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Colonialism Contained

Chiara De Cesari

Often we do not see what is right in our face: this is the case with the absent presence, for many Italians today, of the nation's colonial past. These two pictures—the one contained within the other—achieved iconic status when they came to symbolize the landmark 2009 visit Muammar el-Qaddafi paid to Italy, Libya's former colonizer, to celebrate the signing of the Italy–Libya Friendship Treaty. It is important to emphasize the fact that the older colonial photo achieved this visibility only as framed within the news photograph of Qaddafi meeting Silvio Berlusconi. Qaddafi had decided to pin it to his jacket upon his first landing on Italian soil, and did so to emphasize what he saw as the core of the Treaty, that is, reparation for the brutal colonial crimes committed by the Italians in Libya between 1911 and 1943. Yet, the effect on Italian (and European) public opinion was the opposite: the photograph did not engender any social memory of the colonial past but, indeed, reproduced the absence of memories of colonialism and social amnesia. Many talked about Qaddafi with a photograph; nobody really talked about its content.

The picture shows the arrest of Umar Al-Mukhtar, the hero of the Libyan struggle against Italian colonialism, captured by the Fascist army and hanged in September 1931. His death marked the end of an anticolonial rebellion that had been brutally quelled by the Italian occupation troops, including the internment of a defiant local population in detention camps, where nearly half of the 100,000 imprisoned Bedouins are believed to have died (Del Boca 2005: 187). However, despite its spectacular visibility on Qaddafi's uniform jacket, nobody in the Italian press talked about Umar Al-Mukhtar, and still today he remains an almost unknown figure to most Italians—unlike many anticolonial heroes of lands much further away from Italy.

Qaddafi's visit to Italy and the Treaty with Berlusconi received wide media coverage both in Italy and internationally. What was striking about this coverage, however, was the basic gap between texts and pictures. The exposure of the colonial past at the visual level did not correspond at all to its engagement in the corresponding articles. Not a single piece in the mainstream Italian and international press addressed the broader historical dimension of the Treaty beyond mere descriptive reporting, or attempted an



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in-depth discussion of what happened in colonial Libya. Instead, the mainstream media focused on the extravagance of both contemporary leaders and the Realpolitik behind the Treaty, aimed at the promotion of capital flows across the Mediterranean and migration control. The *New York Times* defined the Italian occupation of Libya as “one of the least notable colonial histories in Europe” (Donadio 2009) without mentioning the extremely high death toll between 1911 and 1943 (Del Boca 2003). Mentioning Umar Al-Mukhtar only in relationship to the “provocation” of the pinned photo, the same article included several ironic comments on Qaddafi and Berlusconi. Thus, in spite of its visual immediacy, colonial violence slipped from public view.

How can we make sense of this simultaneous visibility and invisibility of the colonial past? What is the role of the two photographs taken

together; a historical photograph contained in a news photograph? In spite of the historical truth spoken by the colonial picture, the latter, interpreted as a provocation, was not perceived as evidence of crimes worthy of remembrance and reflection. The frame made its truth irrelevant. What stood out was not the content of the photograph as such, but rather



its spectacular *mise-en-scène*. The very bodies of the two leaders, in their somehow excessive corporeality, grabbed the public attention: this helped turn history into farce—the term that was commonly used to describe the event. The frame took precedence over the content of the picture and in fact annihilated its evidential value.

Most Italians tend to believe that Italians were not bad colonialists, if indeed they were colonialists at all. Reversing the terms of reparation—usually about promoting the public memory of murderous pasts—the Italy–Libya Friendship Treaty and its highly mediated celebration reproduced such amnesia. Indeed, the photographic visibility of the colonial past does not always translate into collective memory. At times, photographic visibility can actually serve to occlude a broader consciousness of the enduring legacy of colonialism, and contribute to a form of social production of blindness. At times, we look but fail to see the past within the frame.

For Roland Barthes (1981), the essence of photography is to give what it represents a stamp of reality and certainty: a quality neutralized in the case of this colonial image by the very process of its mediatization. Barthes also emphasizes another virtue of photography: the ability to give its representations a quality of pastness, of things long gone by. This can block memory, for social memory is precisely about seeing the past in the present, and about critically reflecting on its enduring legacy. Commenting on Qaddafi's "photo-provocation," former Italian premier Giulio Andreotti remarked: "Is

it worth remembering these things? These are things past. Instead, we should look towards the future" (Corriere della Sera 2009).

The interplay of the two photographs thus marks an ambiguous condition: the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of the colonial past in the Italian and broader international public sphere. More than just a reflection of a condition produced elsewhere, the photos together were part of the complex process that made possible this form of memorial invisibility.

Note

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