

From Soil to Oil: Colonial Ecologies of Libya

Roberta Biasillo

This research project illustrates how colonial environments emerged and developed in the nineteenth through the twentieth centuries, how they have affected the historical trajectories of colonizing and colonized countries in colonial and post-colonial times, and how modern-day socio-ecological emergencies of the Global South are not only traceable to climate change but also rooted in environmental transformations under colonial rules. This project analyses the case of the North Africa territories that are now known as Libya. Libyan state and nation formation overlap with the rise, development and mutation of colonial institutions and power relations. The research argues that Libya represents an emblematic and extremely under-researched case through which to historicise both Global North-Global South imbalances and the inhabitability of several African regions affected by desertification and other consequences of global warming. Furthermore, the history of Libya as a colonial domain illuminates processes of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial environment building. Rather than stressing traditional dichotomies between colonial and metropolitan spaces and landscapes, white settlers and indigenous peoples, European agriculture, and local practices, one of the project's main contributions is precisely the reinterpretation of colonial environments as hybrid formations.

“From Soil to Oil” addresses the following questions regarding the Libyan trajectory:

1. To what extent have landscapes and natural resources featured in colonial enterprises, geopolitical orders, and international relations between the Global North and Global South in the Modern Era?
2. How can we assess the colonial past and legacy of Libya through the lens of environmental sustainability?

In order to show the pivotal role of natural environments, the research project is articulated in three parts:

Section 1 addresses how the collapse of the Ottoman Empire triggered an interest in conquering Libya and how this conquest related to environmental knowledge production.

Section 2 is dedicated to questionable policies and practices born of the environment during Mussolini's government, the period in which Libyan environments were severely affected by colonization. Several chapters explore attempts to build a fascist Italian Libya and implement European-modelled agricultural schemes.

Section 3 explores how in postcolonial times the uneven relationship between Europe and Africa continued and kept depending on extractivist dynamics.

This research fills several historiographical gaps. The history of colonial Libya and Italian colonialism are under-researched subfields, and such meagre interest is even more evident with respect to their environmental dimensions.