child an Italian metropolitan citizen, but many irresponsible Italians did not recognise their mixed-race children and actually abandoned

24 Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.; Barrera, *Dangerous Liaisons*; Barrera, *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*.

them. In response to this problem, a gubernatorial circular was introduced in Eritrea in 1917 to invite colonial judges to attribute Italian metropolitan citizenship to *meticci* of unknown parents, even in the absence of paternal legal acknowledgement.²⁷ The majority of these children, however, continued to be abandoned by the male parent, a selfish attitude that transformed *meticciato* into a severe social problem for Italian authorities and also for the local indigenous society.

Subsequently, from the 1930s onwards and within the radicalised context of the late fascist regime, additional discourses and practices were endorsed, as it was believed that in mixed-race children maternal characteristics were more predominant than the paternal ones, and, that the union of a white man and an African woman resulted in a deterioration of the white race. A new politics was also introduced in the colonial territories from 1936, pushing *meticciato* back to its indigenous world through the following measures: the 1936 regulation for Italian East Africa was silent about *meticci*, a juridical silence that no longer allowed them to ask for Italian metropolitan citizenship at the age of majority and under certain meritocratic conditions previously enshrined in a 1933 law; the already-known restrictive norms of 1937 and 1938 about *madamato* and marriage, as they were introduced to avoid the birth of metis citizens too; finally, the notorious 1940 directive clearly defining the *meticci* as native colonial subjects who could not be recognised by the Italian metropolitan citizen, nor have the surname of the metropolitan parent, nor acquire Italian metropolitan status.²⁸

Finally, several considerations made in Barrera's works deserve particular attention for the historical analysis of this phenomenon: first, throughout the entire Italian colonial period, many Italian colonisers assumed that mixed-race girls tended to become prostitute while mixed-race boys became criminals. The opinion about an innate degeneracy of the metis child was in fact upheld in different quarters, although a minority of voices opposed the ideas about the racial inferiority and the natural inclination of the metis toward crime, suggesting instead that the high rate of criminality among them had social origins (i.e. the abandonment of irresponsible Italian fathers alongside the resentment of African families for whom, traditionally, it was the father who held responsibility to care for the offspring).²⁹ Secondly, the majority of *meticci* suffered hardship, destitution, marginalisation and abandonment; but a number of documented exceptions also exist, such as the example of a *meticcia* girl, born in Eritrea to an Italian father, recognised by the latter, attending Italian schools, marrying an Italian lawyer and representing a story of a middle-class Italo-Eritrean milieu with a successful integration into the Italian community.³⁰ Thirdly, an interesting colonial paradox concerning the *italianità* (Italianness) of the metis kids should be remarked: the Italianisation of Italo-Eritrean children was made possible in the colony thanks to the local indigenous society and their African mothers.³¹

27 Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*; Barrera, *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*.

28 Ibid.

29 Barrera, *Dangerous Liaisons*.

30 Barrera, *Sex, Citizenship and the State*; Barrera, *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*.

31 Barrera, *Patrilinearità, razza e identità*.

In fact, paradoxically, on behalf of honouring social African norms about paternal filiation and identity, African women – even those who were abandoned by their Italian partners – encouraged their metis progeny to embrace and identify with the Italian paternal culture. This was due to the fact that for the local Tigrinya society, Italo-Eritreans were Italian *tout court*, being generated by an Italian father. This explains why, in the cases pertinently discussed by Barrera, the Italo-Eritrean children were brought up as Catholics, whereas most of their native mothers remained Orthodox Christians; the children ate Italian food and wore Italian dresses, whereas their native mothers never gave up their local food, dress and traditional hair styles; the kids spoke the Italian language and received an Italian upbringing, and many African women accepted, and even encouraged, the education of their children in institutes for metis, run by Catholic missionaries. The result is a historical and painful paradox: beside the Italian state, it is especially Eritrean women – the female colonized and the most fragile agents in the colonial hierarchy – who contributed the most to the realisation of the project on *italianità*. Obviously, this point makes the concepts of gender, resistance, adaptation and complicity, interesting notions of debate for historians of imperialism.³²

1d. The Italian “citizen-soldier” through the First World War and the colonial wars

A marginal, yet interesting, debate on Italian imperialism joining the gender and the citizenship dimensions concerns the ideal of the Italian “citizen-soldier”. Thanks to Stefani’s research focussing on masculinity,³³ one can appreciate how the gender variable is intertwined with concepts of citizenship and identity in relation to the Great War and to Italy’s colonial conflicts in Libya and in Ethiopia. In particular, drawing on scholarly works about male identity crisis and male degeneration within the context of accelerated modernity in the West, Stefani discusses the Italian case and emphasises how the nationalist rhetoric of the liberal period as well as subsequent radical fascist propaganda of the 1920s and the 1930s regarded the dramatic experience of “war” as *the* instrument of regeneration and resurrection for the Italian male community. War reinvigorated male Italians in terms of courage, discipline, heroism, and virility; this is a malleable discourse that in the Italian context was applied in diverse ways vis-à-vis the Great War, the Libyan war of 1911–1912 and, more aggressively, the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935–1936.

In reference to the latter military event, Stefani is right in noting that it became one of the founding pillars of Mussolini’s project of the *uomo nuovo* (the New Man): this colonial war would be both a training ground to affirm the full masculinity of the Italians as well as a proof of their total devotion to the fascist cause. So, after the “peace” of the interwar period, the Italo-Ethiopian conflict was seen by the fascist dictatorship as a way to mould the young generations and to educate the “citizen-soldier” through military pa-

32 Ibid.

33 Stefani, *Colonia per maschi*.

triotism. This conquest of Africa was also presented to Italians younger than 30 years as a chance to get rid of a special sense of “inferiority”: these young Italians had taken part neither in the Great War nor in the March on Rome, and often regarded themselves as “inferior” vis-à-vis their older Italian brothers who had gone through the War of 1915–1918 and the first years of *squadristo* (Fascist squads). The Ethiopian invasion provided the youngest with an opportunity, both in the search of success and material wealth, and in the emulation of those who had fought in WWI or participated in the events of 1922. Interestingly, the ideal of Italian masculinity was realized in a *colonial* war, therefore not only through the submission of an enemy but through a process of racial differentiation between the male Italian identity of the colonizers and the colonized Africans. So, colonialism and the colonial wars were to strengthen notions of (male) *italianità* and (male) metropolitan citizenship vis-à-vis indigenous subjects.

In concluding the first part of this review article, it is important to note that different research paths and lively academic discussions have addressed the history of Italy's African empire from the viewpoints of gender and citizenship, enriching our understanding of the dynamics of Empire. The scholarship surveyed here shows the beauty of cross-pollination through interdisciplinary perspectives, since the historical methodological framework has been enhanced by methods taken from anthropology, social history, gender and cultural studies. As we have seen, scholarly debates on the Italian case have focussed on four principal directions for examining the relationship of gender, empire and citizenship. These include issues of representation and auto-representation; interracial unions, marriage, and citizenship of wives; mixed-race children and their ambiguous citizenship position; and masculinity and related identities. In this literature, the First World War does not seem to be a watershed for the Italian empire. Indeed, many similarities and continuities can be highlighted before and after that conflict. Also, after World War One Mussolini's empire expanded its sphere of action, and if we really need to indicate a turning point, it would certainly be the invasion of Ethiopia and the consequent demographic changes of Italy's African empire, and not the War of 1915–1918.

Part Two: Cherishing historical comparisons with the empires of Great Britain and France

Within the literature reviewed in the preceding section, only Stefani's monograph contains an explicit comparative analysis of several pages devoted to the “feminisation” and/or “masculinisation” of certain groups of colonial subjects under British rule.³⁴ In order to appreciate the comparative approach, and make it visible within this review article, the survey shall now turn attention to a number of influential works on empire, gender, and citizenship in the British and the French experiences, and highlight some interesting similarities and differences with the Italian historiography. Indeed, thinking about

34 Ibid., pp. 109–121.

History comparatively helps scholars emphasize commonalities, varieties and differentiations between and across cases. The benefits of comparison were well elaborated years ago by Raymond Grew in his article “The Case for Comparing Histories,”³⁵ and they are still appropriate.

The literature on Italy’s African empire tells us that Italian colonial discourses and perceptions were gendered vis-à-vis “*ascari* – the friends” and “Ethiopians – the enemies”, and in most cases were characterized by a “masculinisation” of Italy’s indigenous soldiers.³⁶ In the British Empire, gendered representations were likewise widespread, but as pertinently explained by Stefani, scholarly discussions on the British discourse about indigenous militaries joining imperial troops bring to light the pervasiveness of “denigrating metaphors of feminisation”. The politics of “feminising discourses” was similarly deployed by British authorities for political and military reasons linked to colonial rule and power relations. Two accomplished studies provide useful details and analyses in this regard. In his monograph *Warrior Gentlemen*, historical anthropologist Lionel Caplan explores and discusses the British construction of the myth of the masculine and naturally martial Gurkhas (i.e. Nepalese soldiers who served in the British imperial armies), in opposition to so-called “feminine traits” of cowardliness and unreliability applied to men of other ethnic and enemy groups.³⁷ This was a way for the British to foment rivalry between indigenous groups in colonial India, and indirectly strengthen imperial rule. Focussing on the same colonial territory, long regarded as the “Jewel in the Crown”, historian Mrinalini Sinha ruminates upon British “politics of discourse” in her book pertaining to content and contours of colonial masculinity, and convincingly argues that stigmatizing feminine metaphors were present in British imagery and discourses when depicting and denigrating the “effeminate Bengali subjects” vis-à-vis the “manly Englishman”; in other words, the elite within the colonized and the elite within the colonizers.³⁸

As regards the other broad subjects highlighted in our previous pages (i.e. interracial unions, formal marriage and women’s citizenship), we saw that Italian scholarly debates have mainly concentrated on the specific issue of *madamato* and on the juridical position of the Italian or African wife upon marriage with a colonial subject or a metropolitan citizen. By moving geographically to the British Empire we can underscore several parallels but also a number of variations due to the difference in colonial contexts. As emphasised by historian Barbara Bush, interracial unions and liaisons between male colonizers and local women had been very common in the British territories, and continued despite the important demographic changes in the post-WWI British Empire, following large waves of emigration by British women from the metropole to colonial outposts and Dominions.³⁹ Inspiring directly some of the debates on the Italian case, historian Philippa

35 R. Grew, The Case for Comparing Histories, in: *American Historical Review* 85 (1980) 4, pp. 763–778.

36 Stefani, *Colonia per maschi*.

37 L. Caplan, *Warrior Gentlemen: ‘Gurkhas’ in the Western Imagination*, New York 1995.

38 M. Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘Manly Englishman’ and the ‘Effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester 1995.

39 B. Bush, *Gender and Empire: The Twentieth Century*, in: Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire*, p. 93.

Levine has convincingly demonstrated that sex was a “significant imperial policy issue” and “a key site of colonial anxieties,” a point that she reiterated in her research on the British case from the sixteenth through the twentieth centuries.⁴⁰ In effect, as part of imperial politics and as central to the functioning of imperial governance, sexuality was something that “needed regulating and managing,” for it could endanger Empire’s building and notions of British supremacy,⁴¹ an argument that Italian scholars have also made. Moreover, with a different chronology in comparison to the Italian example, but shaped by similar discriminatory principles, it is apposite to highlight the prohibitions or accepted practices that Levine mentions in her work: in colonial Hong Kong marriage between government servants and local women was not formally forbidden, but was discouraged through disincentives; concubinage also had its advocates, including the British military commanders of the Meerut division in India who supported the practice in the 1870s; and finally, having a local concubine could cost a government employee his promotion, as in the British Colonial Service in Africa in 1909.⁴²

Keeping our attention on the interracial relationships of Europeans with Africans, further analogies and dissimilarities can be drawn between the Italian and the British experiences. In the context of the Italian-Libyan encounter, as discussed by Spadaro, specific gender criteria and ideas about marriage, love and sexual relations circulated among Italian metropolitan women – ideas that were used to measure the civilisation of a non-European society. This is quite similar to the British case. For instance, as highlighted in Levine’s research,⁴³ the British had a view on marriage as a Christian covenant between a man and a woman, so an “exclusive”, “sanctified” and “heterosexual” union. This viewpoint though was not always shared by the colonial subjects living in the various territories under British rule, where the meaning and nature of human sexual relations were based on profoundly different ideas that could be far from Western values. In fact, in many territories short-term temporary marriages were quite common – an aspect that also concerned the Italian East African case. The heterogeneity of sexuality that the British found in other cultures, including man-man marriages and woman-woman marriages, was seen as “an index of savagery” and “perversion”, and was quickly condemned as abhorrent. In this respect, we can mention the marriages between older and younger males in African mining communities, as in Zimbabwe, where this kind of temporary arrangement provided not only companionship but also a way to accumulate assets for a later heterosexual marriage of the younger man. And we can also mention the existence in colonial Africa of “female husbands” within the indigenous institution of woman-woman marriage, in which, as explained by the historian Margaret Strobel, a biological woman living in a patrilineal society and who wanted to create her own lineage could adopt the gender role of “husband” by paying bride-wealth for a wife; the latter would

40 P. Levine, *Sexuality, Gender, and Empire*, in: Levine (ed.), *Gender and Empire*, p. 134.

41 *Ibid.*, pp. 134–137.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 138–139.

43 *Ibid.*, pp. 141–142 and pp. 151–153.

then conceive children through sexual relations with a man; the biological father would have no claim on the children, and the latter would belong to the lineage of the “female husband.”⁴⁴ So, in this case the indigenous society separated “gender” from biological sex, allowing women to be “husbands” to wives, and consequently to be “males” in relation to their wives. Clearly, the encounter between the British colonizers and the more expansive sexualities of their colonial subjects rose issues about gender roles and sexual preferences which in Western culture were perceived as fixed and rigid rather than flexible and fluid – with these factors becoming civilizational yardsticks.⁴⁵

Regarding the debate on imperial citizenship, this encounter also points to the interesting scholarly discussion about the citizenship status of women upon marriage – a discussion that takes for granted heterosexual marriages, and that would certainly be complicated if extended to the man-man, or woman-woman, marriage. In reference to the citizenship of women, we saw in Part One that scholar Sòrgoni has examined and discussed the status of the wife, both in the case of an African woman (a female colonial subject) marrying an Italian colonizer, or an Italian woman (a metropolitan citizen) marrying a male native. This academic debate can be extended and revived by considering the larger landscape of British imperialism. As examined by M. Page Baldwin in his legal-historical account on the conditional marital nationality of women within the British empire in the post-1914 era,⁴⁶ a British woman who married an alien followed the nationality of her husband, and thus became an alien herself, on the basis of the “principle of family unity”, so much cherished at that time not only in Britain, but in many other European countries including Italy.⁴⁷ With the loss of British nationality, the British-born wife was treated as an outcaste as she obviously lost all the rights and privileges accorded to her previous status, including municipal and parliamentary franchises, the new welfare benefits of the twentieth century, her passport and diplomatic protection, as well as the legal identity of Britishness that British women cherished in Britain and overseas. Interestingly, during the 1920s and the 1930s, British feminists from around the Empire attempted to change this 1914 regulation, but only in 1948 were women in the United Kingdom granted the right to “their own” nationality regardless of their marital status so that they would not automatically lose their Britishness upon marriage with an imperial outsider. One of the major reasons why this was to be a longer feminist struggle than expected is that the citizenship norms for British women were determined in Britain with respect to wider imperial considerations, perceived by the various British governments as crucial for maintaining the Empire together. So, British married women’s nationality

44 Strobel, *Women’s History*, pp. 53–54.

45 Levine, *Sexuality, Gender, and Empire*, pp. 141–142 and pp. 151–153.

46 M. Page Baldwin, *Subject to Empire: Married Women and the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act*, in: *Journal of British Studies* 40 (2001) 4, pp. 522–556.

47 In this research Page Baldwin uses the legal term “nationality” as synonym with “subjecthood” in line with the historical evolution of the British case and its related notion of “allegiance to the Crown”; yet, we remind the reader that in certain languages and countries, the words “nationality”, “citizenship” and “subjecthood” do not mean, and have not necessarily meant, the same thing in historical perspective. On this variety of terminology, see Donati, *A Political History*, pp. 8–11.

had to be sacrificed across the Channel not only to the unity of the family as in Italy, but also to the unity of the empire, at least until 1948 when the United Kingdom finally introduced a law according to which marriage would have no effect on a British woman's nationality status.

By setting aside the citizenship of women, and turning attention to mixed-race children and their juridical position, we can highlight further points of comparison and conclude this section. Scholarly discussions on the Italian case have emphasised the ambiguous and complex figure of the *meticci*, mixed-blood progeny. If we leave the British territories and we move to the French empire, some similarities and differences can be noted with the French category of the *métis*. For instance, by focussing on French Indochina at the turn of the nineteenth century and during the 1930s, the influential historical anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler argues that discourses about the "metis problem" expressed a "fundamental contradiction of imperial domination: the tension between a form of domination simultaneously predicated on both incorporation and distancing."⁴⁸ As she explains, some *métis* were candidates for incorporation and metropolitan citizenship, but others were categorised as colonial subjects. Stoler takes up historical examples such as the child of a French father and a Vietnamese mother, in order to discuss how in 1898 French court authorities refused to consider the boy a French citizen on the basis of concerns about his cultural identity, French linguistic competence, levels of patriotism vis-à-vis the French *patrie*, and notions of French upbringing in the colonial milieu. The whole debate at the time teemed with allusions to the "inappropriate behaviour" of a French father, loving a child who was ignorant of the French idiom and who had grown up as Indo-Chinese despite being legally recognised by the French male parent. Specific imperial boundaries of culture and race were clearly in place.

In mentioning the 1928 decree pertaining to mixed-race children of unknown parents born in Indochina, Stoler equally emphasizes how French citizenship was not open to all metis but restricted by a "scientific" and a "moral" judgement that the child was non-indigene. These "scientific" and "moral" evaluations were based on two aspects: the child's physical features or race, to be evaluated by a medical-legal expert, as well as the moral certainty derived from the fact that the child had a French name, French upbringing and French descent. Bearing in mind the discussions on the Italian case, however, it is apposite to note further gender considerations that, detailed in Stoler's research, were circulating in the 1930s between the French metropole and the colony, this time in reference to the channelling of metis young girls into special state institutions.⁴⁹ As proposed by a number of French feminist representatives in 1931, these metis young women could marry with Frenchmen, would be acclimatized to the tropical milieus while being attached at the same time to France, and therefore contribute positively to

48 A.L. Stoler, *Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia*, in: F. Cooper and A.L. Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, Berkeley 1997, pp. 198–237. The citation is on p. 202.

49 Stoler, *Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers*.

the strengthening of the imperial project. This was a rather optimistic vision that, as Stoler rightly underlines, echoed the widespread opinion according to which if metis girls were rescued in time they could avoid their “usual” destination (i.e. prostitution) and be educated to become good wives of a settlers’ Indochina in the service of France. At the bottom of these diverse discussions, though, there was a concern that we also saw in Italian Africa: the ambiguous position of the metis which could make them – boys and girls alike – either a dangerous menace to or an effective instrument of the imperial state. This shows that similar discourses and anxieties were mapped onto vastly different social and political landscapes ranging from Italian East Africa to French Southeast Asia, and that children, the most fragile category of the European empires, could shake colonial rule at its foundation if the progeny under discussion was of Italo-African or French-Asian “blood”.

Conclusion

This review article has offered a survey of the literature pertaining to the Italian case, and then discussed it in comparative perspective with works about British and French imperialisms. All the publications mentioned here challenge us to reconsider how attention to gender and citizenship can help reframing our knowledge of European empires. By providing new and alternative focal lenses, they make possible analyses of the imperial past from fresh perspectives. Also, in different ways, all these studies point at those “tensions” of empire which have become major aspects of academic discussion since the publication of the well-known interdisciplinary volume edited by Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler.⁵⁰

From this general overview covering the Italian experience in comparison with other colonial settings, one can see that notions of gender, femininity, and masculinity cannot be universalized as if they were archetypal terms to cross borders, cultures, and language without difficulty; they are actually notions that have been determined locally and defined by the time, culture, context and local settings of a particular space.⁵¹ Similarly, concepts of citizenship and colonial subjecthood need to be historically and geographically contextualised, as the two terms have rarely meant the same in different historical periods and colonial milieus. Flexible and changing over time and space, categories like gender and citizenship are useful instruments to grasp the multi-faceted dimensions of imperialism. They are also valuable for drawing parallels and noting variations between and across different colonial environments. Undoubtedly, the literature reviewed here contributes to re-shaping our vision of, and ideas about, Empire.

50 Cooper and Stoler (eds.), *Tensions of Empire*.

51 This point is also emphasized by Levine, *Introduction: Why Gender and Empire?*, pp. 2–4.