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The Making of Italians in Tunisia: A Biopolitical Colonial Project (1881-1911)

Gabriele Montalbano

In March 1905, a group of 145 students from the Sicilian universities of Palermo, Catania, and Messina travelled to Tunis, after a visit to the ruins of Carthage, and were greeted by the headmaster of the local Italian Vittorio Emanuele II high school, Luigi Mascia, with a conference in which he declared, as reported by French intelligence services: “dites bien que Carthage est morte en tant que rivale et ennemie de notre Rome, mais qu’à sa place, est née, riche d’énergies et d’avenir une Tunisie latine, dont l’exemple évoque et attend une Tripoli italienne! Dites franc et fort dans les journaux, les réunions et les universités: à Tunis, il n’y a plus de place pour nos frères; il leur faut un foyer italien...” (“Talk loudly and clearly in your newspapers, in meetings and in universities: in Tunis, there is no longer any room for our brothers, they need an Italian settlement”).¹ Mascia’s statement revealed both the colonial interest of some members of the local Italian middle-class, in tune with homeland public opinion,² and alluded to the migration flows from Italy to North Africa,³ especially to the French protectorate of Tunisia. Between the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Tunisia was, in fact, a host country for Italian migration,⁴ and also an object of French-Italian colonial tensions.⁵ In 1881, France’s control over Tunisia, altering the Mediterranean balance of power without Italy’s approval, became a symbol of Italian powerlessness, which had to be avenged through colonial conquests. The “slap of Tunis” was the first colonial shock for Italy before the more tragic defeats of Dogali (1887) and Adwa (1896), which resurfaced as a nightmare of its international powerlessness

¹ Paris, Archives du Quai d’Orsay (henceforth AQO), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tunisia, Central Administration, Political and Commercial Correspondence, Italian Affairs, art. 105, fol. 44-48, resident general Stephen Pichon to minister Théophile Delcassé, Tunis, March 29, 1905, concerning the visit of Sicilian students to Tunis. All translation from Italian and French are my own.

² After the Adwa defeat in 1896, the early years of the twentieth century had been a phase of study and preparation for Italian colonial aims. In 1905, the Colonial Congress at Asmara, in Eritrea, relaunched the colonial question to Italian public opinion and in 1906, the Italian Colonial Institute was founded. See Alberto Aquarone, “Politica estera e organizzazione del consenso nell’età giolittiana: il Congresso dell’Asmara e la fondazione dell’Istituto Coloniale Italiano,” in *Dopo Adua: politica e amministrazione coloniale* (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, 1989), 257-410.

³ Federico Cresti, “Comunità proletarie italiane nell’Africa mediterranea tra XIX secolo e periodo fascista,” *Mediterranea. Ricerche Storiche* 5, no. 12 (April 2008): 189-214.

⁴ Since the Early Modern era, the Tunisian Regency was home to Italian-speaking communities such as the Sephardic Jews of Leghorn, and Tabarkinian sailors and Genoese merchants. See Leila El Houssi, “The Qrāna Italian Jewish Community of Tunisia between XVIII-XIX Century: An Example of Transnational Dimension,” *Studi emigrazione* 49, no. 186 (April 2012): 361-69, for the first group, and Fiorenzo Toso, “Tabarchini e Tabarchino in Tunisia Dopo La Diaspora,” *Bollettino di Studi Sardi* 3, no. 3 (December 2010): 43-73, and Alessandro Triulzi, “Italian-Speaking Communities in Early Nineteenth-Century Tunis,” *Revue de l’Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 9, no. 1 (1971): 153-84, for the second.

⁵ Mark I. Choate, “Identity Politics and Political Perception in the European Settlement of Tunisia: The French Colony versus the Italian Colony,” *French Colonial History* 8 (2007): 97-109, and id., *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

whenever there were tensions of a colonial order.⁶ Alongside geopolitical issues, Tunisia acquired a symbolic role as a “lost colony”⁷ in the nationalist imagination of liberal Italy, compounded by the fact that until the 1930s, Italian nationals there had outnumbered French nationals.⁸

In this paper, I attempt to show that the French protectorate of Tunisia was an outstanding laboratory for Italian nation-building and a colonialist project from the beginning of France’s control over Tunisia up to Italy’s invasion of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. As many scholars have noted, colonialism played a central role in the construction of Italian nationhood.⁹ Starting from these analyses, I will focus on the labor migrations, particularly those in colonial areas,¹⁰ as active factors in shaping Italian national identity. Labor migrations to foreign colonial possessions linked the two main social phenomena of nineteenth-century human mobility: migration and colonialism. I will analyze the history of Italian colonialism¹¹ and its cultural project and production beyond national boundaries,¹² to include Italian overseas colonial diasporas as places of cultural and social production of the colonialist narrative.¹³ Even though Italian migration involved many African countries ruled by foreign colonial powers, such as Egypt and Algeria,¹⁴ Tunisia is a noteworthy case study because the Regency under French control was a crossroads of southern European migrations,¹⁵ French colonialism, and Italian colonial projects. Scholars such as Julia Clancy-Smith and Mary Dewhurst Lewis have pointed out the issue of human mobility in Tunisian society and its related legal pluralism within the

⁶ Enrico Serra, *La questione tunisina da Crispi a Rudini ed il colpo di timone alla politica estera dell’Italia* (Milan: A. Giuffrè, 1967), and Giampaolo Calchi Novati, “Cairoli, la sinistra storica e gli inizi della penetrazione in Africa: un caso di colonialismo controllato,” *Africa: Rivista Trimestrale di Studi e Documentazione dell’Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente* 45, no. 3 (September 1990): 445-64.

⁷ The Italian term of “colonia” had an ambiguous political meaning, as it included the Italian possessions of Eritrea and Somalia as well as the settlements of Italian migrants in Argentina, the United States, and so forth. See Choate, *Emigrant Nation*, and Aquarone, “Politica estera.”

⁸ Henry De Montety, “Les Italiens en Tunisie,” *Politique étrangère* 2-5 (1937): 412.

⁹ Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* (Abington: Routledge, 2007); Lucia Re, “Italians and the Invention of Race: The Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890-1913,” *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2010); Gabriele Proglione, *Libia 1911-1912: Immaginari Coloniali e Italianità* (Milan: Mondadori, 2016).

¹⁰ Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹¹ Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, *Italian Colonialism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹² Giuseppe Maria Finaldi, *Italian National Identity in the Scramble for Africa: Italy’s African Wars in the Era of Nation-Building, 1870-1900* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), and Proglione, *Libia 1911-1912*.

¹³ See Ulrike Kirchberger and Steven Ivings, *Global Diasporas in the Age of High Imperialism* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), and Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas*.

¹⁴ Concerning the Italian migration in Egypt, see Marta Petricioli, *Oltre il mito: l’Egitto degli italiani (1917-1947)* (Milan: B. Mondadori, 2007); about Italian migrations in Algeria, see the recent book about the city of Bône (today Annaba) in north-western Algeria: Hugo Vermeren, *Les Italiens à Bône (1865-1940): Migrations méditerranéennes et colonisation de peuplement en Algérie* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2018). For a general overview of Italian settlements in Mediterranean Africa, see Cresti, “Comunità proletarie italiane nell’Africa mediterranea.” These migrations did not concern only the African Mediterranean shore, but also sub-Saharan and western Africa; for instance, see Matteo Grilli, “La comunità italiana in Ghana: cento anni di emigrazione nell’Africa occidentale,” *Altreltalie* 42 (June 2011): 63-81.

¹⁵ Along with French and Italians, Tunisia hosted many foreign populations from southern Europe, such as the Greeks and the Maltese. See Habib Kazdaghli, “Communautés méditerranéennes de Tunisie. Les Grecs de Tunisie: Du Millet-i-Rum à l’assimilation française (XVII^e-XX^e siècles),” *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée*, no. 95-98 (2002): 449-76, and Michèle Muscat, *L’Héritage impensé des Maltais de Tunisie* (Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, 2011).

frame of imperial rivalry.¹⁶ Mark Choate's analysis of Italy's attempt to mobilize its diasporas for imperial aims, and his studies of French-Italian tensions concerning colonial Tunisia, make clear the importance of Tunisia in Italian policies.¹⁷ Based on Choate's lectures, this paper investigates the Tunisian context as a contributing element of a specific, colonial Italian-ness,¹⁸ seen as an ethno- and biopolitical project, by analyzing the national discourse coming from within the local community of Italian settlers and its formulation and circulation in Italy.

In fact, it was no accident that the Tunisian Regency, during the Italian-Turkish war (1911-1912), attracted the interest of politicians, writers, and intellectuals¹⁹ who were influential members of the Italian nationalist party, such as Enrico Corradini, founder of the Italian Nationalist Association,²⁰ and the nationalist writer and intellectual Gualtiero Castellini.²¹ The reconfiguration of Italian migrants on foreign colonial soil involved a particular process of racialization that directly influenced the construction of Italian national identity.²² In the wake of the biopolitical perspective on Italian nation-building,²³ this paper also sheds light on specific kinds of community-building processes in foreign colonial possessions by paying special attention to the social context in which those processes took place, following the approach of the collective work, *Italian Mobilities*, edited by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom.²⁴ Imperial rivalry, labor migration, racial categories, and colonial capitalism played an important role in forming social hierarchy in colonial contexts and, accordingly, within the expatriate communities themselves. Of course, these social power relationships were also influenced by developments in the homeland.

In the system of domination of the Italian liberal state, the marginalization of Southern Italy (including the islands of Sardinia and Sicily) was often considered by politicians and

¹⁶ Julia Ann Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800-1900* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011); ead., "Migrations, Legal Pluralism, and Identities: Algerian 'Expatriates' in Colonial Tunisia," in *Algeria & France, 1800-2000: Identity, Memory, Nostalgia*, ed. Patricia M. E. Lorcin (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006); and Mary Dewhurst Lewis, *Divided Rule: Sovereignty and Empire in French Tunisia, 1881-1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Mark I. Choate, "The Tunisia Paradox: Italy's Strategic Aims, French Imperial Rule, and Migration in the Mediterranean Basin," *California Italian Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2010): 1-20.

¹⁸ Silvana Patriarca, *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Traveling to and discovering Tunisian colonial society profoundly influenced Italian intellectuals and politicians who visited the country. About such encounters, see Barbara Spackman, *Accidental Orientalists: Modern Italian Travellers in Ottoman Lands* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

²⁰ Fonzo Erminio, *Storia dell'Associazione nazionalista italiana (1910-1923)* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2017).

²¹ See Silvio Ficini, *La grande guerra del nazionalista Gualtiero Castellini: dalle Dolomiti all'Adamello e dall'Isonzo al Grappa* (Buccinasco Udine: Società storica per la guerra Bianca, 2008).

²² Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e nero: storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani* (Florence: Le Monnier Università, 2013); Lucia Re, "Italians and the Invention of Race," and Fabrizio de Donno, "La Razza Ario-Mediterranea: Ideas of Race and Citizenship in Colonial and Fascist Italy, 1885-1941," *Interventions. International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 3 (2006): 394-412.

²³ Rhiannon Noel Welch, *Vital Subjects: Race and Biopolitics in Italy, 1860-1920* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

²⁴ Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom, eds., *Italian Mobilities* (London: Routledge, 2015), 4-9. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1983), and Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

intellectuals to depend on the racial or social characteristics of these populations.²⁵ Using a Gramscian and postcolonial perspective, Jane Schneider demonstrated the effectiveness of applying the concept of Orientalism in analyzing the “Southern Italian question.”²⁶ This racialization of Italians extended to some aspects of the diaspora of migratory mobility; as demonstrated by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno,²⁷ the status of “whiteness” of Italian migrants was questioned and denied to Southern Italian immigrants in the United States, showing how these processes of marginalization and racialization were linked to social and economic dynamics. In a foreign colonial context, these marginalized populations became a spearhead for a greater overseas project that employed them in a subordinate role for Italian imperial aims. In line with Georges Balandier’s and Ann Laura Stoler’s suggestions about exploring the inner structure of European communities in colonial contexts, particularly their racial categories and specific local colonial culture,²⁸ our concern in this case study is how the Mediterranean context enhanced a racialized and national reconfiguration of the migrant workforce (Sicilians, Sardinians, and Southern Italians in general) in colonial areas in order to build collective identities as “Italians” by putting the migrant working-class in a subordinate position in the national community hierarchy. In the case of Tunisia, the regional origin of Italian migrants fostered a particular narration about their national membership from within the community, framed by a project that linked colonial diasporas with imperial aims.

Foreign Workers or Colonial Settlers? Social Divisions and National Categories

The demographic predominance of Italian nationals in Tunisia was one of the main reasons for French-Italian tensions during the Regency.²⁹ Beyond the quantitative aspect, there was a qualitative one that is worth emphasizing. Most of the Italian nationals who had settled there belonged to the working class and had emigrated to Tunisia after 1881³⁰ in search of work opportunities related—directly or indirectly—to French colonial exploitation.³¹ According to the statistical considerations of Gaston Loth, in 1905, the social character of the Italian presence in Tunisia was “the enormous predominance of the working class which, including farmers, makes up the almost totality of the [Italian] Colony, 86.40%.”³² Jules Saurin, president of the French Settlement Committee, stressed the lack of a French workforce and the danger—for French

²⁵ Vito Teti, *La razza maledetta: origini del pregiudizio antimeridionale* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1993), and David Forgacs, *Italy’s Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

²⁶ Jane Schneider, *Italy’s ‘Southern Question’: Orientalism in One Country* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998).

²⁷ Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

²⁸ Georges Balandier, “La Situation coloniale: Approche théorique,” *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie* 11 (1951): 44-79, and Ann Laura Stoler, “Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 1 (1989): 137.

²⁹ Choate, “Identity Politics.”

³⁰ Francesca Fauri, “L’emigrazione italiana nell’Africa mediterranea: 1876-1914,” *Italia contemporanea* 277 (April 2015): 34-62.

³¹ Carmel Sammut, *L’Impérialisme capitaliste français et le nationalisme tunisien: 1881-1914* (Paris: PubliSud, 1983).

³² Gaston Loth, *Le Peuplement italien en Tunisie et en Algérie* (Paris: A. Colin, 1905), 133. Loth was a teacher at French high school “Carnot” of Tunis and the future director of the public education in the French protectorate of Morocco.

colonial interests—that could come about from uncontrolled Italian immigration to Tunisia.³³ Indeed, the masons, diggers, and peasants held the position of minor settlers, as “poor whites” or *petits blancs*,³⁴ but with a status of foreign nationals. They worked in the service of foreign colonization, so that Loth defined them as “useful auxiliaries of colonization.”³⁵ The Italian settlement was seen by French colonial authorities as a potential danger to the stability of French rule over Tunisia.³⁶ Others saw the Italian settlement as an opportunity for French colonization, provided that the naturalization of these Italians defused the danger of foreign demographic dominance in the colonial possession.³⁷ Implicitly, they agreed on the need of such a workforce for colonial exploitation:

Sans leur collaboration, le Gouvernement Français n’aurait pu exécuter le vaste programme de travaux publics entrepris dans l’Afrique du Nord. On conçoit, par conséquent, de quelle importance peuvent être, pour l’avenir de cette région, les mesures édictées à l’égard des travailleurs étrangers, soit dans un sens libéral, soit dans un sens restrictif.³⁸

(Without their collaboration, the French Government could not have executed the vast program of public works undertaken in North Africa. It is therefore understandable how important the measures enacted for foreign workers, in a liberal sense or in a restrictive sense, might be for the future of this region.)

The demographic imbalance within the European population of Tunisia was also social and economic: alongside the demographic majority of Italians—largely made up of laborers, masons, and peasants—, there was the French community—a demographic minority, but politically and socially dominant.³⁹ While Saurin considered the Italian settlement in Tunisia to be a weakening of or challenge to French colonial power, Pierre Denis, a social geographer, assumed instead:

L’habitude était en effet répandue, plus encore en Tunisie qu’en France, de parler du péril sicilien; péril familial dont on avait fini par ne plus se troubler [...] Cependant, on y croyait toujours, on s’imaginait que la progression de la population italienne était loin de s’arrêter. On se sentait si peu de force à arrêter l’immigration italienne qu’au lieu de lutter contre elle, on ne parlait plus que d’en profiter le mieux possible. De là peut-être la pensée que la Tunisie, réservée au

³³ Jules Saurin, *L’Invasion sicilienne et le peuplement français de la Tunisie: Conférence faite par M. Jules Saurin en mars et avril 1900 à Marseille, Lyon, Lille, Roubaix, etc.* (Paris: Challamel, 1900).

³⁴ Nicola Labanca points out the absence of a comparable expression to *petits blancs* in Italian but notes the persistence of the idea of “demographic Empire” or “Empire of Work” in Italian colonial (and postcolonial) narration. See Nicola Labanca, “Introduction,” in *Posti al sole: diari e memorie di vita e di lavoro dalle colonie d’Africa*, ed. Nicola Labanca (Rovereto: Museo storico italiano della guerra, 2001), v-xliii.

³⁵ Loth, *Le Peuplement italien*, 135.

³⁶ Saurin, *L’Invasion sicilienne*.

³⁷ Lucien Bertholon, “Quel est le rôle de la France dans l’Afrique du Nord—coloniser ou assimiler?,” *Bulletins de la Société d’anthropologie de Paris* 8, no. 1 (1897): 509-36, and Pierre Denis, *Italiens de Tunisie* (Paris: Éditions de la Revue du mois, 1908).

³⁸ Loth, *Le Peuplement italien*, 134.

³⁹ For the historical evolution of the French community in Tunisia during the nineteenth century, see Anne-Marie Planel, *Du Comptoir à la colonie: Histoire de la communauté française de Tunisie, 1814-1883* (Paris: Riveneuve éditions, 2015). See also Joël Michel, *Colonies de peuplement Afrique, XIX^e-XX^e siècles* (Paris: CNRS, 2018).

peuplement italien, n'était pour la France qu'une colonie d'exploitation pour ses capitaux, et non une terre à peupler...⁴⁰

(We were so used, more in Tunisia than in France, to speaking about the Sicilian danger, and it became so familiar, that we ended up not being troubled [...] We were so reluctant to stop Italian immigration that instead of fighting against it, our concern was rather how to take advantage of it as best as possible. From these considerations came the thought that Tunisia, bound to the Italian settlement, was for France only a colony of exploitation for its capital, and not a land to populate.)

If, therefore, colonial rule could not do without Italian labor, it maintained the priority of French investments. In 1896, after a consular report in which the Italian vice-consul in Sousse praised the Italian work input, Sousse's Civil Inspector replied to the Resident General stressing the importance of the French element in the economic development of the Regency:

les Italiens parlent avant qu'ils puissent notre langue, c'est-à-dire la langue du peuple qui les a fait travailler [...] ils restent sous le contrôle français et ne peuvent aller plus loin qu'on ne leur permet, ce qui n'indique pas une prépondérance absolument marquée de la part de l'élément italien, qui nous avait pourtant précédés dans le pays mais n'a pas pu fructifier que lorsque nous sommes venus lui apporter nos capitaux.⁴¹

(Italians speak our language as soon as they can, that is the language of the people who allow them to work [...] they remain under French rule and can go no further than we allow them, [but] this does not mean an absolutely marked preponderance by the Italian element, which has nevertheless preceded us in this country, though it could not have developed without the influx of our capital.)

French capital and the process of colonization in Tunisia attracted Italian workers; colonial capitalism and the international labor market were embedded in national categories. In agriculture, and especially in viticulture, Sicilians became a required workforce. They possessed the know-how of viticulture and often found better living conditions in Tunisia than in their homeland.⁴² Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, the Italian workforce (alongside native Tunisians)⁴³ worked in masonry and the mines,⁴⁴ and at a

⁴⁰ Denis, *Italiens de Tunisie*, 2.

⁴¹ AQO, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tunisia, Central Administration, Political and Commercial Correspondence, Italian Affairs, art. 103, fol. 160, Civil Inspector of Sousse to the Resident General, Sousse, April 1, 1896.

⁴² Daniela Melfa, "La colonizzazione agricola italiana nel protettorato tunisino: poderi siciliani oltre confine?," *Quaderni del Dipartimento di studi politici 2* (2007): 183-203, and ead., "Da proletari a proprietari: viticoltori italiani in Tunisia tra '800 e '900," in *Da maestrale e da scirocco: le migrazioni attraverso il Mediterraneo: atti del convegno, Facoltà di scienze politiche, Catania, 23-25 gennaio 2003*, ed. Federico Cresti (Catania: A. Giuffrè, 2006): 121-50.

⁴³ According to historian Tabbabi Hafiz's analysis of the Gafsa mine basin, in 1902 there were 370 European workers, mainly Italian nationals, and 1510 workers registered within the vague category of "Muslims," maybe North Africans. See Tabbabi Hafiz, *Al-ḥaraka' al-niqābiyya' fī manāḡim Gafsa' hīlāl al-fatra' al-isti'māriyya'* (Tunis: Al-ma'had al-'alā li-tārīḡ al-ḥaraka' al-waṭaniyya', 2005), 34-37.

⁴⁴ Gianni Marilotti, ed., *L'Italia e il Nord Africa: l'emigrazione sarda in Tunisia, 1848-1914* (Rome: Carocci, 2006).

cheaper price than French workers. Vice-Consul Carletti remarked on this characteristic of the Italian worker, so advantageous to the colonial system:

Non sarà inutile ricordare che i salari degli operai, se sono, generalmente, superiori a quelli corrispondenti in Italia, restano sempre inferiori a quelli usati in Francia. E questa è una delle ragioni per cui l'operaio italiano è di gran lunga preferito all'operaio francese, tanto che, anche col premio di un franco, accordato dalla Direzione dei lavori pubblici per ogni operaio francese e per giorno, gl'intraprenditori [...] preferiscono impiegare operai italiani [...] Ma, d'altro canto, essi intuiscono che ciò che li protegge contro la in ogni modo favoreggiata introduzione in Tunisia di lavoratori francesi è, in gran parte, la relativa mitezza delle mercedi.⁴⁵

(It is not insignificant to remark that the wages of the workers, while they are, generally, higher than the corresponding ones in Italy, still remain inferior to those practiced in France. And this is one of the reasons why the Italian worker is much preferred to the French worker, so much so that, even with the bonus of a franc, granted by the Direction of Public Works for every French worker and for each day, the entrepreneurs [...] prefer to employ Italian workers [...] the workers understand that what protects them against the introduction in Tunisia of French workers, fostered by all means, is, in large part, the cheap wages of their labor.)

The workers' membership in the Italian nation meant, in the Tunisian Regency, being a source of cheap labor. Despite public support for recruiting French workers, the Italian workforce remained the most profitable for entrepreneurs and businessmen. The competition of the Italian workers strongly limited the growth of the French working class in Tunisia and hindered the promotion of the Tunisian workforce, at least initially.⁴⁶ Historian Ali Mahjoubi, analyzing the social and economic condition of Tunisia in those years, affirms that the Tunisian worker:

il se trouve donc en butte à une double contradiction. La première et aussi la principale l'oppose au patronat qui groupe les capitalistes et sociétés financières [...] La seconde contradiction, secondaire certes mais à ses yeux importante, l'oppose à l'ouvrier européen qui, par sa présence en Tunisie et sa concurrence, bloque devant lui, sinon le perspectives d'embauche du moins celle de promotion.⁴⁷

(is thus faced with a double contradiction. The first and also the main one opposes him to the employers [...] The second contradiction, secondary certainly but in his eyes important, opposes him to the European worker who, by their presence in Tunisia and their competition, blocks him, if not the from prospect of being hired, at least from that of promotion.)

⁴⁵ Commissariato Generale dell'Emigrazione, *Emigrazione e colonie: raccolta di rapporti dei RR agenti diplomatici e consolari* (Rome: Tipografia nazionale, 1906), 365-66.

⁴⁶ Juliette Bessis, "Le Mouvement ouvrier tunisien: De ses origines à l'indépendance," *Le Mouvement Social* 89 (December 1974): 85-108.

⁴⁷ Ali Mahjoubi, *Les Origines du mouvement national en Tunisie, 1904-1934* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, 1982), 59.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, in 1904, the first labor strikes took place in Tunis,⁴⁸ with the participation of the Italian working class, which had organized international labor unions and made wage demands.⁴⁹ But the salary differences in the colonial regime and the imperial rivalry divided the working-class by nationality, hampering efforts toward class unity and fostering national-colonial categories.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the local Tunisian population learned some of the practices and techniques that had made the Italian workforce so indispensable. Thus, Tunisians began to compete directly with the Italians in certain types of employment. In 1910, the Italian nationalist newspaper of Tunis, *La Patria*, in a front-page article titled “Gli Europei sostituiti dagli Arabi” (“Europeans Replaced by Arabs”), expressed concern about the Tramway Company’s intention to hire more Arabs:

se i tranvieri appartengono a nazionalità diverse, sono purtuttavia gli italiani quelli che ne costituiscono il numero maggiore: la metà almeno dell’intero personale. Orbene ci si assicura che la Compagnia, volendo aver sempre più le mani libere nell’amministrazione della sua azienda, e quindi sfuggire alle noie di possibili rivendicazioni proletarie, sia venuta nella determinazione di disfarsi a poco per volta degli Europei e servirsi in loro vece degli Arabi, più docili, più mansueti, più accondiscendenti.⁵¹

(while the tram drivers are of different nationalities, it is still the Italians who form the majority: at least half of all the staff. Well, we know that the Company, wanting to have a freer hand in administering its business and to avoid the inconvenience of possible proletarian demands, have decided to get rid of the Europeans little by little and to substitute them with Arabs, who are more docile, calmer, and more accommodating.)

Economic competition and the colonial system divided the workforce along national community lines. One of the consequences of such overlapping of social space was the effectiveness of the national community narration of social divisions. Economic competition, the rise of nationalism, and the Italian-Turkish war over Libya were essential factors for understanding the inter-community tensions that plagued Tunisian society between 1910 and 1913.⁵² We can observe the weakening, during those years, of the international labor movement in Tunisia, which, at the beginning of the century, had seen the Italians as its “spearhead.”⁵³ While in July 1910, *La Patria* worried about the competition of the “Arabs,” a month earlier, in *L’Unione*, a self-

⁴⁸ Bessis, “Le Mouvement ouvrier Tunisien.”

⁴⁹ Nantes, Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes (henceforth CADN), French Protectorate of Tunisia, 1st versement, Series Residence Générale—Internal Affairs, art. 1200, “Grèves” (“strikes”), f. 1904.

⁵⁰ See Nouredine Sraïeb, *Le Mouvement ouvrier maghrébin* (Paris: CNRS, 1985), and Claude Liauzu, *Militants, grévistes et syndicats: Études du mouvement ouvrier maghrébin* (Nice: Centre de la Méditerranée moderne et contemporaine, 1979).

⁵¹ “Gli Europei sostituiti dagli Arabi,” *La Patria*, July 5, 1910.

⁵² Gabriele Montalbano, “La comunità italiana di Tunisia durante la guerra Italo-Turca per la Libia,” in *Storie e testimonianze politiche degli Italiani di Tunisia / Histoire et témoignages politiques des Italiens de Tunisie*, ed. Silvia Finzi (Tunis: Finzi editore, 2016), 107-20.

⁵³ “Il n’est pas exagéré d’affirmer que les Italiens ont été le fer de lance du mouvement ouvrier au moins dans ses débuts.” Claude Liauzu, “La Presse ouvrière européenne en Tunisie, 1881-1939,” *Annuaire de l’Afrique du Nord* [9] (1971): 952.

declared ex-anarchist publicly declared his rallying to the Italian nationalist idea. The social conflict in the colonial space led Sisto Quarello, a miner, to embrace the ideology of Italian nationalism:

L'esperienza insegna che senza essere un fedifrago posso ricordarmi di avere una Patria e dei compatrioti da difendere, specialmente in questa classica terra [...] Così, vivendo in mezzo agli italiani, vedendo quotidianamente gli abusi di cui sono vittime. E mi sono ricordato anche io di essere italiano di avere una madre ...Patria [...] E io, ad onta delle mie idee, del mio passato dico che mi ricordo di essere italiano.⁵⁴

(experience teaches me that without being unfaithful I can remember that I have a fatherland and compatriots to defend, especially in this classic land [...] Thus, living among Italians, seeing daily abuses of which they are victims, I remembered that I was Italian, that I had a mother... Patria [...] And, in spite of my ideas and my past, I say that I remember that I am Italian.)

The former anarchist affirmed an attachment to his homeland as a result of his experience as part of the foreign working class in Tunisia. The massive presence of a working class originating from the kingdom of Italy was able to facilitate the substitution of the socio-economic category of “worker” with that of “compatriot.” This dynamic conflict between French capital and Italian labor thus combined the economic framework with the national framework. Thanks to this overlapping of categories, the nationalist narration could claim to have on its side the Italian immigrant working class of Tunisia. It was a shifting of the social conflict that rallied the working class to the national category;⁵⁵ the nationalist expedient was thus able to turn the social-economic conflict into a nationalist one.

Nationalizing Labor in a “Latin” Colonial Empire

In such a context—crossed by international, social, and inter-community tensions—Italian labor became, in nationalist rhetoric, a tool for claiming national prestige. Often, as mentioned above, what made these workers coming from the poorest regions of the kingdom of Italy so highly prized was their low labor cost. Behind the recurrent expressions, both in the case of Tunisia and in other migratory contexts, of “Italian work” was the desire to nationalize, to “Italianize,” the different activities of migrant workers. This aimed to give meaning to emigration from Italy, which could thus become an expression of the vitality of the whole Italian people.⁵⁶ Claiming the work of expatriate migrants as an inherent part of their nationality became a strategy for including them in the Italian diaspora spread throughout the world. The Italian upper class of Tunisia held that the development of modern Tunisia was due to the work of Italian farmers and workers: “E se la Tunisia sotto il rispetto dell’agricoltura può dirsi rinata a nuova vita [...] in massima parte lo deve al lavoro tenace, assiduo, intelligente [...] de’nostri rudi lavoratori del mezzogiorno della penisola” (“if Tunisia, for its agriculture, can be said to have been reborn to

⁵⁴ “Tribuna libera,” *L’Unione*, June 26, 1910.

⁵⁵ Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Maurice Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991), 185-228.

⁵⁶ Welch, *Vital Subjects*.

new life [...] this is due, in large part, to the hard work and intelligence [...] of our doughty workers from the south of the peninsula”).⁵⁷ This praise of the “really useful emigration of the labor force” was made by the committee of the Italian notables of Tunis during the International Exhibition of Milan in 1906. An inclusive “we” allowed the notables to nationalize this work by highlighting the nationality of the migrant labor force operating in Tunisia. This nationalist narration thus made the efforts of Italian migrants an “Italian” effort, identifying it as an expression of the homeland.

This same identification of the migrants’ work as an expression of Italian-ness can also be seen in the above-mentioned conference for the Sicilian students. The most important Italian newspaper in Tunisia, *L’Unione*,⁵⁸ greeted the students who arrived in “cette terre qui fût autrefois la nôtre” (“this land that was once ours”) and invited them to admire “la constance avec laquelle tous restent fermement fidèles à leur race [...] la loyauté et la ténacité qu’ils mettent à poursuivre l’oeuvre à laquelle ils se sont voués” (“the constancy of those who remained firmly faithful to their race [...] the loyalty and the tenacity they put into pursuing the work to which they have dedicated themselves”).⁵⁹ “Italians,” “race,” “work”: the categories of race, nation, and class were closely intertwined in the Italian nationalist narration of Tunisia.⁶⁰ The headmaster of the Italian high school added:

ports, chemins de fer, écoles, hôpitaux, marchés, théâtres, palais, si notre Patrie n’a pu les signer de son nom, rappelez-vous que le travail italien n’est pas étranger à cette oeuvre de progrès; et dans votre coeur de Latins réjouissez vous comme d’une victoire de famille, parce que ce sont là désormais les vraies victoires de la civilisation.⁶¹

(ports, railways, schools, hospitals, markets, theatres, palaces, if our country cannot identify them by name, recall that Italian labor is no stranger to this work of progress; and in your Latin hearts rejoice as at a family victory, because these are now the true victories of civilization.)

While Italy could not take Tunisia under its direct colonial power, the Italians, as “Latins,” were part of a “Latin” imperialism that was depicted as superseding the colonial tensions between France and Italy. The work of colonial civilization was thus presented as a shared mission through the figure of the “Latin family” that united the Italians alongside the French and that could also include the other Southern Europeans who had settled in the Maghreb. In the quoted text, Mascia highlights the Italian contribution to the colonization of Tunisia by emphasizing its working-class character. Mascia indicated “Italian labor” as indispensable for colonial exploitation of Tunisia.

Although he claimed as Italy’s own the nationality of the workforce and qualified all these

⁵⁷ Camera di Commercio Italiana di Tunisi, *Gli Italiani nella Tunisia* (Tunis: Typographie de l’association ouvrière, 1906), 21.

⁵⁸ About the history of Italian newspapers in Tunisia, see Michele Brondino, *La stampa italiana in Tunisia: storia e società: 1838-1956* (Milan: Editoriale Jaca Book, 1998).

⁵⁹ AQO, Central Administration, Tunisia, Political and Commercial Correspondence, Italian Affairs, art. 105, Resident General Stephen Pichon to Minister Théophile Delcassé, Tunis, March 29, 1905, fol. 45.

⁶⁰ See Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*.

⁶¹ AQO, Central Administration, Tunisia, Political and Commercial Correspondence, Italian Affairs, art. 105, fol. 44-48, resident general Stephen Pichon to minister Théophile Delcassé, Tunis, March 29, 1905, fol. 45.

achievements as “progress” or “civilization,” he omitted mention of the French nationality of the colonial enterprise. Mascia’s use of the “Latin” rhetorical device aimed to hide the imperial rivalry between France and Italy in Tunisia and, at the same time, minimize France’s contribution to the colonial endeavor in favor of the Italian settlers. The headmaster made this point clear by adding in the same speech: “dites bien que Carthage est morte en tant que rivale et ennemie de notre Rome, mais qu’à sa place, est née, riche d’énergies et d’avenir une Tunisie latine, dont l’exemple évoque et attend une Tripoli italienne!” (“Carthage is dead as a rival and enemy of Rome, and in its place, a Latin Tunisia is born, with a wealth of energy and future, whose example invokes and awaits an Italian Tripoli!”).⁶² While he considered the French protectorate of Tunisia to be “Latin,” he hoped the Italian colonization of Tripolitania would maintain the Italian-ness of the colony, eliding the common “Latin” link with France. This idea of “Latin” colonialism in Tunisia was a fragile one, a mere rhetorical fig leaf to hide the rivalry between the French and the Italians in the protectorate, and an effect of the diplomatic appeasement that took place between the two countries in the early years of twentieth century.⁶³ But this appeasement did not last long, as international tensions, interwoven with social conflicts, paved the way for nationalist political developments in Tunisian colonial society. For this reason, Tunisia and its Italian community would take an important place in the Italian colonialist imagination during the 1910s.⁶⁴ Tunisia and its working-class Italians were not just passive actors in the Italian imagination, but also producers of a specific, colonial Italian-ness with strong links to public opinion in the homeland.

In December 1910, following a national congress, the Italian Nationalist Association was founded in Florence.⁶⁵ Among the founders and organizers was Enrico Corradini, a major actor in Italian nationalism and one of the most committed publicists in ascribing imperialist value to Italian emigration.⁶⁶ Corradini was a well-known figure in Italian culture of the time, having founded and directed the magazine *Il Marzocco* in 1897 and *Il Regno* in 1903, along with other famous figures of the Italian cultural panorama. As a man of culture and intellect, in April 1910, the Tunisian committee of the Dante Alighieri Society invited Corradini to hold a series of conferences in Tunis, Sousse, and Monastir. The person responsible for organizing the conferences was Pietro Brignone, a Sicilian doctor, native of Pantelleria, and chair of the committee, who strongly agreed with Corradini’s nationalistic ideas: “dalla lettura di qualche libro e di alcuni articoli di giornali del Corradini, da lui stesso inviatemi prima del suo arrivo, mi si è venuto creando nell’animo un sentimento di altissima stima e di profonda simpatia per il letterato e per il cittadino” (“after reading some books and some newspaper articles he sent to me before his arrival, a feeling of very great esteem and deep sympathy was aroused in me for this intellectual and citizen”).⁶⁷ The secretary of the committee, Luigi d’Alessandro, a teacher at the Italian high school of Tunis, also expressed his high consideration for Corradini, writing of “L’ottima impressione della visita del buon Corradini, il quale fra i tanti che abbiamo conosciuti,

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Pierre Milza, *Français et Italiens à la fin du XIX^e siècle: Aux origines du rapprochement franco-italien de 1900-1902* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1981).

⁶⁴ Giuseppe Parlato, “Nazionalismo italiano e colonialismo,” *Nuova Storia contemporanea* 2, no. 3 (1998): 137-48.

⁶⁵ See Erminio Fonzio, *Storia dell’associazione nazionalista italiana (1910-1923)* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2007).

⁶⁶ Ronald S. Cunsolo, “Italian Emigration and Its Effect on the Rise of Nationalism,” *Italian Americana* 12, no. 1 (1993): 62-72.

⁶⁷ Rome, Archives of the Dante Alighieri Society, Series Comitati Esteri, b. 434, f. 613, Committee of Tunisia, “relazione del presidente Brignone” (“report of President Brignone”), Tunis, April 30, 1910.

è finora il solo che si nutra d'un vero e nobile ideale nazionale" ("the excellent impression of Corradini's visit, as one who, of those we have known so far, is unique in manifesting a true and noble nationalist ideal").⁶⁸ This visit had a significant impact on the development of Corradini's political thought, as he wrote a few years later:

in Tunisia il capitale, francese, e il lavoro, italiano, restavano separati e piuttosto ostili l'uno all'altro; o più esattamente, ostile il primo al secondo. Mi saltò agli occhi, durante quel mio primo viaggio, una specie di rassomiglianza tra francesi e italiani in Tunisia e borghesi e proletarii nel resto del mondo: con la differenza che nel resto del mondo erano i proletari a muover guerra ai borghesi, mentre in Tunisia erano piuttosto i francesi borghesi che avrebbero voluto muover guerra agli italiani proletarii.⁶⁹

(In Tunisia, French capital and Italian labor have remained separate and fairly inimical to each other; or, more precisely, the former inimical to the latter. During my first trip, I saw a kind of resemblance between the French and the Italians in Tunisia, and the bourgeois and the proletarians in the rest of the world: with the difference that, in the rest of the world, it was the proletarians who waged war against the bourgeois, whereas in Tunisia it was rather the bourgeois French who wanted to wage war against the proletarian Italians.)

Tunisian colonial society thus left a strong impression on Corradini, who later defined the concept of "proletarian nations" as opposed to "bourgeois nations" in the class struggle between nations. Indeed, a few months later, he referred to his Tunisian tour in the congress that took place in Florence. Corradini highlighted the conditions of Italian emigrants abroad as evidence of Italy's membership in the category of proletarian nations. He mentioned the Argentine case, which he had known from his trip there in 1908,⁷⁰ and then the Tunisian one. After referring to a French newspaper article and a consular report describing the conditions of exploitation of Italian workers in the French Protectorate of Tunisia, Corradini stated: "Ma supponiamo che l'Affrica più vicina fosse italiana [...] L'essere quell'Affrica piuttosto sotto dominio italiano che francese credete voi che avrebbe lasciato e la Sicilia e il Mezzogiorno e l'Italia nelle stesse condizioni in cui sono rimaste?" ("suppose that the part of Africa nearest to us was Italian [...] The fact that Africa were under Italian rule rather than French rule, do you think that would have left Sicily, the South, and Italy in the same conditions in which they have remained?").⁷¹

While the Italian proletarian presence in Tunisia revealed the exploitation by the French bourgeoisie, it also legitimized the colonial aspirations of Rome. If, according to Corradini, it was just a question of conquering a colonial space, why not satisfy the demographic needs of the Italian people? Of course, Corradini and the nationalists could aim at the African Mediterranean regions that were not occupied by Anglo-French colonialism: Cyrenaica and Tripolitania. In this way, the flows of migrant Italian nationals to North Africa would have a national colonial possession in which to settle as colonizers, not as foreign immigrants. What better kind of

⁶⁸ Ibid., "relazione del segretario D'Alessandro" ("report of Secretary D'Alessandro"), Tunis, August 5, 1910.

⁶⁹ Enrico Corradini, *Sopra le vie del nuovo impero, dall'emigrazione di Tunisi alla guerra nell'Egeo. Con un epilogo sopra la civiltà commerciale, la civiltà guerresca e i valori morali* (Milan: Treves, 1912), 16.

⁷⁰ See Enrico Corradini, *La patria lontana* (Milan: Treves, 1910).

⁷¹ Gualtiero Castellini, ed., *Il nazionalismo italiano: atti del Congresso di Firenze, e relazioni di E. Corradini, M. Maraviglia, S. Sighele* (Florence: A Quattrini, 1911), 25.

colonial settlers than those who have already settled in an African Mediterranean country, like the Italians of Tunisia?

Sicilian of Tunisia: Racial Prototype of a Mediterranean Colonial Project

In the Tunisian context, the vast majority of Italian nationals were Sicilians or of Sicilian descent, born in Tunisia.⁷² According to the French colonial statistics, in 1911 there were 46,044 French and 88,182 Italians in Tunisia, among them 49,039 born in Italy, of which 41,155 in Sicily: in other words, 47% of the Italian nationals in Tunisia were Sicilian born. The remaining 39,143 were Italian nationals born in Tunisia whose regional identification was not reported in the French statistics, though the Sicilian descendants likely made up a considerable part of that number.⁷³ So, quite often, the generic “Italian worker of Tunisia” meant migrants coming from the Sicilian islands (mainly Sicily, Pantelleria, and the Egadi Islands) who had settled in the French protectorate, or Sicilian descendants born there. Other worker migrant groups came from Southern Sardinia (from Sulcis-Iglesiente mining region)⁷⁴ and Southern Italy (mainly Calabria). The Italian consular and central authorities had to deal with that fact. In 1903, Tommaso Carletti, vice-consul of Tunis and future governor of Somalia (1908-1910), considered the characteristics of his fellow Italians from Sicily, evaluating from a psycho-social and bio-political point of view the pros and the cons of the human component of this Italian collectivity in an African Mediterranean country:

La psicologia collettiva della nostra colonia è la psicologia della razza siciliana; la nostra colonia è l'immagine impiccolita della Sicilia, riportata sopra un quadro di modeste proporzioni con uno sfondo tunisino. [...] Difetti, codesti popolani di Sicilia, trapiantati in Tunisia, ne hanno, parte risultanti dal malgoverno, che per secoli si è fatto di loro gente in patria, parte rampollanti su dalla stessa loro essenza etnica. Alla prima causa è da attribuire l'ignoranza crassa in cui i più sono immersi; non ci siamo mai preoccupati di dirozzarli, d'ingentilirli, di piallarli, se mi è lecito dir così; abbiamo lasciato che venissero su rudi e incolti, come la natura li educava. [...] Imputabili, infine, alla prima causa sono certe forme d'immoralità, che non provengono da corrotta natura, ma da ignoranza del male [...] Alla natura etnica sono imputabili l'impetuosità del carattere, l'impulsività e lo scarso potere d'inibizione, un sentimento esagerato dell'onore, da cui originano atti di violenza e reati di sangue.⁷⁵

(The collective psychology of our colony is the psychology of the Sicilian race; our colony is a reduced image of Sicily, cropped into a snapshot of modest dimensions, with a Tunisian background. [...] The defects that these countrymen of Sicily, transplanted in Tunisia, have are due partly to the bad government that for centuries they have endured at home, and partly arising from their ethnic

⁷² Thanks to the International Conventions between France and Italy in 1896, Italians born in the French protectorate kept their citizenship. See Anna Baldinetti, “Cittadinanza e comunità italiana nella Tunisia coloniale,” in *Minoranze, pluralismo, stato nell'Africa mediterranea e nel Sahel*, ed. Federico Cresti (Rome: Aracne, 2015), 63-83.

⁷³ Régence de Tunis—Protectorat Français, *Statistiques générale de la Tunisie: année 1913* (Tunis: Société Anonyme de l'Imprimerie Rapide, 1914), 8-11.

⁷⁴ Marilotti, *L'Italia e il Nord Africa*.

⁷⁵ Commissariato Generale dell'emigrazione, *Emigrazione e colonie*, 335.

essence. The first cause must be attributed to the shameful ignorance in which most are plunged; we have never been concerned about refining them, civilizing them, educating them—if I may so say—we have allowed them to remain as uncouth and uncultivated as nature made them [...] What may be attributable to the first cause are forms of immorality that do not derive from a corrupt nature, but from ignorance of evil [...] What is attributable to their ethnic nature is their impetuosity of character, impulsiveness and weak power of inhibition, an exaggerated feeling of honor, which produce acts of violence and blood crimes.)

Sicilians were categorized as a “Sicilian race” with a specific “ethnic essence” that gave them a particular character. The racialization of the Sicilians was at the same time intertwined with historical and social considerations, such as mistrust of national institutions because of past bad governance. The definition of “Sicilian race” implied an otherness that was presented in a neutral way, with a “we” in which Carletti was included. When he affirmed “we have never been concerned about refining them,” he may have been referring to the civilizing mission of the colonizer over the colonized, an Italian version of the “white man’s burden,” with Sicilians in the role of the savages. The reference to their “ignorance of evil” demonstrated the infantilization of this category, as if they were not fully responsible for themselves. The “Sicilian race” therefore needed a guide, a teacher and an educator that could only be the group of Italians indicated by Carletti’s “we.” But does this “we” refer to an Italian racial superiority that differentiates itself from and imposes itself on Sicilians?

The racial discourse in Carletti’s report is strongly intertwined with the socio-economic framework. He contests, in his report, the idea of a biological inferiority of Sicilians: “che certi nostri grandi baccalari in sociologi e in altre scienze dell’avvenire ci vogliono gabellare per organica e irrimediabile, mentre non è in realtà che inferiorità economica dovuta a cause accidentali, e quindi passeggera” (“that some of our great masters of sociology and other sciences of the future want us to believe as organic and therefore irremediable, while it is just economic inferiority, caused by accidental causes, and therefore temporary”).⁷⁶ According to Carletti there was, therefore, a “Sicilian race,” which was inferior only for historical and social contingencies, however—not by nature. The “we” used by Carletti did not necessarily refer to an “Italian race” of the North—he came from central Italy, specifically from Viterbo, in Lazio—but rather to cultivated people, the middle and upper classes, the liberal bourgeoisie. This is the sense in which we must take Carletti’s racial thought, as the racialization of a social and regional category, that of the migrant Sicilian working class.

However, this “Sicilian race” had positive qualities as well. Following the myth of the “noble savage,” Carletti considered Sicilians as keeping their racial stock “pure”:

mentre poi, d’altro canto, si trovano in mezzo alla popolazione siciliana indizi certi d’una moralità superiore a quella di altre razze; rarissime, ad esempio, le unioni illegali, scarse le nascite illegittime, grande rispetto dei figliuoli per i genitori [...] Nelle genti piegate sul quotidiano lavoro vibra l’anima dei padri, reduci e trionfatori delle terre e dei mari; e come per le fibre delle piante ascendono i succhi vitali, così per le vene della plebe siciliana ascende la superbia delle antiche gesta. E però nel popolano di Sicilia, per rozzo e ignorante che sia,

⁷⁶ Ibid., 336.

trovi il sentimento patriottico profondo e vigoroso, come tutti i sentimenti che hanno radice nelle remote origini.⁷⁷

(we could find among the Sicilian population obvious traces of a superior morality compared to other races: for example, illegal unions are very rare, the number of illegitimate births weak, respect for children great, no less great their attachment to their parents [...] In the people bent over their hard daily work the souls of their ancestors vibrate, the veterans and the triumphant winners of the lands and the seas; and as through the fibers of plants vital energy circulates, so in the veins of the Sicilian plebs circulates the pride of their venerable gestures. For this reason in the male of the Sicilian people, although he is rude and ignorant, one finds deep and vigorous patriotic sentiment, like all the feelings that have their roots in their ancient origins.)

As the above passage illustrates, the racial categorization of Sicilians makes flattering considerations about the “Sicilian plebs,” who are believed to possess exceptional ethnic and moral resources. In this context Sicilians, although racialized, are not excluded from the whole of the Italian people, but, on the contrary, their “ethnic essence” is taken for granted and seen almost as an example of “original purity.” The Southern atavism of Sicilians, according to Carletti, derived from the Roman era of the “winners of the lands and the seas.” Sicilians have revealed themselves in Tunisia as a pure racial prototype of Mediterranean man, fit for fatigue, hard work, conquest, and the colonization of new lands:

Il siciliano, insomma, ci si addimostra l'uomo italico per eccellenza, con le sue millenarie attitudini alle peregrinazioni lontane, con la sua tenace passione per il mare, col suo amore profondo al lavoro dei campi, con la sua rassegnazione al male, co' suoi scarsi bisogni, col suo senso realista della vita, con i muscoli induriti e colle mani fatte callose dagli strumenti grossolani a cui sono da secoli asservite [...] E oggi che, rifatta dall'unità e dalla pace, la patria sente risorgere le sue forze e gonfiarsi le vene di nuove linfe vitali, è fatale che ella slanci nuovamente fuori dai fianchi fecondi quest'uomo mediterraneo a riconquistare, col tenace e pacifico lavoro, le terre ed i mari, e che il siciliano d'oggi getti le sue propaggini sulle terre vicine [...] E ove si tenga conto che in quest'opera di pace, di civiltà, il siciliano ha compagne altre sue qualità preziose, e cioè la resistenza meravigliosa al lavoro, la proverbiale sobrietà, la parsimonia, la fermezza dei propositi, la praticità d'idee, sarà agevole spiegare come, senza capitali, senza sussidi, senza consigli, senza direzioni [...] i più mettono vigorose radici in Tunisia.⁷⁸

(Sicilians, in sum, are the Italic man par excellence, with their millennia of habitual distant wanderings, their tenacious passion for the sea, their deep love for farm work, their resignation to ill fortune, their modest needs, their realistic sense of life, their hardened muscles and their hands callused by the coarse tools that serve them [...] And today, reshaped by unity and peace, the country feels its

⁷⁷ Ibid., 336-37.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 337-38.

strengths resurging and its veins swelling with new vital lymph, it is destiny that this Mediterranean man should rush once again from her fertile loins to conquer lands and the seas with their tenacious and pacific work, and that today's Sicilians ramify to neighboring lands [...] And if we consider that in this work of peace and civilization Sicilians possess other precious qualities, namely their marvelous endurance in work, their proverbial sobriety, their parsimony, their firmness of intent, their practicality of ideas, it will be easy to understand how, without capital, subsidies, advice or directions [...] most of them sink vigorous roots in Tunisia.)

In Carletti's report, we find the echoes of the Italian debate that took place during those years.⁷⁹ Carletti's position, which accepted the Sicilian racial difference while encompassing it in a framework of "Italic man" or "Mediterranean man," demonstrates how this debate was elaborated and how it influenced consular and colonial officials.⁸⁰ Carletti's considerations seem to lie somewhere between the racial theory of Giuseppe Sergi,⁸¹ who posited an Aryan race and a Latin race, assessing the decadence of the latter, and the social one of Napoleone Colajanni and Giustino Fortunato,⁸² who ascribed Southern Italian inferiority to economic, social, and historical contingencies. What is unclear in Carletti's report is the relationship between the "Sicilian race"—which he assumed was different—and other Italians, and how this "race" is both "Sicilian" but also part of "Italic man par excellence." Most likely it is a relationship of atavism (Sicilians as Italic aborigines?) to other Italians.

The link between the race, the "marvelous work endurance" of Sicilians, especially of the manual and agricultural kinds, led the vice-consul to assert a "racial" efficiency of the Sicilians in colonization. While describing the defects of the "Sicilian race," Carletti nevertheless considers Sicilians to be singularly fit for doing the spadework of the colonial enterprise. Southern inferiority, which stems from historical and social contingencies, may still become the spearhead of Italian expansion overseas as Sicilians, after a "cleansing" of certain traits considered inferior and barbaric, can provide the Italian unitary state with the strength to exploit its colonial conquests. The narration of the colonial legitimation through the work of Sicilians involved natural characteristics, human as well as vegetable, from their "hardened muscles" and "callused hands" to their "vigorous roots;" the racial prototype of the Sicilian settler was as a "natural" colonizer. The strength of the Sicilian colonial settlers, appreciated by the colonial authorities, came precisely from the condition of need and deprivation in which many Sicilian working-class migrants lived.

According to Carletti, Sicilians could exploit their subordinate position of infantilized colonial settlers within an imperial Italian project. Thanks to national unity, Sicilians could be the new and powerful "vital fluid" that would bring new overseas lands to the motherland. Unfortunately, at that moment, Sicilians, as well as the other migrants from the kingdom of Italy, preferred foreign lands to the Italian colonial or national territories. In 1905, there were 2,333

⁷⁹ See Teti, *La razza maledetta*, and Aliza S. Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861-1911: Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁸⁰ For the relationship between Italian and Aryan races and the idea of a "Mediterranean-Aryan" race, see de Donno, "La Razza Ario-Mediterranea."

⁸¹ Giuseppe Sergi, *La decadenza delle nazioni latine* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1900).

⁸² See Giustino Fortunato and Manlio Rossi-Doria, *Le due Italie* (Lecce: Argo, 1994); Napoleone Colajanni, *Per la razza maledetta: osservazioni* (Palermo: R. Sandron, 1898).

nationals in the Italian colony of Eritrea,⁸³ while in 1906, the Italians in Tunisia numbered 81,156.⁸⁴ For this reason, the vice-consul recommended in his report to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a place of honor for Sicilians, considered a true “race of colonizers,” who in Tunisia had made an excellent demonstration of their worker and settler skills, useful for the future of Italian colonial projects:⁸⁵

Sarà bene che l'Italia ricordi, nel caso che la Colonia Eritrea e la Somalia fossero destinate ad uno sviluppo agricolo, o la fortuna benigna permettesse un giorno che noi potessimo, in qualche luogo, fare opera di civiltà sotto la protezione della bandiera nostra, che nella Sicilia essa possiede una stoffa di colonizzatori di prim'ordine, che non soffre comparazione con alcuna altra gente e che può mettere radici sovra ogni terra.⁸⁶

(It would be better for Italy to remember whether the Eritrean colony and Somalia were destined for agricultural development, or that benign fortune would one day allow us, somewhere, to grapple with the task of civilization under the protection of our flag that in Sicily has a cloth of first-rate colonizers, which does not fear comparison with any other, and which can take root on every land.)

Carletti's opinion was shared by several sympathizers of the colonial cause. In fact, settling rural populations in colonial areas instead of letting them emigrate to foreign countries was an enduring policy idea in Italian colonialism, as exemplified from the settlement project of senator Leopoldo Franchetti at the end of nineteenth century in Eritrea⁸⁷ to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.⁸⁸

The Italian notables of Tunisia emphasized the colonial potential of Sicilian emigration, which in Tunisia was considered successful. In the publication of the Italian Chamber of Commerce of Tunis, on the occasion of the international exhibition of Milan in 1906, Sicilian peasants were described thus: “Contenti di poco, sobri oltre ogni credere, resistenti all'inclemenza del clima, che su per giù è il cliema del loro paese nativo (e aggiungiamo noi che cosa non farebbero negli alti piani della Cirenaica dove il clima è infinatamente più mite e salubre?)” (“happy with little, sober beyond what is imaginable, they endure the inclemency of the climate, which is almost the climate of their native country [we add: what would they do in the highlands of Cyrenaica where the climate is infinitely milder and healthier?]”).⁸⁹ A year later, in 1907, Senator Giacomo De Martino, a major player in the Italian colonial administration,⁹⁰

⁸³ Gino Bartolomei Gioli and Michele Checchi, *La colonizzazione dell'Eritrea: Memoria letta alla R. Accademia dei Georgofili* (Florence: [n.pub], 1903), as cited in *L'Eritrea economica: prima serie di conferenze tenute in Firenze sotto gli auspici della Società di Studi Geografici e Coloniali* (Novara-Rome: Istituto Geografico de Agostini, 1913), 391.

⁸⁴ Régence de Tunis—Protectorat Français, *Statistiques générale de la Tunisie*, 8.

⁸⁵ Between 1908 and 1910, as governor of Somalia, Carletti tried to stimulate settler colonialism in that area, only to see his project fail due to local rebellions.

⁸⁶ Commissariato Generale dell'emigrazione, *Emigrazione e colonie*, 340.

⁸⁷ Leopoldo Franchetti, *Mezzogiorno e colonie* (Florence: La nuova Italia, 1950).

⁸⁸ See Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), 309-69, and Emanuele Ertola, *In terra d'Africa: Gli italiani che colonizzarono l'impero* (Rome: Laterza, 2017).

⁸⁹ Camera di Commercio Italiana di Tunisi, *Gli Italiani nella Tunisia*, 22.

⁹⁰ Giacomo De Martino was founder of the Italian Colonial Institute in 1906, Governor of Somalia from 1910 to 1916, of Eritrea from 1916 to 1919, and of Cyrenaica from 1919 to 1921.

expressed the same opinion. In his notes on his trip between Tunisia and Tripolitania in June-July 1907, he described the condition of the Italians he met in his passage through Tunisia. After glorifying the work of the Italian peasants, the Italian senator stated:

Alcuni dei membri del nostro Parlamento [...] sorridono scettici ad ogni impresa coloniale, e imperterriti vanno ripetendo: “c’è tanto da fare per colonizzare noi stessi, e voi volete incitare gli italiani a cercare nuove sedi?” ma se quei nostri uomini [...] viaggiassero e vedessero, che cosa penserebbero di questi italiani della Tunisia che la nuda roccia con lavoro incessante hanno convertito in campi ubertosi? [...] se per opera di governo, ovvero, come crediamo per opera del naturale svolgimento degli eventi, la Tunisia cesserà gradatamente di essere rifugio di nostra popolazione, dove andranno i nostri lavoratori? La Tripolitania apre le braccia ed attende [...] Occorre, dunque, che in Tripolitania si aprano le vie ai capitali ed alle braccia. Questo chiediamo, questo è necessario che avvenga, se non vogliamo che la Sicilia e il mezzogiorno d’Italia diventino ragione di grave preoccupazione futura.⁹¹

(some members of our Parliament [...] smile skeptically at every colonial enterprise and, undeterred, they ask: “is there not as much to do to colonize ourselves and do you want to encourage Italians to find new settlements?” but if these men [...] would travel and see, what would they think about those Italians of Tunisia who made flourishing fields from bare rocks through their hard work? [...] if by the work of the government, or, as we believe, by the natural course of events, Tunisia will gradually cease to be a refuge of our population, where will our workers go? Tripolitania opens her arms and awaits [...] It is therefore necessary that in Tripolitania the gates should be opened to capital and arms. We ask that, this needs to happen if we want to avoid Sicily and the South of Italy becoming a cause of serious future concern.)

Senator De Martino linked the Southern question to the colonial one: the latter is the solution to the former. With the possession of colonies, emigration can directly benefit Italian society, which would otherwise be impoverished by that same emigration. To the skepticism of anti-colonial members of parliament, he counterposed the case of Tunisia as an example of the “colonial success” that Italians could have in an overseas national space. Here we can identify the “we” with the whole of the Italian population. In the expression “colonize,” one sees the colonizing/colonized dichotomy which, reproduced in the Italian context, can only refer to Italy’s North/South dichotomy. “Colonizing” Italians, especially those of the South, means including them in the national community, albeit in a subordinate position. Southern otherness and inferiority form part of an Italian national discourse of internal colonialism, which Michael Hecter’s study has compared to the “Irish question.”⁹² Yet De Martino demonstrated how Tunisia displayed the civilizing and colonizing aptitude of the Italians. Thanks to a foreign colonial system, that of the French Protectorate, Sicilians proved that they could be good settlers.

⁹¹ Giacomo De Martino, *Tripoli, Cirene e Cartagine* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1912), 154-62.

⁹² See Michael Hecter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1977).

This narration of Italian colonial legitimacy through the migration of its lower-class nationals to foreign colonial possessions⁹³ flourished during the colonialist propaganda campaign for the invasion of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica in 1911.⁹⁴ Consequently, the rhetorical role of Tunisia and its Sicilian settlers as a “lost colony” reappeared in Italy’s colonial narration. For instance, some months before Italy’s declaration of war against the Ottoman empire, Giuseppe Piazza, a journalist at Rome’s *La Tribuna*, wrote a report about his trip from Tunisia, titled “Through Our Lost Land,” to Tripolitania, which he defined as “Our Promised Land,” in order to arouse colonial action and stir Italian public opinion.⁹⁵ In those months, Corradini again traveled to Tunisia, making a report that focused more on the Sicilians that had settled there. During his stay in Tunisia in 1912—after the beginning of the Italian invasion of Libya—he visited Bou-Ficha, a rural village between Enfidha and Hammamet, where he spoke with the Sicilian settlers living there, mainly originating from the neighboring island of Pantelleria. He wrote after his visit:

Bu Fichia ha una popolazione metà araba e metà italiana con cinque o sei francesi soltanto, impiegati del governo. Poiché la piccola Pantelleria fa per una zolla di terra che trova, ciò che la grande Francia troppo ricca, troppo bisognosa di benessere, troppo carica della sua civiltà estrema e della sua corruzione, non farebbe ormai più nemmeno per l’eredità dei cinque continenti: prolifica nella sincerità della vita primitiva. Vidi quei rozzi pantellereschi in mezzo alle loro vigne nuove, per le pianure che scendono sul paradisiaco golfo di Hammamet su cui già splendeva la primavera [...] Conobbi molti di quei pantellereschi irsuti e quasi negri che una volta nell’isola natia [...] eran gente di mare e poi avevano emigrato.⁹⁶

(Bou Fichia has a half Arab and half Italian population, with only five or six Frenchmen, employed in the government. The small Pantelleria does for an inch of land that it finds what great France—too rich, too needy of well-being, too laden with its extreme civilization and its corruption—would not do by now even for the wealth of five continents: prolific in the sincerity of primitive life. I saw these harsh Pantellerians in the midst of their new vineyards, in the plains that go down on the paradisiacal gulf of Hammamet where spring already shone [...] I knew many of these hirsute and almost black Pantellerians who, once on their native island [...] had been seafarers before they emigrated.)

According to this colonialist perspective, the uncivil, coarse side of the Sicilians, while subordinating them to other Italians also endowed them with the qualities necessary to succeed in the harsh struggle of colonization. The corrupt civilization of the well-off countries would not undermine the Sicilian working class, in this case the Pantellerian settlers, seen here as a model of this racial prototype of the Italic colonizer. It is worth noting that in this colonial biopolitical

⁹³ Concerning the Egyptian case, see Anna Baldinetti, *Orientalismo e Colonialismo. La Ricerca di Consenso in Egitto per l’impresa di Libia* (Rome: Istituto per l’Oriente C.A. Nallino, 1997).

⁹⁴ Antonio Schiavulli, *La guerra lirica: il dibattito dei letterati italiani sull’impresa di Libia (1911-1912)* (Ravenna: Fernandel, 2009).

⁹⁵ Giuseppe Carlo Piazza, *La Nostra Terra Promessa. Lettere Dalla Tripolitania, Marzo-maggio 1911* (Rome: Bernardo Lux, 1911).

⁹⁶ Corradini, *Sopra le vie del nuovo impero*, 52.

narration Pantelleria, which hosted a penal colony until the end of the Fascist regime, emerged as a concrete vanguard of this Italian worker imperialism. Closer to the African continent than to Sicily, Pantelleria acted as a dual externality, since it lay at the margins of an already marginalized territory. The people of Pantelleria, as a symbol for the other Southern Italian laboring migrants, were, thanks to their condition, the ones who could extend the nation's borders to Africa's shores and build an Italian Africa. According to this colonial imagination, the Italian social question and working-class migration were forging the perfect colonizer as a settler of the colonial vanguard. But first, it was necessary to "civilize" and "educate" these Southern populations—in Italy as well as in foreign contexts—to make them useful to the common national cause. Italian nation-building within Tunisian society was closely linked to colonialism: it was necessary to colonize the future colonizers, that is to say, to "Italianize" the Sicilians, so that they would leave behind their status as emigrants subject to foreign powers and become the true vanguard of overseas Italy.

Imperial Illusions

The French protectorate of Tunisia was not just a destination for Italian migration and settlement, but produced a specific Italian-ness framed within the colonial dynamics of Tunisian society. The case of Italians in Tunisia unfolded at the crossroads of Mediterranean migratory mobility, French colonialism, and Italian colonialist yearnings. For Italian colonialism, it was necessary to reclaim these migrants, who testified with their migration to the economic and social weakness of the Italian state. The labor of Sicilian migrants was "nationalized" to make it become Italian labor, and it was presented as a sign of the strength of the Italian people and their ability to colonize. Already adapted to the Afro-Mediterranean environment, the Italians of Tunisia were the perfect prototype of the future colonizers, raised and trained in a foreign colonial context but ready to become protagonists of overseas Italian expansions. The marginalized people of liberal Italy, the Southern working-class migrants, could find a place of honor in an overseas Italian empire through the colonial project, especially during the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911.

The Italian invasion of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica had a strong impact on Tunisian society. The future colonization of Tripolitania was presented as a great opportunity for the Italians of Tunisia, both the merchant upper class and the working class. The nationalist Italian upper class of Tunisia openly supported the colonial war, and the public protests of the Italian settlers exacerbated the nationalist rivalries.⁹⁷ In Kelibia, a town in the Bon Cape, L'Unione Musicale,⁹⁸ an Italian association founded in 1910, directed by shoemaker Francesco di Malta and made up of Sicilian migrants from Pantelleria, attracted the attention of the local police in October 1911 due to its open support of Italian invasion and the statements of its president, who declared that "qu'après Tripoli, on reprendra la Tunisie qui est terre italienne" ("after Tripoli [Italy] will take back Tunisia, which is an Italian land").⁹⁹ Colonialist propaganda aimed at the working class resulted in rallying the migrants around a nationalist sentiment, as declared by the report: "Les Italiens de Kelibia ne sont plus les mêmes depuis la création du cercle 'L'Union' complètement

⁹⁷ Montalbano, "La comunità italiana di Tunisia."

⁹⁸ Camera di Commercio Italiana di Tunisi, *Elenco delle ditte commerciali italiane e dei professionisti stabiliti in Tunisia. Edizione corretta ed ampliata coll'aggiunta degli Enti nazionali costituiti in Tunisia* (Tunis: Tip. Vittorio Finzi, 1915), 24.

⁹⁹ CADN, French Protectorate of Tunisia, 1st versement, art. 998, "Guerre italo-turque—telegraphes 1912-1913," Rapport du poste de police de Kelibia au Contrôleur Civil de Grombalia (report of Kelibia police office to 'Contrôleur Civil' of Grombalia), Kelibia, October 10, 1911.

et absolument italien par sa composition [...] La mentalité mal dirigée des Pantellaresques [*sic*] par Di Malta est mauvaise en ce qui concerne la France” (“Italians of Kelibia are no longer the same since the foundation of the club ‘L’Union,’ completely and totally Italian in its composition [...] The mentality of the Pantellerians misled by Di Malta is bad for France”).¹⁰⁰ On the other side, the Tunisians supported the Libyans and the Ottomans in their anti-colonial defense and resistance.¹⁰¹ The Djellaz riot between Italians and Tunisians and the Tramway strike against Italian drivers—which took place in Tunis during the first months of the war—,¹⁰² were the outcomes of inter-community conflicts stirred up by Italy’s colonial war. Soon after the military occupation of the Libyan shore, the idea of attracting the Italians of Tunisia to the new national colonial possession became a concrete possibility. Even though the local colonialist propaganda inspired the Italian settlers to leave Tunisia, at that point actively hostile to Italians, and to settle in Tripolitania, the displacements were few, owing to the lack of economic opportunities offered by the national colonial system and to the instability of the region.¹⁰³ The migrant-colonial project for directing the Italian settlers of foreign colonial territories to an Italian colony failed or, at the very least, did not succeed in the long term, as was hoped. The colonial enterprise as a solution for the needs of the Italian working-class failed, in the end. But, by dividing the working class into national categories and fostering colonialist illusions of supremacy, it partially succeeded in building national feeling in the Italian migrant collective in Tunisia, as shown by the Kelibia case. Ironically, redirecting the Italians of Tunisia to other colonial territories worked better within the French empire: after 1912, many Italian laborers of Tunisia preferred to migrate to French Morocco¹⁰⁴ rather than to the Italian-occupied territories of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Moreover, 1913 was the peak year for departures from Italy to foreign countries, with more than 800,000 migrants.¹⁰⁵ Italy’s imperialist illusions of using its migrant diaspora for colonial purposes in Africa had to face the economic reality of its social conditions, the international labor market, and the consequent migration trajectories.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ali Mahjoubi, *Les Origines du mouvement national en Tunisie (1904-1934)* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, 1982), 129-34, and Taoufik Ayadi, *Mouvement réformiste et mouvements populaires à Tunis: 1906-1912* (Tunis: Université de Tunis, 1986), 203-34.

¹⁰² Claude Liauzu, “Les Traminots de Tunis du début du siècle à la deuxième guerre mondiale,” *Les Cahiers de Tunisie. Revue de Sciences Humaines* 89-90 (1977): 141-90.

¹⁰³ With the outbreak of the First World War, the already fragile military occupation of Libyan territory collapsed rapidly, although the Italians kept Tripoli, Benghazi, and a few other main cities on the shore; see Nicola Labanca, *La guerra italiana per la Libia. 1911-1931* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 122.

¹⁰⁴ Salvatore Speziale, “Più a Sud del nostro Sud: spunti e problemi per lo studio dell’emigrazione italiana in Africa mediterranea tra le due guerre,” *Meridiana* 92 (2018): 95-116.

¹⁰⁵ Patrizia Audenino and Maddalena Tirabassi, *Migrazioni italiane. Storia e storie dall’Ancien regime a oggi* (Milan: Mondadori, 2008), 24.