

Italian coffee: a temporary triangle

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Diana Garvin, an historian in the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Oregon, recently published a paper that examines what she calls the Italian coffee triangle. She explains how Italy's belated land grab in Africa sought to transform the *colonos* of Brazil, the 2.7 million immigrant Italian labourers who effectively tripled Brazilian production in a decade, into respectable *colonialisti* in Ethiopia, Italians who owned and oversaw coffee plantations in Ethiopia. Although their Fascist-inspired duplication of Brazilian methods utterly failed, still, Africa had a powerful hold on the Italian imagination.

Brazil has always had a boom and bust economy, based often on a single commodity. The first of those, brazil-wood, which is red like the glow of embers, *brasa* in Portuguese, gave the country its name in the 1500s. Diana Garvin took up the story.

Diana Garvin: Then sugar in the 1600s, diamonds and gold in the 1700s, and then finally, rubber and coffee in the 1800s, which is what we're talking about.

Jeremy: All that ran on enslaved labor. First, indigenous people and then enslaved Africans. Brazil received about 4.9 million enslaved people from Africa, more than any other country. Brazil didn't end slavery until very late, with the so-called golden law of 1888. You might think that enslaved people would want to work for wages, but the *fazendeiros*, the coffee barons didn't want that. They were responding to an initiative from the new Brazilian government.

Diana: The republic kicks in with a coup d'etat in 1889, just one year after this golden law and they have eugenic dreams in mind. They are aiming to whiten the Brazilian population and to make it more Catholic. There is a huge drive to bring in southern European labourers, namely Portuguese and Italian immigrants, to be the new

workers on the coffee plantations. They were quite successful. There were 2.7 million Europeans that emigrate during this period.

Jeremy: That's about half the number of enslaved Africans. Most of the Italian immigrants came from the northern areas around Venice. They were poor. They were mostly illiterate. How did they even find out about these opportunities?

Diana: There are all of these ads for steamship passages going from Genova to São Paulo that are in the publications that are aimed at farmers. It seems really weird. Why are there all of these ads when people can't read them? The reason why is there were also farmers' associations that were a means to meet at the end of the day, have a glass of country wine, and talk about the latest news in farming.

At those events, there would be one guy who knew how to read and he would read some of the latest news to the assembled crowd, and then everyone would discuss it together. That's how those ideas started to circulate.

Jeremy: With Brazil paying for the steamship tickets, the campaign was quite successful. As Diana Garvin said, about 2.7 million Italians ended up in Brazil. What was life like for them?

Diana: These farms are incredibly isolated, not just geographically but also linguistically. Life on the fazendas was difficult, and was particularly hard on women because they had a triple load. Not only are they tending to the coffee trees alongside their husbands and children, not only are they doing the housework, but they also have a third shift of farming that nobody else has. They're tending to chickens and planting corn and beans in between the coffee rows for subsistence farming. It's a huge amount of work and there are a few things that get lost in the process.

You see a lot of the emotional tenor of this period in *La Cronaca Italiana*, which was basically São Paulo's Italian language newspaper for the homesick. There's an advice column that ran for many years that women would write into asking for help for how to cope with fazenda life. You can hear the difficulty through these letters. It's everything from asking for beauty remedies to recuperate what is physically lost through the labor to, "How do I manage hopelessness?" The answers ranged from the silly – "You should just dance. Dancing helps," – to "Just think about your children. Stay strong for them."

Jeremy: By all accounts, it was an incredibly harsh life, little better than actual enslavement. A life captured in a song of homesickness and longing from Caterina Bueno.

There was one fazendeiro, a plantation owner, who seems to have been a little more enlightened. His name was Geremia Lunardelli.

Diana: Magazines of the period, he's constantly featured. He's really the face of Italian fazendeiros of whom there were very few. He had a very typical story for this period, in that he emigrated in 1886 while still a toddler. He's driving trucks on these plantations by the time he's 10 or 11. What he manages to do is, he's able to take advantage of the coffee bust that happens in 1906, 1907.

In that year, there was a bumper crop and prices plummeted. People could smell what they thought was roasting coffee from hundreds of miles away. It was actually the fazendeiros burning the beans to try and bring the prices lower, try and get rid of some of that excess product. He buys up a bunch of land during that period and ends up with 3,000 Italian families, tending over 4 million coffee plants.

His innovation is largely in the housing that's on these plantations. He builds houses that are out of brick for the *colonos* rather than out of sticks and mud, which is what they had been previously. He brings electricity into these outposts. That means that people can start gathering together in the evenings. There's a bit more of a social life, and there is more of a rent-to-own situation with the coffee beans, where if the farmers tend his trees for a certain amount of time, over time, those trees become theirs.

Jeremy: That's a bit of a deviation, I admit. It's probably only because Geremia Lunardelli is the only Italian Geremia I've ever come across, apart from San Geremia in Venice.

That's two points of the triangle established. Brazil, where monster plantations grow row upon row of identical robusta coffee trees, and Italy supplying much of the labour looking after the coffee, and quite a few of the coffee baron plantation owners. On then, to East Africa. That starts with shipping interests based on the port of Massawa, then the capital of Eritrea on the Red Sea coast.

By 1890, Eritrea is Italy's first colony, and Italy sees its colony as a place where immigrants elsewhere can come home, as it were.

Diana: All of those Italian labourers that had been working in Brazil, in Argentina, in Canada, in the United States, it's the famous quote, a place in the sun. A place where they could work that would be under Italian control, and critically, that was going to move Italian labourers up the social hierarchy.

What this means for coffee is that they are moving from being *colonos* on Brazilian plantations to *colonialisti* on Ethiopian ones. That moves them from the bottom of the coffee plantation hierarchy all the way to the top.

Jeremy: When the fascists marched into Ethiopia in 1935, agronomists from the fascist party create coffee plantations in the Brazilian mould.

Diana: Long gridded rows, humans had decided where to put the trees. It's not spontaneous seeding, which is what is the traditional Ethiopian method. It also means mono-cropping, so there are no other trees. Basically, it gets rid of shade-grown. That type of growing does work but only temporarily. It produces lots of beans, but with less flavour and aroma. Critically, it really only works on *Coffea robusta*. Robusta can handle those long gridded rows, the intense parching heat, but *Coffea arabica* requires gentler growing. It does not work with the rationalist planting style that was so beloved of the fascists.

Jeremy: Beloved and a failure. The Italian plantations performed really poorly compared to those managed by Ethiopians, but the Italians didn't seem to notice, why not?

Diana: Unreasonable rationalism, because what the Italians were going for was higher tree height, and in fact, they were trying to track the exact day that Italian planted coffee trees were going to be higher than Ethiopian trees. Even in this period, Italian agronomers knew the tree height had nothing to do with the number of beans or the quality of beans produced. They did know that these were not effective methods, and yet this performance of control and the superiority of height was deemed so important. That's what all of the agronomers are tracking.

Jeremy: Classic case of misguided measurement instead of real management. At that time, during the fascist period, Italians back home weren't actually drinking a lot of coffee. Diana Garvin says that

most of what they were drinking came from Brazil, and yet Africa had a powerful grip on their imagination.

Diana: There's a strange collective fantasy that the coffee they were drinking was African. I looked at testimonies from the Pieve Santo Stefano diary archive. When these testimonies talk about coffee more generally, when they're talking about it as a product or just what they think of when they think of coffee, all of these East African characteristics emerge.

It's being contextualised as coming from Ethiopian plantations. The cultural imaginary is much more drawn from African imagery. That may be because, during this period, so in the 1930s, in cafes and bars, all of the interior design was reminding Italian consumers that coffee was a colonial product.

Jeremy: One of the things that I think surprises many people when they first come to Italy, is the imagery associated with coffee. It's still there. It's overwhelmingly black faces and African black. Not Brazilian black faces. In your opinion, is it racist? How do you view that?

Diana: I think what matters here is that in the 1920s and 30s, there are two things that are happening. One is the rapid industrialisation that builds a lot of cafes and also consolidates major brands and it's happening in the same context as fascism and imperialism. That means that the structures that are being built and the brands that are being crafted are absorbing the pervasive and explicit racism that's part of that time period.

Unsurprisingly, the fascist empire and corporate allies produced racist imagery. Because so many brands and cafes were built during this period, these tropes have ended up being depressingly enduring, so people turn into coffee beans. The definition of objectification.

The reason why these images are still around, actually comes from the economics of bar ownership, specifically from a contractual form that's called *comodato d'uso*. This contractual form links coffee bean suppliers to cafe owners through their monthly supplies. Italian bars make most of their money from selling coffee, so to keep the coffee bean purchases coming, importers were invested in keeping all parts of the cafe in business.

This is everything from the cost of the espresso machine and its monthly maintenance to the crockery associated with the bar. Those cups might break, but the images keep getting recycled, and that's why the colonial imagery of these former groups seems to endlessly duplicate even today.

Jeremy: Comparing today's imagery with that of the 20s and 30s, it does seem to have mellowed a little, sweetened, but it's definitely still present. One of the most striking images is a silhouette of a beautiful woman apparently sowing coffee seeds. She's known as the *seminatrice* or seed sower, which is a bit strange because that's not a great way to multiply coffee bushes.

Anyway, she's young, practically naked and exotic. Today, that image is tightly linked to the Tazza d'Oro, a famous cafe and roastery in the heart of Rome. I was amazed to learn from Diana Garvin that she's merely one survivor of a trope that used to be quite common. What's more, that kind of image was used to lure young men into the Italian army.

Diana: There was an image archetype that was very popular during the mid-1930s to the early 1940s known as *venere nera*, the black Venus. Women – often heartbreakingly young – who were photographed in East Africa, and then their images were used as postcards, on calendars, and all sorts of promotional materials as a way to get young Italian men to enlist in the army.

Often, you would see an image of these women on the front of a card, and then there would be the address for the military conscription offices on the back. The *seminatrice* or the coffee sower imagery fits into this broader trope in terms of the age of the women, their beauty, in terms of the fact that they are almost always topless. It feeds into the classic inflation of sexual and territorial conquest. It's just that this figure is basically a culinary variant of the black Venus.

Jeremy: Brazil, coffee, Ethiopia; a complicated story that still exerts a powerful influence on the Italian imagination, but there's one more mystery as far as I'm concerned.

Diana Garvin says coffee was a fascist beverage. One of the fascists' stated goals was autarchy, the idea of being self-sufficient, especially as far as food production goes. To me, that whole idea seems pretty

weird if you have to go to some other country and conquer it in order to be self-sufficient in coffee.

Diana: To be specific. I don't say that coffee is a fascist beverage, but rather that the fascists thought it was a fascist beverage. Coffee is whatever people bring to it and what people read into its properties; the darkness, the intensity, the caffeine kick. For the Italian fascists, coffee promised extra energy. It would make work more productive. It would make the body move faster. Basically, it promised to make people less like animals and more like machines.

Jeremy: That surfaced a memory of something I read in Karima Moyer-Nocchi's book *Chewing The Fat*, in which she talked to women about food in fascist times. Very few of them ever drank coffee. There wasn't much of it about and what there was, was very expensive. Karima found a passage in *La Cucina Italiana*, which she calls the bull horn of fascist propaganda, that denounces coffee in no uncertain terms. I asked her to read a bit of her translation.

Coffee for us is not a necessity but a gluttonous habit. The worker, who best defines health and strength, consumes a minimum of coffee; he drinks it perhaps when he is ill, but at the height of his industriousness, his only beverage is wine, red like his generous blood, with the distinct scent of his homeland. Not consuming coffee is Italian, it is fascist, but also because our new work consciousness, like social duty, rejects this continuous ridiculous prop in the workday.

Perhaps that kind of propaganda gave people a reason to avoid something that they couldn't get hold of anyway. Last word to Diana Garvin on what coffee really means to fascism.

Diana: I would argue the fact that coffee is actually emblematic of fascism in a different light, that is, not in its aspirations, but in its failures. Despite Italian agronomy on Ethiopian coffee plantations, the imports never rose. In fact, they cratered. Thanks to the actions of the Ethiopian Patriots resistance movement, which operated in the very highlands where *Coffea arabica* was growing most plentifully, the majority of coffee farms in East Africa remained Ethiopian-owned and operated throughout the fascist period and they remain so to this day.

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