Ethnic Expositions in Italy, 1880 to 1940. Humans on Exhibition

Guido Abbattista
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Just accepted

Often absent from, or relegated to the margins of, syntheses of imperial history, the Italian colonial empire remains poorly known. The English translation of Guido Abbattista's major work, published ten years after its original Italian edition (*Umanità in mostra. Esposizioni etniche e invenzioni esotiche in Italia (1880–1940)*, Trieste, Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2013), contributes to rebalancing a global history of empires which has too often overlooked colonial states deemed more marginal. The book traces the history of exhibitions of human beings brought from overseas to Italy between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.

Some of these exhibitions took place within the framework of universal or international exhibitions, where so-called 'native villages' were intended to entertain visitors. Similar forms can be found in many European cities, especially in France, Germany and Great Britain. One of the specificities of the Italian case, however, lies in the fact that the exhibition of Africans preceded the formal establishment of colonial rule (the Italian colony of Eritrea was proclaimed in 1890), thereby contributing to a policy of propaganda and prestige aimed at asserting the position of the young Italian nation within the concert of nations. Guido Abbatista thus offers a history that brings together the emergence of the Italian nation and the expansion of its imperial ambitions.

The scope of the work (482 pages, supported by a substantial critical apparatus) guarantees its scholarly rigor and its refusal to succumb to the fascination that these ethnographic exhibitions of living human beings exerted on contemporaries—a fascination that has at times extended into the historiography of the phenomenon itself. The author, a professor at the University of Trieste, explicitly distances himself from the French scholarship of Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire, who played a major role in popularising the concept of 'human zoos' in France by emphasising the spectacular dimension and colonial pedagogy of these exhibitions, as well as their cultural legacies. The term 'human zoos' is deliberately set aside here in favour of the more analytical category of *ethnic exhibitions*, which allows for a more

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precise account of the diversity of *dispositifs* and of the intentions of the actors involved, without in any way minimising the violence of these practices or their role in the construction of racial hierarchies. In this respect, the historian clearly situates his work within the rich historiographical tradition that has highlighted the connections between anthropology, racial sciences, and museography in the colonial period. This includes, in particular, John M. MacKenzie's seminal work on the role of propaganda in the construction of imperial sentiment (*Propaganda and Empire*, Manchester University Press, 1984), or of Sadiah Qureshi's study of exhibitions of so-called 'exotic' peoples in Victorian Britain (*Peoples on Parade*, The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

In 1884, Africans from Assab were exhibited in Turin. The author then takes the reader to Palermo in 1892, Genoa in the same year, Milan in 1894, Turin again in 1898, and in 1911. The book follows a chronological structure and provides highly detailed analyses of several exhibitions, from Turin in 1884 to Genoa in 1914, in step with the rhythm of Italian colonial conquests. These exhibitions are complemented by those organised by missionaries, who notably displayed children and women in Italian cities during the 1920s—an aspect whose history the author outlines while explicitly calling for further research.

Beyond the press, which constitutes the core of the documentation used to re-construct these exhibitions, the breadth of the archival materials drawn from scattered Italian collections, together with the iconographic sources assembled, makes this book a key reference. The English edition contains fewer images than the original Italian version (though readers can easily consult the latter, available open access on the University of Trieste's website, which includes colour illustrations).[1] Dense in its documentation, the book will be of interest to historians of Italian colonialism as well as to those concerned with the transnational dimensions of European imperialism. The examples are extensively developed, and a continuous reading may at times give an impression of repetition; yet this choice of exhaustive description ultimately proves necessary in order to capture the ways in which exhibitions were adapted to specific local and international contexts. In this way, the book avoids presenting these exhibitions as a uniform spectacle replicated identically everywhere.

The positioning and reactions of the Africans who were exhibited are difficult to reconstruct, although the author makes an effort to do so through the only sources available to him—the press—whose polyphonic character he nonetheless emphasises. By examining as closely as possible the audience, its size, and its reactions, the author pursues a history of cultural practices that goes beyond the analysis of representations alone. The violence inherent in the exhibition of human beings and the racism embedded in these events emerge all the more clearly thanks to the fine-grained documentation of the cases discussed.

[1] GUIDO ABBATTISTA, *Umanità in mostra. Esposizioni etniche e invenzioni esotiche in Italia (1880–1940)* (Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2013), accessed via OpenstarTs, http://hdl.handle.net/10077/9484.

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Several important conclusions emerge from the Italian example. The first concerns global imperial history and the ways in which it is written, without neglecting more marginal national cases. Abbattista's investigation demonstrates that human exhibitions constituted an imperial language widely shared by European powers, regardless of the territorial extent of their empires, even if this language was adapted to specific contexts. Although the phenomenon of ethnic exhibitions was far less extensive in Italy than in France—a case frequently used as a point of reference by the author—it nonetheless remains essential for a global history of colonial cultures. From the perspective of Italian colonial history, the book provides crucial insights into metropolitan imperial cultures. The book thus demonstrates that the relative marginality of Italian colonial domination did not entail a weaker or less racialised imperial imagination. In both Liberal and Fascist Italy, imperial culture was neither derivative nor peripheral, but deeply embedded in metropolitan society.

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