

The Climate of Fascism

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As a Landhaus fellow, my writing goal is to finalize my book project “The Climate of Fascism” for publication. The project places Italian colonialism in the global history of European imperialism from the perspective of environmental history and the history of science. The book asks how fascist imperialism emerged from the challenges of liberal imperialism in the face of scarce natural resources. My research focuses especially on climate and water, as they were fundamental for agriculture, human settlement, and warfare. The book argues that Italian imperialism was a laboratory of the transformation of liberal into fascist imperialism, as Italian colonialism in Africa lasted across the liberal, fascist, and even postwar period.

Liberal and fascist imperialism differed dramatically in the way they imagined nature, the scientific knowledge necessary to control it, and humans’ right to it. The focus of liberal imperialism was the economy; its goal, the commodification of natural resources. Since the age of exploration, the environmental assumption of this capitalist drive to empire was a vision of nature as boundless, open, and inexhaustible. Europeans believed that their right to the exploitation of African resources rested on their superior forms of knowledge, as they could manage colonial natures scientifically, allegedly better than Indigenous societies. In different local declinations, these assumptions about natural mastery and racial superiority underpinned the colonial practices of British, French, and American imperialism alike.

The core concern of fascist imperialism, however, was race. The fascists saw nature as limited and scarce. This world was unjustly partitioned by plutocratic empires and its resources wasted by inferior races. The conquest of nature was a zero-sum game, as seizing space from inferior civilizations was a matter of survival. The goal of fascist political economy was autarky, namely national self-sufficiency, which *required* a colonial empire. Science could not expand the bounty of nature at will. It had to contribute to military conquest and maximize the output of limited resources for the survival of the race. The political climate of fascism, namely this worldview constituted of environmental crisis and racial claustrophobia, went far beyond the dictatorship founded by Benito Mussolini in 1922: in the 1930s, it was the common denominator of Nazi Germany, Francoist Spain, Salazar’s Portugal, and Japan. How did this alternative political ecology emerge?

In my research project, I suggest that the environmental anxiety typical of the “climate of fascism” materialized first in Italy’s colonial empire by examining the role of scientific knowledge, water resources, and colonial ecologies. Italian experts’ efforts to understand and control the *physical* climates of their African colonies are essential to understanding the emergence of the *political* climate of fascism. Italian colonialism was the laboratory of an alignment of environment, science, and empire that became a feature of all Axis powers.