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## The specious dividends of peace in the Horn of Africa

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AIEP EDITORE



**Simona Berhe, Olindo De Napoli (eds.),  
*Citizens and subjects of the Italian colonies: legal  
constructions and social practices*, Routledge,  
Abingdon, 2022, ISBN: 9780367621643**

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"Citizens and subjects of the Italian colonies" is an edited book on the relationship between citizenship, subjecthood and empire-making in the Italian colonial space. The collection explores a topic that has received growing inquiries in recent years by the historiography of British and French colonial empires. The politics of citizenship adopted by minor colonial powers such as Italy, however, has remained so far a neglected subject in the anglophone literature with which this book interacts.

The book is composed of two main parts. The first section deals with the legal aspects of citizenship, in particular the legislative frameworks and scholarly debates that shaped the distinction between citizenship and subjecthood in the Italian colonial empire of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second part is concerned with the social practices associated with the construction of collective identities and their relationship with political power in the colonial space.

The first chapter by Olindo De Napoli explores the debate on the status of the inhabitants of the Eritrean colony between 1882 and 1909. The author highlights the necessity to go beyond the dichotomy between citizenship and subjecthood, because these categories were not clearly defined within the Italian legislative framework. The Italian approach was frequently shaped by contradictions: the Italian minister

for Foreign Affairs Mancini, for instance, claimed his intention to make the citizens of Assab "none other than true Italian citizens", but his government established that Italian law was valid only for the relationships involving Italians and other foreigners, at exclusion of the Africans (De Napoli: 10). The indeterminacy of the legislation was, according to De Napoli, a precise political choice aimed at leaving greater freedom to the administrative and judicial articulations of the metropolitan power in the colonial space, where they could pragmatically adapt their policies to the different conditions encountered on the ground.

The second chapter by Federico Cresti analyses the construction of citizenship and subjecthood in Libya in the first decade of the Italian occupation. The First World War and the anti-colonial insurrection that followed are viewed as the turning point in the colonial debate over the administrative status of the populations of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. In contrast with the promises of greater freedom that had characterized the rhetoric of the colonial conquest, the idea of reducing these communities to a status of subjecthood prevailed. According to the author, the fluctuations of the Italian government's position were at the same time the outcome of different ideological perspectives within the colonial administration and of variations in the bargaining power of African notables.

In the third chapter, Roberta Pergher reflects on what did mean being a citizen in Libya under Fascist rule. The author underlines how the concept of citizenship, albeit widely granted to the populations residing in the various colonies across the Mediterranean, had different meanings in different geographical and temporal contexts. In this respect Fascist rule followed the typical political economy of an empire, which recognized different categories of subjects and assigned overlapping entitlements and obligations to the peoples living under its rule. Pergher's chapter also highlights the entangled histories of citizenship both in the colonial and metropolitan settings. By changing the legal category of citizenship in the colonies, the Fascist government redefined the broader relationship between the individual and the political community, with longstanding consequences on the status of Italian citizens themselves (Pergher: 60).

The fourth chapter by Alessia Maria Di Stefano explores the debate on citizenship and subjecthood in the Italian colony of Libya. The analysis of the decisions taken by Italian judges, who acted as shadow lawmakers in the colonial space, confirms that the politics of difference was a persistent theme of Italian governmentality throughout different regimes.

The fifth chapter by Carlo Bersani analyses the theory and practice of Italian legal culture across different colonial experiences through the work of several Italian jurists and the activity of the Consiglio Superiore Coloniale. Bersani's chapter confirms De Napoli's argument that the Italian legislation on citizenship and subjecthood was purposefully left in a state of indeterminacy and driven by political expediency, thereby leaving greater freedom of action to colonial officials on the ground. The Consiglio

Superiore did not develop precise legal categories concerning the status of colonial subjects, turning the colonies into a space primarily shaped by administrative action (Bersani: 103).

Chapter six by Filippo Espinoza extends the comparative debate on citizenship to the Dodecannese. The essay explores the process that led to the transformation of the capitulatory system in force under the Ottomans into a form of minor non-colonial citizenship for the Aegean population. The author aptly demonstrates how Aegean citizenship was primarily considered by the Italian power as a tool for peaceful commercial and cultural penetration in the Levant. The Aegean identity was supposed to overcome the metropole/colony dichotomy and pave the way to the establishment of a class of cosmopolitan middlemen that would reproduce Italian influence in the region.

Chapter seven by Giovanni Villari explores the entanglement between geopolitics and the politics of citizenship, taking the case of the intra-European competition for control of the Balkans during the 1939-1943 Fascist occupation of Albania. The formal equality of rights granted to the Albanians served to underline the latter's privileged position within the imperial space and their cultural proximity to the Italians. The hypothesis of their complete assimilation, though never conceived in practice, was linked to the lack of a third country that could act as a pole of attraction, in contrast with the case of Greece and the Dodecannese (Villari: 149).

Chapter eight by Simona Berhe inaugurates the second part of the book. The essay explores the relationship between citizenship and the re-organization of space in the two colonies of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in the 1920s. The author convincingly argues that the insertion of the Libyan population within new networks of mobility imposed by Italian authorities and the assimilationist policy adopted towards the Maltese community should be seen as two faces of the process of territorialization of state authority. The passports granted to the African population were a tool to extend Italian jurisdiction beyond Libyan borders and check the activity of political exiles, while also linking the new subjects to the territorial configuration designed by Italian colonialism at the expense of pre-existing networks of solidarity and mobility. The assimilation of the Maltese population, in turn, aimed to delink the community's diasporic bonds across different colonial jurisdictions, thereby strengthening the allegiance of Maltese residents to the Italian colonial project.

Chapter nine by Valentina Fusari explores the strategies adopted by abandoned Italo-Eritrean children of mixed ancestry to obtain Italian citizenship. The author discloses the agency of marginalized subjects in negotiating the vertical connection to the ruler and the horizontal networks with the political community at large. Orphanages should be understood as "transformative spaces" (Fusari: 195) where Italo-Eritrean orphans had the possibility to improve their social status through the interaction with the Italian community. This social capital, in turn, was occasionally mobilized to obtain

genealogical and economic resources that facilitated their access to Italian citizenship. Chapter ten by Luca Castiglioni focuses on the relationship between the Italian administration and the inhabitants of the Italian islands in the Aegean Sea. The essay offers another example of the entanglement between citizenship policies and the territorialization of colonial authority, unveiling how regulations enacted by Italian officials aimed at disrupting the trans-national networks of Dodecanese communities. Chapter 11 by Boris Adjemian is an innovative study on the history of the Armenian community in Ethiopia and its navigations across multiple belongings before, during and after the Italian occupation of 1936-1941. The essay also explores the political economy of citizenship in the Ethiopian empire, thereby going beyond the boundaries of the historiography on Italian colonialism. As stateless peoples, Armenians enjoyed the extraterritorial protection of foreign powers such as France, Italy, and the United Kingdom, which looked at these communities as a tool to expand their economic and political presence in the empire. At the same time, their entrenchment into the local society and their command of the Amharic language made them an auxiliary of Ethiopian rulers in mediating the relationship with the international system. Overlapping references to people of Armenian nationality who were also Ethiopian subjects while enjoying protection by foreign powers, however, highlight the ambiguity of the regulations concerning nationality and subjecthood in imperial Ethiopia. This unclear legal status turned into an asset during the Italian occupation: authorities showed more indulgence towards the Armenians than towards the Greeks, because the lack of formal links to an enemy state made them appear once again as an ideal intermediary of Italian influence.

The final chapter by Frederick Cooper draws the threads that connect the different chapters of the essay. According to Cooper, one of the main contributions of the book is that it uncovers the existence of many grey areas within the citizenship/subjecthood dichotomy. In the context of the Italian colonial empire, the two concepts should be seen as overlapping and contested categories that could acquire different meanings according to the time and place of application (Cooper: 247).

In conclusion, the book offers a fresh perspective on the global history of citizenship and, at the same time, provides an innovative contribution to the historiography on Italian colonialism. The approach chosen by the authors is in line with the "new" imperial history, a historiographical trend that encourages a more networked conceptualization of colonial categories. In the case of the Italian empire, the actual meaning of citizenship and subjecthood was not dictated by abstract models elaborated in the metropole and then transmitted to the colonies. It was rather the outcome of the interaction between ideas and administrative practices experimented in different territories according to expediency and political calculations. In other words, it was the periphery that shaped the centre more than the reverse. The book also explores the trajectory of social groups that acted as bridgeheads of the Italian colonial design or, at least, were potentially

perceived in such terms by the metropolitan power. The Armenians in Ethiopia or the Maltese in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were supposed to play the role of the Indians in British East Africa. The study of these networks is a promising field of research if we want to understand the trajectory of the postcolonial African state and challenge the boundaries of national historiographies.

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