

# Geographical imaginations, public education and the everyday worlds of Fascist Italy

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## Abstract

This article explores the phenomena of geographical imaginations and their seldom-noted promotion within various corners of Fascist Italy. Imagined geographies are socially constructed understandings of other places and regions and, as such, they are malleable, contingent, shifting and unquantifiable. Nevertheless, these imaginaries help us to navigate our imaginative worlds and our relative place in the material world. In 1930s Italy, various interest groups associated with the colonial and expansionist projects of Fascism promoted the development of wider geographical imaginaries among Italians. Academic geographers were often key figures in these initiatives: some prompted these projects, while others did so at the behest of the regime and its desire to expand Italians' *coscienza geografica* (the geographical imagination) to an 'imperial level'. This article explores how academic geographers from Trieste sought to contribute to this project and to embed their geographical knowledge into the ordinary, everyday circuits of public life. The article therefore outlines the notion of the geographical imagination and demonstrates via case studies how Triestine geographers tried to nurture these phenomena. Finally, it suggests that, although elusive and amorphous, geographical imaginations were a feature of everyday life in some corners of Fascist Italy and, as such, they deserve academic attention.

## Keywords

Geographical imaginations, geography, Fascism, public education, Trieste, geopolitics.

## Introduction: studying geographical imaginations

The geographical imaginaries that were encouraged and promoted by various actors within Fascist Italy received scant attention from the regime's interpreters either at the time or subsequently. Geographical imaginations are the ways that individuals or groups construct understandings of their wider worlds, and, at the same time, construct their own places within these worlds. These were traditionally viewed as self-evident phenomena – we all construct imaginative understandings of the worlds around us – but these ideas have only been partially explored from the 1990s onwards, and in geography they are more often enunciated than interrogated (Closs Stephens 2011). Elsewhere, despite Anderson's (1983) pioneering work on 'imagined communities', these ways of

seeing and conceptualizing ‘Self’ and ‘Other’, and their relations across geographical space, remain largely unexamined in the social sciences (Chakrabarty 2000). Similarly, geographical imaginaries have been addressed only intermittently and partially by Italianists and rarely, if ever, in relation to Italy’s Fascist period.

This omission is all the more curious given the Fascist regime’s persistent focus on generating an imagined national community and their efforts to persuade Italians to conceptualize themselves as *Italian* citizens rather than cling to traditional local or regional attachments. Indeed, efforts to prompt Italians to affiliate with a national imaginary at scales beyond their default *campanilismo* were, in part, attempts to develop their geographical imaginations. In turn, the regime’s efforts to encourage public interest in Italy’s colonial possessions and in further expansionism similarly required Italians to comprehend the world at wider, international scales. After the 1936 proclamation of empire, some advocates insisted that this meant developing these imaginaries to an ‘imperial level’.

How could these projects be realized? How are geographical imaginations developed and nurtured? How do they circulate, and how are they negotiated, resisted, or consumed and reproduced? In this article I move beyond an academic tendency to make sweeping, generalized statements about these slippery phenomena. Instead I offer a more precise, fine-grained focus upon how some academic geographers tried to generate and expand geographical imaginations for the benefit, as they saw it, of their city, the regime, and Italy’s colonial project. I also outline how such initiatives were supported by various aspects of the regime and its apparatus.

This article therefore unpacks the notion of imaginative geographies for colleagues in Italian studies. It outlines how Fascist Education Minister Giuseppe Bottai promoted geography through the late 1930s within Italian academic structures and throughout society with the intent of developing Italian geographical imaginations. Later sections focus upon one of the more politicized corners of Italian academic geography by outlining how the knowledge and pedagogy fashioned by the newly founded Department of Geography in the University of Trieste also aimed to enhance Italian geographical imaginations. Rather than publish their analysis solely in books and journals, these geographers also disseminated their knowledge locally and nationally in a sustained strategy to forge a *coscienza geografica* (a geographical imagination) among Italians. I suggest that these attempts to register upon, and affect, geographical imaginations has not been acknowledged sufficiently in previous work on Fascism, but that it could be understood as part of the daily experience of inter-war Italy.

## **Exploring geographical imaginations and the spaces of knowledge**

The concept of imaginative geographies has been an increasingly prevalent element of Anglophone geographical writing since the 1980s. The notion encompasses some longer-standing concerns of geographers to explain how

individuals and communities conceptualize and engage other places imaginatively – despite having no direct experience of them beyond textual or visual representations. Although isolated pioneers tried to nudge ‘the imaginative’ onto geographical agendas after 1945, the term only earned significant traction in the 1980s with the emergence of cultural geography and its concerns for the imagined and the representational. This notion was simultaneously popularized by Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) whereby the modern world was produced, in part, by ‘Latent Orientalism’: a process through which world regions were imagined and, in turn, produced by the West as ‘Other’ to the Western ‘Self’. In colonial contexts, this production of difference and its essentializing projections of the Orient as a distinctive region settled by societies with common traits helped to produce the colonial discourse that legitimated imperialism to the colonized *and* the colonizers. Said’s interventions have their critics of course – not least for his sweeping dissection of the world – but his focus on geographical imaginations still fuels our debates. He also inspires critics who interrogate the geographical imaginations underpinning the West’s twenty-first-century foreign policies – as the geopolitics of the colonial period are reproduced in the ‘War on Terror’ to construct what Gregory (2004) calls the ‘colonial present’.

My concern here is with smaller stories at scales precise enough to expose how geographical imaginations can be generated and disseminated. I also need to outline the protean nature of inter-war geographical knowledge and how it was forged differently in different sites. Again, Said (1978) helped us with these projects through his focus on the *practical* production of colonial territory. Although overlooked by many commentators, Said’s discussion of ‘Manifest Orientalism’ outlined the explicit applications of geographical knowledge to the governance of colonial territory. The banner of ‘Geography’ was broad in the early twentieth century. It encompassed the explorers, cartographers, boundary-makers and regional surveyors working in the field. It also covered the racial theorists, ethnographers, educationalists and the discipline’s politically connected leaders who directed fieldwork and interpreted its results from Europe’s grand geographical societies. Together, these overlapping groups and the knowledge they produced and codified were applied to constitute colonial domains. This ‘stern practicality’ rendered geography the West’s imperial science *par excellence* (Livingstone 1992). As a result, and amid the broader postcolonial project, contemporary historians of geography address the political service of geography and its various practices to colonialism (Driver 2000). Said thus helped us to think about empire’s imagined geographies plus the material, colonial territories formed and produced by colonialism – and the roles of geographical knowledge in both processes.

In colonial contexts social constructions of geographical imaginaries were, of course, entwined in the various subjectivities of the sites and contexts which produced them. They were also saturated with power, and it becomes impossible to consider the knowledge produced about Other peoples and

regions as being ‘neutral’ or ‘objective’. Recognizing this led historians of geography also to address the *spaces* where this knowledge was created, circulated, negotiated and consumed. We recognized that knowledge can be fashioned everywhere: in the field, the laboratory, the classroom or the political meeting room. It can be communicated via technologies as varied as the book, the map, the newspaper or the image. Acknowledging the historical geographies of geographical knowledge allows us to identify the key sites where knowledge is generated and reproduced (Withers 2010). Yet some sites were especially pivotal nodes of knowledge production and exchange: the scholarly societies of European capitals, for example, were entrenched nodes of knowledge – the ‘centres of calculation’ that Latour (1987) describes. Although we cannot hope to measure or define geographical imaginaries themselves therefore, we can sometimes trace the sites where geographical knowledge was created with the explicit intention of shaping geographical imaginations.

I attempt such an exercise in this article, and I do so in this journal because further assessment of these ideas within Italian studies is overdue. For sure there has been suggestive work on geographical constructions of Italy and especially the *Mezzogiorno* (Dickie 1996; Schneider 1998), but to my knowledge there are few studies that address the attempts to make Italians broaden their geographical imaginations or, indeed, any studies of how such projects might be enacted. Equally, while imagined geographies are frequently invoked by geographers, the ways they circulate and function are far less frequently addressed. The geographers of interwar Trieste offer us a rare opportunity to assess sustained attempts to generate geographical imaginations. In the following pages I explore their methods and address how they aligned their project with various institutions, media and politicians of the Fascist regime.

### **Developing a *coscienza geografica* in Fascist Italy**

The desire to educate populations to become more geographically aware, or more ‘space-conscious’, rumbled around early twentieth-century Europe. The political elites of Italy’s rival colonial powers often encouraged their citizens to ‘think imperially’ and to conceptualize both colonies and Metropole as one connected, imperial unit. In Italy, the lack of a *coscienza geografica*, plus parallel concerns about Italians’ limited *coscienza coloniale*, were identified and debated through the *ventennio* by advocates of expansionism (Gambi 1992; Labanca 2002). Some argued that nurturing an extroverted perspective in Italians was essential to the colonial project (Rusca 1928; Furfaro and Bianco 1979). Geographer Luigi De Marchi argued that the *coscienza geografica* was critically important as ‘an effective, proactive instrument of colonial and foreign policies’ (De Marchi, as quoted in Vacchelli 1928, 159). This argument was developed further by General Nicola Vacchelli – a former colonial surveyor who became Director of the *Istituto Geografico Militare* (IGM, the state mapping agency), President of the *Società Geografica Italiana* (SGI), and an ardent Fascist. In 1928,

he oversaw the reorganization of the SGI and aligned it still more closely with the regime (Cerreti 2000). That same year he used the IGM's popular journal, *L'Oltremare*, to call for a more developed national *coscienza geografica*, which would, in turn, inform effective expansionism and efficient colonial governance. It was, wrote Vacchelli, vital:

to form colonial and foreign policies from a scientific basis. And what science can do this more than Geography, which examines, sifts and argues about the character of each region to make its useful contribution to this duty of solid preparation? Geography . . . when understood in its true sense, encompasses the physical, the political, and the economic all at once, and is a secure and realistic base that we can't ignore nor dismiss in the treatment of physical and human problems. (Vacchelli 1928, 159)

Vacchelli hoped to realize his vision of geography facilitating effective colonialism when he planned the colonial surveys of Libya. These sizeable expeditions were coordinated by the SGI and undertaken in the mid 1930s. The 'scientific' knowledge they returned to Rome was designed to help constitute a colonial domain from the Saharan interior (Atkinson 2003, 2005; Cresti 2011). Upon Vacchelli's death in November 1932, the next influential advocate for developing a *coscienza geografica* was Giuseppe Bottai – Minister of National Education from November 1936.

### ***Bottai and the geographers***

At the thirteenth Italian Geography Congress in Udine, September 1937, Bottai outlined the challenges facing Italian geography. Amid a changing world, he argued: 'Geographical understanding is now so much more necessary in so far as to understand is to possess, and scientific possession is the optimum, indispensable introduction to any other form of possession' (Consiglio Nazionale di Ricerche, Comitato nazionale per la Geografia 1938, 29). Bottai also affirmed the geographers' duty to develop their science appropriately for Italy's new, imperial status. In addition to the development of academic geography, he continued, this also meant that: '[t]he geographical imagination of the population had to be disseminated through schools . . .' and those charged with this task had to put geography back in its place:

not at the margins, but at the center of the study of a modern nation: where it could perform its duty to coordinate and unify every aspect of human knowledge in the understanding of the earth and the understanding of the world. (Consiglio Nazionale di Ricerche, Comitato nazionale per la Geografia 1938, 29–30)

Bottai's speech was part of his wider support for geographical education in the later 1930s. His attention was celebrated by the geographers (Biasutti 1939), and Bottai directed additional favour to the discipline – including additional conferences and proposals for a National Graduate School of Geography (Biasutti 1941; Dainelli 1941). Yet Bottai was not only interested in academic geographies; he also focused on promoting geographical *education* at all levels of society.

Although the geographical institutions and agencies that facilitated colonialism enjoyed support from the regime prior to Bottai's initiatives, geography was not well established in Italian schools and universities. The first geography degrees were available only from 1926, and just seven geographers graduated from universities in 1930 (Cerreti 2000; Cuesta 1931). Some commentators saw this as a problem, and one called for a general geographical monograph that would engage the public and cultivate their passion for geography (Cuesta 1931). Upon his appointment as Education Minister, Bottai also pursued this cause. A commission to investigate the state of geographical teaching in schools and universities reported in 1938 and Bottai implemented the recommendation that the final year of university degrees should be more 'applied' in character (Biasutti 1939). That same year he signed a decree creating more dedicated geography school teachers, and in January 1939 geography was enshrined within the new programmes of his *Carta delle Scuole* (Malesani 1939; Galfre' 2005).

In the new curriculum geography now surpassed history in middle schools, with two hours of teaching each week (Trevisoi 1939). Under this programme students learned the geography of Italy and its empire, with a subsequent focus on Europe and Italy's rival powers (Malesani 1939). For some commentators geography now transcended its previous descriptive tendencies; it was now embedded in classrooms as an analytical science that could *explain* the modern world (Francolini 1939; Trevisoi 1939). Indeed, educational commentator Malesani concluded that:

In the new schools, which desire above all to be the political schools of Fascist and imperial Italy, geography must have, and certainly will have, a position of prime importance. One can safely trust the clear vision on geographical issues of [Bottai, who] affirmed that geography 'is an indispensable instrument of action for a people that, after regaining their imperial position, must compete, and desire to compete, with other peoples'. (Malesani 1939, 217–218)

As Pes (2013), Deplano (2013) and Galfre' (2005) demonstrate, the educational infrastructure of Italy was reoriented towards shaping future generations. I argue that Bottai also used formal education to make Italians think geographically at wider scales.

Bottai's next task was to reach a wider public beyond the classroom. In January 1939, the *Bollettino della Reale Società Geografica Italiana* appeared in a

new, more accessible parallel format as *I Paesi del Mondo* (Biasutti 1939). Bottai explained his strategy in the opening pages. He again reminded 'scientific' geographers of their responsibility 'to observe and to understand, that is, ... to scientifically possess the world' (Bottai 1939, 1), especially now that imperial Italy had to understand the geography that underpinned its potential 'action' (2). But Bottai also highlighted a new duty for geography: the requirement to engage public audiences.

I have talked up until now of geographical science. But, descending to more popular realms, the problem doesn't change. Together with responsible, organic and methodical scientific activity, an empire demands a vivid and widespread geographical imagination in the population. Here is another duty which I for one don't hesitate to place alongside [the scientific duty]. (Bottai 1939, 3 )

In our histories of the regime, Bottai is often differentiated from other Fascist hierarchs because of his intellectual interests and his relatively coherent vision of a future Fascist society that he pursued through various cultural initiatives (De Grand 1978). It seems that Bottai had identified the discipline of geography, and particularly its potential to develop collective geographical imaginations, as one of his cultural projects. His aim was to produce future Fascist citizens with wide-ranging and informed geographical imaginations so that future Italian leaders would not find their imperial ambitions hamstrung by provincialism. His influence sought to shape both educational policy and academic geography. Contemporary academics appreciated this significance: for one senior geographer this was a 'courageous programme for the renewal of geographical studies and of the national geographical imagination' (Biasutti 1939, 79).

### **Developing a *coscienza geografica* from Trieste**

The remainder of this article focuses on Trieste and its academic geographers. In part this is because Trieste offers opportunities to analyse how groups tried to generate geographical imaginations; it also reveals the intentions behind these projects. But also, Trieste's geographers published perhaps the most notoriously politicized geographical knowledge of the Fascist era and, therefore, there is little ambiguity about their political intent when they were promoting geographical perspectives for the regime. The journal *Geopolitica* was published monthly between January 1939 and December 1942. It was founded in Trieste by two academic geographers, Giorgio Roletto and Ernesto Massi, with support from Bottai. The geographers developed their geopolitical gaze and their way of representing the shifting inter-war world, within this border city. The journal has been discussed partially elsewhere (Antonsich 2009; Atkinson 1995, 2000; Vinci 1990), although significant gaps in our knowledge remain. Roletto and Massi's attempts to render their geopolitics accessible to the public and useful for

commercial and political interests has not been discussed, nor has their pursuit of what we would today call research ‘impact’.

This section addresses this oversight by exposing how the geographical knowledge generated in Trieste was targeted at various user groups and embedded in the circuits of everyday life. I outline three brief case studies that reveal how Triestine academics, collaborating with various agencies, tried to engage the public and enhance their geographical imaginations. Of course, some of this story is specific to Trieste and these accounts do not necessarily represent what happened elsewhere in Italy. Neither can I demonstrate the impact of these initiatives upon public imaginations or understanding. Yet these vignettes do reveal sustained, serious and wide-ranging attempts to forge geographical imaginations among the public, and the methods that were employed to this end. Although these more mundane stories have been overlooked by previous accounts of this episode, such attempts to inflect public imaginaries nevertheless deserve attention.

### *Trieste and its ‘applied’ geographers*

Trieste thrived through the nineteenth century as the main port and third city of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the southern, sea-board focus of the central European rail network (Hametz 2005). It suffered crippling problems, however, when it was annexed to Italy at the 1919 Versailles conferences and was isolated abruptly from its economic hinterland. In response, the Fascist regime pursued programmes to Italianize Trieste, and a key element was instituting an Italian University for the city. In addition, the University was stocked with academics who could address Trieste’s problems (Vinci 1990).

Giorgio Roletto was one such appointment. A leading economic geographer with interests in natural resource location, control and transportation, he was employed to address the spatial and economic problems prompted by the redrawn border (Bonetti 1967; Valussi 1965). Roletto was also interested in the political ramifications of these shifts and his academic project was politicized from the start. His 1929 inaugural lecture revealed his sympathies for Fascism alongside his conviction that geographical science should serve applied, national ends. His lecture – *La Geografia come Scienza Utilitari* – emphasized the *practical* applications of economic geography: but to realize these benefits Roletto called for the development of ‘a geographical spirit and the geographical imagination’ for the rational conduct of trade, commerce and economic development (Roletto 1929, 18). He noted how other European powers used geographical knowledge to their advantage and he argued that Italy should do the same. Under Mussolini, he concluded: ‘geography has a great mission to undertake and geographers have serious responsibilities to perform’ (Roletto 1929, 20). True to his word, Roletto immediately began geographical research into the economic and political problems of Trieste.

Another key figure in the Trieste Department was Ernesto Massi, who, by 1930, had graduated in geography and begun doctoral research under Roletto’s



supervision (Lo Monaco 1987; Societa` Geografica Italiana 2002). His PhD addressed how Gorizia, another city ruptured by a new frontier in 1919, had been reshaped by its political geography. Such shuddering change was common to post-war Europe and it was this flux that the continent's emerging geopoliticians tried to represent and explain. In Trieste it was Roletto, Massi and their group who turned to these nascent geopolitical debates to address the pressing problems of economic and political geography. Roletto's prescribed role in the University, plus the wider struggles and politicized cultures of Trieste, must have also informed his determination, alongside Massi, to develop an *Italian* geopolitics to address the issues of borders, states, territories, resources and their impacts on the changes and instabilities of the inter-war world (Atkinson 2000). Nine years before their journal *Geopolitica* appeared, however, an earlier attempt to articulate geographical assessments of the shifting world order was realized through a Trieste-based journal entitled *La Coltura Geografica*. Their promotion of geography, their application of this knowledge to Italy's problems, and their Fascist sympathies can all be traced through its pages.

#### *Generating geographical imaginations with La Coltura Geografica*

The journal *La Coltura Geografica* was aimed at school teachers and was published between January 1930 and February 1932. It was directed by Roletto. Massi worked as a sub-editor on a voluntary basis, and many of its leading contributors would later write for *Geopolitica*. The journal's programme laid claim to a special role for geography as a science capable of interpreting, analysing and explaining the dynamics of the contemporary world thanks to its wide-ranging vision. As Pes (2013) notes in this issue, when Balbino Giuliano took over as Education Minister in September 1929, he had instructions to infuse schools with Fascist ideology. *La Coltura Geografica* reflected this agenda and its politics were clear from the start. The journal's front cover featured the Lictor Fasces plus a statement from Mussolini: 'You know which errors were perpetrated only recently, and which must be attributed above all to an imperfect understanding of geography' (from his address to the *Societa` Geografica Italiana*, June 1924; Reale Societ`a Geografica Italiana 1924). Any teachers reading this new journal would be clear about its political stance.

The first page of *La Coltura Geografica* reproduced a statement from Giuliano about the discipline of geography. Giuliano declared that geographical teaching did not receive the attention that its importance merited, and therefore, geography would be included in a revised national curriculum (Giuliano 1930). Such sentiments were common in the journal. The first article – entitled 'Economic Geography and General Geography' – emphasized the many applications of this science because the geographer 'can not only observe and describe, but can also often explain and therefore prescribe action: it is this possibility that fundamentally-characterises geography as a science of observation and of practical application' (Anon 1930, 3).

Roletto's editorials also promoted geography relentlessly: a bullish December 1930 item talked of continuing the struggle against the ignorance of the masses and 'the rubbish that blocks the road to the free development of geographical understanding' (La redazione 1930c, 229). A month later, Roletto re-emphasized geography's privileged perspective and special role:

The Italian of today has interests in all parts of the world: in commercial and emigration flows, in political and colonial expansion, in the fundamental problems of our foreign policy .... Only a geographical culture is in a position to place these questions in their proper contexts, to prepare – with a strong commitment to study and propaganda – their solutions from a geographical perspective. (La redazione 1931, 1 )

Thereafter, the journal exhibited two entwined themes consistently. The first was a focus upon colonial issues – particularly the location, access and control of world resources amid the global recession. This concern extended to transport infrastructures, energy supplies and the political control of trade routes: all of which shaped inter-war resource access in the period, and all of which were felt keenly by resource-poor states like Italy. Dante Lunder, a former doctoral student of Roletto, was the journal's 'colonial editor', and Massi wrote a 'Colonial section' for each issue. Every month they offered teachers geographical insight and teaching materials about the colonial world and its resources.

The journal's second core theme was the promotion and celebration of geography's role in public life. One editorial claimed their aim was to render geography 'a fundamental element of the national culture and national education' (La redazione 1930c, 229). Therefore the journal encouraged teachers to develop their pupils' geographical imaginations; indeed, at times, this commitment bore a distinctly campaigning tone. In late 1930, for example, two leading articles – aimed directly at teachers and entitled 'Geografia e scuola' – were vigorous polemics that bemoaned the inadequate emphasis on geography in education at a time when the discipline had new roles to perform. The first article critiqued the outdated, 'arid' and 'sterile' geography teaching found in some schools. It continued: 'only with a remedy to this sorry state – to which this journal hopes to contribute – will the geographical and colonial imaginations of the Italian people materialise' (La redazione 1930a, 182). The second article emphasized 'that the Italian people, if they want to mean something in the world, must become accustomed to thinking geographically' (La redazione 1930b, 205). Geography teachers reading the article were instructed to focus their lessons on the new Italy of expanded horizons, with ten million sons disseminated throughout the world, with colonies that stretched to the equator, and with industries that quested insatiably across the world after the most disparate raw materials (La redazione 1930b). And these teachers, the article continued, also needed to trust geography – this new unitary science

with its synthesizing analysis – that would enable them to see and comprehend this new world properly (La redazione 1930b). Such sentiments were repeated endlessly throughout the journal.

It is impossible, of course, to demonstrate the effect of these articles or to claim any direct impact for this project. I have found no records relating to the print run of this journal, but I suspect it may have struggled financially. In April 1932, it suddenly merged with another journal to become the Rome-based *Rivista di Geografia e Cultura Geografica*. For a year Roletto and his Triestine colleagues enjoyed a reasonably high profile in the new journal, but in 1933 they vanished from the re-titled *Rivista di Geografia* along with their articles. For whatever reason, their first journal project had collapsed. Nevertheless, their agenda and intent were clear – particularly their focus on expanding the *coscienza geografica* through formal education. Therefore, when this avenue closed, the Triestini simply transferred their attention to other media and outlets aimed at business communities, the political classes and the general public.

### *Impacting on the public via the Istituto Coloniale Fascista*

The Triestine geographers' argument that geographical insight could best comprehend the changing world was also peddled to colonial and business lobbies. In 1931, for example, Roletto co-authored a handbook for the Italian business community working in the Eastern Mediterranean (Roletto and De Vergottini 1931). The book was designed to aid trade by providing the business community with all relevant information about the region. This initiative was later extended via a series of contributions to *Commercio*, the Rome-based journal of the Fascist Institute of Businessmen (Roletto 1940a, 1940b, 1941a). Throughout this period, Roletto published formal research on Trieste's economic prospects (Roletto 1930, 1941b), but his publishing in more popular fields demonstrates a determination to impact on society more directly. Roletto also reached a wider public through the *Istituto Coloniale Fascista* (ICF).

The *Istituto Coloniale Fascista* evolved from the *Istituto Coloniale Italiano*, which was founded in Rome in 1906. After the hiatus in Italian expansionism following the 1896 Adwa disaster, the institute became the key organization articulating Italy's expansionist claims (Labanca 2002). Like parallel colonial lobbies across imperial Europe, the Colonial Institute was populated by a small but powerful group of Italy's diplomatic, military and political elite, plus elements of the business community with overseas interests (Aquarone 1977). Collectively, this institution's extroverted gaze and political interests resonated closely with Italy's geographical societies and their membership overlapped extensively. This common ground extended to the top of these organizations: the first President of the Colonial Institute, Antonio Di San Giuliano, was simultaneously President of Rome's *Società Geografica Italiana* and Foreign Minister (Aquarone 1977). These enmeshed leaderships, memberships and agendas continued through the inter-war years.

Given Fascism's expansionist interests, the *Istituto Coloniale* became drawn under the regime's control in the 1920s. By the 1930s, the interests of the renamed *Istituto Coloniale Fascista* revolved around the pursuit of more territory, the optimal development of extant colonies and the dissemination of knowledge *about* the empire to the Italian people (Labanca 2002). As such, this organization, with its international outlook and concern to disseminate this perspective throughout society, echoed closely the agenda of the Triestine geographers. Roletto, Massi and their collaborators therefore continued their project to make Italian youth think geographically through the ICF.

Roletto became president of the Trieste regional branch of the ICF in January 1935. He held this post until the early 1940s and he and his PhD students became national figures in the organization (*L'Azione coloniale* 1935a). The ICF's national agenda revolved around enhancing awareness of Italy's colonial profile and ambitions. To this end the Trieste branch organized slideshows, film shows, lectures and excursions – many aimed especially at younger audiences. The film *Abbissinia*, which suggested that the East African state was undeveloped, 'uncivilized' and in critical need of 'modern' intervention, was shown in September 1935 for instance – just as tensions rose and the Italian invasion approached (*L'Azione coloniale* 1935d, 5). In addition, in early 1935 the Trieste ICF organized its third 'Afterwork course on colonial ideas', which ran weekly, in the evenings, and now expanded to include new material on geography (*L'Azione coloniale* 1935b). By the later 1930s, 'Colonial Science' was being taught in Universities (Deplano 2013), but in January 1935 this course in Trieste was well established and was already aimed at a broader, public constituency.

A fourth 'afterwork' course on colonial themes ran from November 1935 to June 1936 – stretching across the Abyssinian campaign. Roletto gave the opening lecture to assembled dignitaries, military officers, teachers and students at an event that was reported widely (*L'Azione coloniale* 1935g). He outlined how Italy's colonial claims sprang from its 'right to expand' to access the 'necessities for life', and its right to forge settler-colonies for the peninsula's excess population. Other justifications for expansion included Italy's history as a 'civilizing influence' in the Mediterranean and the inequitable distribution of African territory between the colonial powers with Britain and France enjoying excessive space, while others, above all Italy, had insufficient territory for their needs. The League of Nations sanctions being levelled against Italy as he spoke probably only heightened Roletto's sense of injustice as he called for the redistribution of African territory (*L'Azione coloniale* 1935g).

This 'afterwork' course was part of a wider programme of educational events and activities that were supposed to feed into the daily schedules of ordinary Italians. By the 1930s, the ICF had often become an integral element of the regime's local presence in *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* programmes: the 'afterwork' organizations that, in theory, filled the leisure time of Italians (De Grazia 1981). In Trieste, academic geographers were central to these ICF

activities. Dante Lunder contributed his expertise upon 'colonial geography' to the ICF's 'Course of culture' (*L'Azione coloniale* 1935c). Angelo Fillipuzzi, another geographer, was head of the section's 'Committee of action for colonial propaganda and culture', which was charged with enthusing the expansionist sentiments of local youth (*L'Azione coloniale* 1935e). One of Fillipuzzi's innovations was using radio broadcasts to spread the ICF's message. The regime's use of radio is seen by some as a marker of its pioneering totalitarian methods, whereby the official pronouncements of Fascism, and, frequently, the rhetoric of Mussolini himself, reached all corners of the nation and, it was hoped, the ears of all Italians (Thompson 1991). Fillipuzzi borrowed this technology by developing a radio competition that involved local youths drawing the political frontiers, major cities and the two military fronts upon maps of East Africa as the invasion progressed (*L'Azione coloniale* 1935f). Here, again, effort was directed at encouraging young Italians to think about the wider world; these schemes were supposed to develop their geographical imaginations explicitly. By mid 1935, therefore, Roletto had infused local ICF and *dopolavoro* activities with geographical education. His work drew praise, from the government minister overseeing the ICF (*L'Azione coloniale* 1935e).

Roletto's reputation in the ICF nationally continued to rise. In November 1936 he was appointed to the organization's National Research Council, which directed the ICF's research activity (*L'Azione coloniale* 1936b). Four months earlier, in July 1936, Alessandro Lessona, the newly appointed Minister for Colonies, made Trieste's ICF 'Colonial Conference' his first official function (*L'Azione coloniale* 1936a). In his welcoming speech, Roletto claimed that future colonial expansion required:

a stronger colonial imagination, which is synonymous with the geographical imagination – that fundamental of patriotic-education, that symptom and proof of the development of a national-political conscience, and indicator of the paths that a young people ... must choose to reach the peak of its imperial power. (*L'Azione coloniale* 1936a, 3).

This familiar refrain – that the colonial and geographical imagination was essential to any colonial enterprise – was here targeted at the Colonial Minister directly. Roletto certainly was not stranded in any ivory tower: he oriented his research towards practical, applied ends that responded directly to current events. The ICF was another outlet for his message, but also an organization he supported because he shared its aims to impact on public imaginations. Again, I cannot measure whether these activities genuinely impacted with the public, but the efforts they invested in these initiatives indicate that the geographers thought these events were worth their time.

One final attempt by these geographers to impact on public imaginations was articulated through Trieste's daily newspaper. *Il Piccolo di Trieste* was a well-established six-page broadsheet newspaper – although by the 1930s it closely reflected the regime's agenda (Bon 2000). As the main newspaper for a city of 260,000 people, it enjoyed a substantial circulation. The geographers managed to access this outlet too and, in early 1939 at least, readers were exposed to a stream of articles offering geographical assessments of the unstable inter-war world. The first six months of 1939, for example, saw thirty-one articles in *Il Piccolo* that could be labelled geographical or geopolitical. Another ten articles discussed the kind of outreach work that the Triestine geographers pursued beyond the University, and seven more reported their academic business – including the launch of *Geopolitica* (Il Piccolo 1939a; see also Il Direttori 1939) and Roletto and Massi's February 1939 audience with Mussolini (Il Piccolo 1939b). In early 1939, clearly, the agenda of the Trieste Geographers found frequent coverage in the local press.

Dante Lunder was the prime geographical contributor to *Il Piccolo*. By 1939 he was teaching in the Trieste Geography Department, and he promoted his geographical perspective through both *Geopolitica* and these newspaper articles. His writing for *Il Piccolo* sought to explain current affairs across a wide range of examples. In my early 1939 sample-period he focused especially on the Adriatic and Balkan regions: an emphasis that reflected the 1938 German expansion into Austria and Czechoslovakia and related Italian anxieties that their 'influence' in the northern Balkans was now threatened (Rodogno 2003; Vinci 1990). In February 1939, for example, Lunder wrote about 'Adriatic Collaboration: the state of Italo-Jugoslav traffic in relation to Autarchic politics'. He suggested that 'the invaluable geopolitical function of the Adriatic is the complementarity between the two economics': an argument that presented geographical reasons for the region to remain under Italian influence (Lunder 1939a). A further, unattributed article in April was entitled 'The geopolitical function of Albania' and stated that 'Albania, with its geopolitical position, constitutes one of the most important elements of our Adriatic strategy. It is the key to the vault of this sea' (Anon 1939b, 2). Despite German pressure to the north, this article again represents the Adriatic basin as a coherent region that is geographically locked together with Italy. This point was reinforced by two maps, drawn in Lunder's hand.

The role of Trieste in this emerging Adriatic context was also addressed regularly for *Il Piccolo's* readers. An article in May 1939 discussed how potential collaboration between the Axis powers in the North Balkans would lend Trieste a pivotal role in the region (R.A. 1939). It noted that 'in an environment of political certainty and geographical stability' the reviving industrial sector of Trieste could look forward to further development (R.A. 1939, 5). Other articles focused similarly on Trieste's strategic position in this emerging geopolitical scenario (Lunder 1939c) and for Italy's colonial trade routes (Lunder

1939b). In addition, these articles were prominent amid *Il Piccolo's* news columns because Lunder often illustrated them with the visually striking geopolitical maps that he also drafted for *Geopolitica* (Atkinson 1995).

These maps are striking, but their presence, sometimes on the front page, indicates that by 1939 some of *Il Piccolo's* readership were familiar with such geopolitical images and were perhaps able to interpret them. Other articles used geopolitical concepts like 'spazio vitale' (living space) and other geopolitical terms in their reporting (Anon 1939a). This again hints that readers were familiar with these terms and that they had been subject, albeit involuntarily, to the kind of public geographical education that Trieste's geographers had been promoting for a decade.

As noted above, geographical imaginations are elusive, unquantifiable phenomena that defy easy legibility and ready analysis. I have therefore pieced together fragments of the textual record that show how the Triestini geographers developed, nurtured and circulated geographical knowledge and aimed this squarely at the public. As ever with research into popular media like newspapers and journals, we cannot demonstrate how these initiatives were received, resisted or negotiated – but I do not think this is reason to ignore them. I am also alive to the problems of using Fascist media as sources – although it is these words and events that were intended to enthuse and affect Italians that I wanted to expose.

### **Conclusion: assessing the impacts of geographical imaginations?**

The geographers I have discussed are notorious in the history of Italian geography for their production of *Geopolitica*. In addition, the subsequent careers of Massi and Roletto also drew controversy. Roletto served as Rector of Trieste University under Nazi occupation in 1944–45 (Vinci 1997), while Massi attracted infamy after 1945 as a leading figure in the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Carioti 2011) and for his unapologetic stance about *Geopolitica*. These roles also shaped how Trieste's geographers were remembered within Italian geography after 1945. Beyond this notoriety, however, their other inter-war initiatives remain unknown. There is no relevant trace of these geographers and their activities in the city or state archives in Trieste, and their efforts are largely ignored by historians (cf. Vinci 1990). However, I argue that their enduring attempts to infuse a *coscienza geografica* into public imaginations deserve attention. Indeed, the support they earned from various actors within the regime suggests that a more systematic examination of how Italians conceptualized the world imaginatively under Fascism is overdue.

Such a project also resonates with contemporary academic debates that direct attention to the more mundane, ordinary worlds of everyday life. From work on 'histories from below', through to geography's recent interest in 'small stories' (Lorimer 2003), the impetus has been to include the quotidian alongside traditional, grander narratives. Recent work on Fascism concerning its cultural

agendas, the pursuit of consensus and the drive to produce Fascist citizens echoes similar themes. Research into the spectacular and performative aspects of the regime, for example, begs questions about how the parades and rituals that permeated the public realm were received by ordinary Italians. Equally, research at the corporeal scale addressing how comportment, sexualities and individual bodies became a focus of regulation prompts discussion about the idealized Fascist citizen and the daily *experience* of Fascism. All these debates suggest we are ready to explore the everyday experience of Fascism further.

To this end my account reveals how some geographers, institutions and Fascist hierarchs working collaboratively to impact upon public imaginations and to encourage ordinary Italians to think geographically and imperially at scales far beyond their traditional horizons. My examples therefore suggest that we should not neglect the significance of such mundane, ordinary events in the nation-making project. Billig (1995) discusses how apparently commonplace, everyday nationalist symbols like flags sneak into our imaginations insidiously through their simple, relentless repetition and familiarity. Cumulatively, these symbols convince and persuade: producing a 'banal nationalism'. It is possible that Roletto, Massi, Lunder and their colleagues were working in a similar vein as they sought to develop geographical imaginations via persistent repetition and exposure to these messages. Certainly, in 1930s Trieste it was possible to encounter geography routinely – in classrooms, in public lectures and *dopolavoro* events, in exhibitions, film shows and the pages of the daily newspaper. Geography was everywhere, and some of it was designed to impact upon Italians to help produce a new, Fascist Italy with citizens who knew their geography.

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