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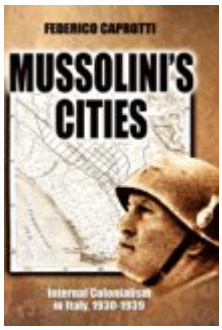
Federico Caprotti. *Mussolini's Cities: Internal Colonialism in Italy, 1930-1939.*
Youngstown: Cambria Press, 2007. xxvi + 290 pp. $84.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-934043-53-0.



Reviewed by Joshua W. Arthurs

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In his speech inaugurating the newly constructed town of Littoria in 1932, Benito Mussolini famously announced that "this is the war we prefer." The battle in question was the reclamation of the malarial marshland around Rome (the Agro Pontino), heralded at home and abroad as evidence of Fascism's dynamic program of modernization. To this day the New Towns--Littoria (now Latina), Sabaudia, Pontinia, Aprilia and Pomezia, all built between 1932 and 1939--stand as tangible reminders of the regime's desire to reclaim, regenerate and redeem the Italian landscape and population.

In *Mussolini's Cities: Internal Colonialism in Italy, 1930-1939*, Federico Caprotti seeks to write not so much a "linear history" of this "battle" as an account of "the lived landscape and multiple social, ideological and technological discourses which contributed to the making of this amazing landscape" (p. xxii). Since Caprotti is by training a geographer and not a historian, I was hopeful that he would approach this topic from a novel perspective, steering clear of the morass of historiographic debates over ideology, consensus and state control in Mussolini's Italy. Indeed, the strongest aspects of the book are those in which the author retains a foothold on the dry land of human geography and development. For example, he suggests that the Pontine Marshes should be seen as a sociocultural landscape, a hybrid space reflecting the dialectic between rurality and urbanity at the core of the Fascist project. The regime attempted to resolve this conflict by distinguishing between an untamed, unhealthy and unproductive "first nature" and a "desirable nature ... where nature was socially co-opted and channeled towards a particular socially-engineered existence ... " (p. 63). His geography background is also helpful in explaining some of the technical aspects of ***bonifica integrale*** (land reclamation), as when he discusses the various chemicals used to combat malaria-bearing mosquitoes or the "technological support network" built "to sustain and continue the production of a constructed 'second' nature" (p. 96).

Too often, however, Caprotti becomes entangled in lengthy excursuses in which he attempts to define such eternally vexing concepts as

modernity and fascist ideology--a task made all the more difficult by the fact that he is not always well-versed in the relevant historiography. Thus the chapter on the settlement of the marshes gets bogged down in a recapitulation of Gramsci's theory of hegemony; the chapter on newsreel footage is rather needlessly preceded by an attempt to define "postmodern interpretation." At times, such theoretical meanderings even seem to undercut his argument. For example, he repeatedly states that the regime's land reclamation schemes must be seen less as genuine development initiatives and more as instances of the aestheticization of politics, a "shroud of rhetoric and spectacle" (p. 10) designed to obscure Fascism's internal "ideological mess" (p. 13). Setting aside the issue that recent scholarship on Fascist culture has moved beyond this rather facile characterization, this claim presents a dilemma: why, if ***bonifica integrale*** was little more than rhetorical window-dressing, does Caprotti introduce the book by vividly describing the present-day Agro Pontino, its "fields heavy with crops ... criss-crossed by canals and arrow-straight roads" (p. xxi)? Similarly, he demonstrates that the regime's anti-malarial campaign was quite effective in combating the disease, becoming an object of domestic pride and foreign envy. In other words, ***bonifica*** schemes met with some success and had a lasting impact on the region. I raise such inconsistencies not to highlight the positive effects of the Fascist project, but to identify a tension in the author's argument. Should land reclamation be dismissed as vacuous propaganda or did it also respond to genuine economic, infrastructural and social exigencies? These options need not be mutually exclusive, but the relationship--both practical and conceptual--between the two is not fully fleshed out here.

Caprotti's argument is further hindered by poor organization and repetition. For example, the chapter and section headings are often misleading. Despite appearing in the title of the book, the theme of internal colonialism receives extremely short shrift and is never developed as a central problem. Chapter 1, "Fascism and the Pontine Marshes," is almost exclusively devoted to the ever-thorny task of defining Fascist ideology and its relationship to modernity; the marshes only make an appearance at the very end, before plunging back into yet another attempt to define "modernity" in chapter 2. We do not get a detailed exposition of the Pontine region or the regime's projects until chapter 3 (eighty pages into the book), and even then there is little background provided. Chapters 4 (on the anti-malaria campaign) and 5 (on the design of the New Towns) are both based on previously published papers, and it shows: in both sections, Caprotti repeats almost verbatim his prior discussions of hybrid landscapes, the regime's attitude towards nature and its gendered discourse on agricultural productivity, and the dialectic between tradition and modernity in Fascist ideology. Even the research gets recycled, as with the identical descriptions of the foreign press's response to the New Towns on pp. 87-89 and pp. 146-147 (though, significantly, in neither case does the reader get any sense of what the foreign press actually had to say). Elsewhere, Caprotti does little more than reiterate earlier scholarship--as with his discussion of the architecture and aesthetics of the New Towns, which is based largely on the work of Diane Ghirardo and Leonardo Benevolo.

Perhaps the most fitting evaluation of this work comes from the author himself. In the book's concluding (and somewhat inconclusive) paragraph, Caprotti states that he does not claim to be

"an encyclopaedic authority on fascism (I will leave that to the anoraks), nor do I claim to change the way people think. I did, however, have a great time attempting to change the way I think through trying to understand the way in which people have thought about the issues explored. This book has enabled me ... to explore corners of geography--and other fields--which have always been of interest; yet fields which I did not have

several years, and the indulgence of the independence of university research, to explore" (p. 258).

This reflection is startling and commendable for its honesty; all too often, scholars are reluctant to acknowledge their uncertainties. Yet, at least for this "anorak," it also encapsulates the book's main failing. ***Mussolini's Cities*** comes across largely as a "figuring-out" exercise, in which Caprotti takes the reader along for the ride while he explores what is for him unfamiliar terrain. Along the way, some interesting discoveries are made, but the work would have benefited from a more systematic and disciplined approach.