



Eurafrica: critical readings of a cartographic vision of power

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Abstract

The study intends to analyze the concept of *Eurafrica* coined by geographer Paolo D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota, a contemporary of the fascist era. The expression *Eurafrica* begins to circulate in the collective imaginary with the spread of the *Geopolitica* (*Geopolitics*) journal that, through the geographical maps, postcards and the photographs inserted within the pages, legitimized an expansion of politics towards Africa. The myth of the creation of a “Third Rome” and the geographical position of Italy in the center of the Mediterranean were the determining factors that justified a strategy of cultural and territorial appropriation of those places. In this context, the cartographic representation of *Eurafrica* was one of the images that best talked about the way in which Italian geopolitics thought of the external projection of the country.

Keywords: Cartography, *Eurafrica*, Fascist Propaganda, Imperial Rome

1. Methodological preamble

Cartographic production is an interesting phenomenon for many scholars of different disciplinary origins. Although the differences between their approaches are profound, there can be noticed a tendency to overcome the theme of the technical and scientific process with which the map is produced in favor of the need to understand the social mechanisms and practices that underlie it. A fundamental contribution in this direction was received, starting from the 1980s, by Brian Harley who proposed a new way of doing research by underlining the distinction between the “internal power” and the “external power” of the map, meaning with the latter the weight exerted by the

authority on cartographic production (Harley, 1989). According to Harley, maps are imbued with values and subjective judgments that build the paper and at the same time, reflect the society and context in which the maps are produced.

However, what is most interesting in this study is not to consider maps as a product submitted to a higher political authority, but rather as the expression of a “post-representational cartography” capable of relating the ideology inherent in the maps - the so-called “second text” (Kitchin et al., 2009, p. 9). With this social and political sensitivity, the authors show during their creation, through a specific

use of images – as claimed by Dodge, Perkins and Kitchin (Kitchin et al., 2009, p. 10) – that maps are not conceived as a “mirror of nature, but as a product of it” (Rossetto, 2016, p. 4).

While recognizing the theoretical limits of a perspective that places the vitalism of images at the center of the debate, this article attempts to analyze the meanings inherent in the cartographic representations produced during the period of the Italian Fascism, with reference to a specific intellectual product which is the geopolitical concept of Eurafrica. Theoretical insights and documentation for the research were provided among others by Luca Acquarelli, Edoardo Boria and Louis Marin who investigated the power of images as a product in and of society.

2. Introduction

Starting from the 1920s, the concept of Eurafrica began to spread in the geopolitical language of the time. The First World War had made deep furrows in the European political sensitivity, and the ruling class of the time set itself the ambitious goal of reconciling the African exploitation resulting from European colonialism with progressive internationalist policies, which nevertheless based their foundations on the ideological conception of a different distribution of the colonies amongst the European countries (Thorpe, 2018, p. 1).

This common understanding of politics found an answer in Richard Nikolaus Coudenhove-Kalergi's studies that decided to create a major project, a Pan-European Union able to facilitate an integration of the African territories with the European Union countries. This organization was born in 1923 with the publication of the text entitled *Pan-Europe* (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1926, p. 170); the union would have included the European African colonies giving rise to that which only starting with 1929 would have been described by the term Eurafrica. Although it was neither the first nor the only one of the international organizations that arose to ask for a

federal link between the states of Europe, but it was certainly one of the most popular in the period between the Two World Wars. The political vision of Coudenhove-Kalergi aimed at an incorporation of the African territory as part of a European political project on a continental scale (Thorpe, 2018). The African territories would have represented for the Pan-Europe that had arisen, a territory capable of balancing the powers between the continental blocs, as claimed by Coudenhove himself in his *Afrika* article of 1929 “*Africa is our South America. Africa is the tropical Europe. Gibraltar is our Panama. Politically, West Africa is the southern continuation of Europe beyond these straits. Europe is a house with many apartments and many tenants – but Africa is its garden. Whereas the Soviet Union separates us from Asia, and the Atlantic Ocean separates us from America – the Mediterranean connects Europe and Africa more than it separates them. So Africa has become our closest neighbor and its destiny a part of our own destiny. From this perspective Pan-Europe is enlarged to Eurafrica*” (Coudenhove-Kalergi, 1929, p. 10). Figure 1 shows, in an illustration of the time, the cartographic representation of the concept of Pan-Europe according to Coudenhove-Kalergi, it was a model that in some respects will be taken as a reference by Karl Haushofer for his theory of the Pan-regions (Antonsich, 1997, p. 261).

However it was not long before strong criticisms surrounded this project from several sections of society; a multisided entity was defined, that on the one hand would have surely guaranteed unlimited access to African resources and their global trade – thus depriving the African territories of their own independent politics and economics – and on the other hand the need of the European leaders was clear: without Eurafrica, Europe would have soon been caught in the grip of both Russian and American external pressures, causing further tensions between the European states that owned colonies and those who had been deprived of them as a result of the Treaty of Versailles (Thorpe, 2018).

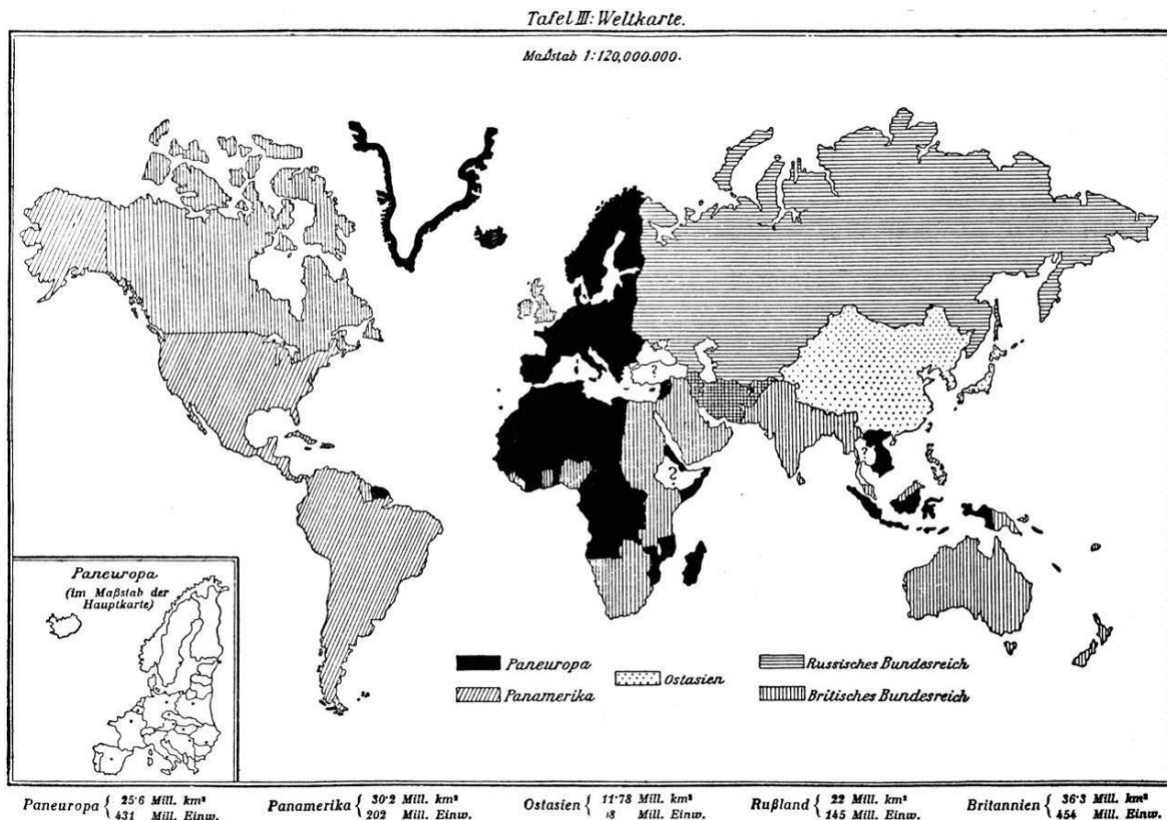


Figure 1. *The Pan-European world map*, Coudenhove-Kalergi Archive, Chodska Museum, Czech Republic.

It was precisely during those years that scholars, belonging to the Italian journal *Geopolitica* (Geopolitics), including Ernesto Massi, Giorgio Roletto and Paolo D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota had published numerous articles and maps. The purpose was to feed a geographical perception of Italy which could have been seen as a protagonist of political and economic events of the Mediterranean (Roletto, 1929, p. 20) because, as D'Agostino Orsini argues in his book *Che cos'è l'Africa?* (What is Africa?), due to its geographical position Italy naturally stretched out towards this sea which was to be considered more and more as a sea of Eurafrica, a sea of welding between the lands of Europe to the north and those of Africa to the south (D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota, 1936, p. 10). At the same time, Fascism in the 1930s began to seriously cultivate the ambition of joining the two shores of the Mediterranean. Between 1924 and 1938 everything seems apparently unchanged in cartography, but in practice this idea of Paneuropa had distorted the

Mediterranean by representing it as a "continuous Empire" that originated from Europe (especially from Italy) and continued in Africa.

In this context, Paolo D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota stressed several times how Eurafrica was a determining element in Mussolini's expansionist politics which, throughout its cartographic representations, entered the collective imagination of the time, becoming a foreign policy strategy to all effects.

3. The imperial dream of Italian geographers

Between 1939 and 1942 the Italian journal *Geopolitica* was one of the most active in the European context as far as the study of the discipline goes, after the German journal *Geopolitik*. With the First World War the international landscape had changed profoundly

and many geographers were opposed to the outcome of the war: Italy had not obtained the eastern Adriatic lands at Versailles, concessions that France, Great Britain and Russia had promised instead in the 1915 Treaty of London.

In this context, the journal's objective was clear: to restore Italy to its former Renaissance glory and to direct the guidelines of the expansionist policy of the fascist regime in the Mediterranean from east to west, going from Gibraltar to Suez with the aim of disturbing the relations between the British and the French from their colonial domains (Perrone, 2016). The dominant geopolitical discourse in Europe in the 20th century was centered on the double dialectic colonization-annexation, identifying in the Mediterranean a place in which to place one's own vital space in contrast with Hitler's growing *Lebensraum*. Mussolini's rhetoric objective was the staging of the drama of Italy as a prisoner in the Mediterranean, a closed sea that did not allow direct access to the ocean with the consequent exclusion from international maritime routes (Antonsich, 1998). Rome was placed in this framework as the engine of a failure of Mediterranean unity, a "supreme synthesis" that found a fertile terrain in *Mare Nostrum*, as can be noticed in Figure 2.

It is obvious how the geographers of the time needed to transform the subject from a simple study of the Earth to a discipline more sensitive to the aspects of society, giving an organic and multidisciplinary vision of the territorial sciences. Roberto Almagià, one of the most prominent Italian geographers, in 1923 asserted the need for a dynamic dimension of geography, resuming the theories of Ratzel but at the same time criticizing the excessive environmental determinism that did not take into account the social and cultural dynamics (Almagià, 1927). The role of geopolitics was therefore not secondary; the geography in between the Two World Wars had to be placed at the service of the nation to indicate the way forward, promoting a certain imaginary geography (Atkinson, 1995): here Fascism and geography were intertwined by giving mutual support. Geopolitica and Mussolini himself tried to promote the "geographic conscience" of the country, a term coined in the 19th century by which was asserted the superiority of Italy's

strategic position at the center of the Mediterranean and it gave colonial support to the conquest policies in Africa – in this sense, Africa passed from being a *terra nullius* to a *terra communis*, in which the European countries ran to the partition of the African continent.



Figure 2. Leo Longanesi, *Italy prisoner in the sea*, Tumminelli, Roma, 1940, pp. 18-19.

The foreign policy choices of the geopolitics scholars of the time had their roots in the Risorgimento tradition of Mazzini, Garibaldi, Cattaneo, Balbo and Gioberti (Perrone, 2016). Even if it took place in a different era, the Italian Risorgimento had left an unforgettable mark on the political culture by transmitting some ideas to Italian colonialism. The mission of the newborn kingdom, the imperial legacy of Rome, the exaltation of the hero and the national myths were all precise elements of both the Risorgimento and Fascism, as can be noticed in the illustrations of the time – Figure 3.

The spread of a political and economic geography at the service of the imperial development of the peninsula is obvious in this picture. The weekly *Il Vittorioso* (The Victorious) published between the 1937 and 1966 shows the adventures of Romano The Legionnaire who embodied the ideal of the excellent Italian and fascist man. In this illustration of 1938, Romano leaves together with his companions for Italian East Africa to liberate the territories "from the

hand black” (quote from the cartoon *Romano il Legionario*) to complete that process of Italian civilization started with Imperial Rome.

The affirmation of the fascist principles is obvious not only in the plot of the comic (which met with great success among the youngest people) but also in the style used. Starting from the heading, a political meaning is obvious. In a continental Africa, Romano often faces wild animals and ferocious beasts. The great artist Sebastiano Craveri in charge of designing the pictures of the comic, after having absorbed the basics of Disney *cartooning*, carries on his own special graphic-narrative speech regarding the animal as an anthropomorphic sentient being with the series *Zoolandia*. Some of these animals can be found on the front pages of the weekly *Il Vittorioso*, in line with the events of Romano set in a wild Africa. It was therefore decided to use a type of caricature drawing that was similar to those of Disney, even if it was of “local” production. The goal was always to highlight the “Italianity” of culture, even visually.

Despite this heading, it was decided to use a neorealist trait for the remaining parts of the comic. The spectator had to be involved in the events, he had to fight together with Romano for the Italian spirit; the figures were thus more historicized, truer, creating an historical continuity between the conquering subject and the observer subject (Acquarelli, 2011, p. 197).

Furthermore, the use of colors, mainly on red if we consider not only Romano’s jacket but also the color of the backdrops, is a clear reference to Garibaldi, to the colors of the Italian flag, to the ideals of the Risorgimento but above all red is the color which indicated the boundaries of the A.O.I. (Acquarelli, 2011). The colonial conquest of East Africa thus represents a pretext to re-establish the missing rituals of the founding myth of the unification of Italy.

According to D’Agostino Orsini, these political lines were influenced not only by elements of an economic or demographic nature but also by geographical ones. The natural conditions made the Mediterranean a welding zone between the European continent and Africa: the orography of the territory, the climate, the economy and the history were common factors, an obvious sign that this unity

which crossed the sea would not have occurred passing through the Suez but through Tripoli, connected by a trans-African line to Stanleyville – Belgian Congo (Antonsich, 1997).



Figure 3. The first episode of *New adventures of Romano Il Legionario* (*Roman the Legionnaire*), published in the weekly *Il Vittorioso* (The Victorious) 1938.

In this context, Libya – or Tripolitania (Tripolitania is often cited in fascist rhetoric as a symbolic territory of the Roman glory justified through the *Leptis Magna*: the “historical right to reconquest” here becomes a fascist fanaticism) became a geographical laboratory whose awareness was able to create or undo the colonial space both in practice and cartographic imagination; in fact, the production of a colonized territory had to bring with it the readable (and graphic) sign of the European mentality. The political line of this “colonial science” had to follow one clear and simple pattern: just as liberal Italy had charted its territory after the unification of 1861, in the same way the new Fascist Italy had to map a new unity that would include even the overseas territories. The cartography in this sense was not only an expedient propaganda but it became the *Leitmotiv* of the fascist colonial campaign which also used images to exercise military and political authority over the occupied territories.



Figure 4. Cover of the magazine *Africa Italiana*, 2, 38, February-March-April 1942.

An example is shown in Figure 4. In this picture taken from the journal *Africa Italiana* (Italian Africa) edited by the Colonial Fascist Institute, two male arms support a plough that crosses the whole of Africa. The abandonment of the zenith perspective and the adoption of an oblique point of view make the image more current and dynamic and less set than the typical perspective vision from the 1800s and the early 1900s.

The real dominant element in this representation however is the colors used. The chromatic ambivalence between brown (allegory of the black continent) and blue is predominant, but another hue is inserted also. The white outlines around Africa are more marked and defined, highlighting the desire to represent it as an island connected only to Italy at the expense of the rest of the planisphere which disappears completely from the figure. However, the outline is intensified more in the upper left corner, with the intent of simulating a real flare; the arms that support the plow are invaded and the allegory appears as an impact between the vigorous fire of Fascism and the workforce, the agricultural arms that not only move Italy but also the whole African continent.

Naturally the element that emphasizes the representation is the plough. The shotgun, the book and the plow are the three tools that in the fascist culture bring to completion civilization, wanting to emphasize in this case the success of the experiment of the reclamation of the Agro Pontino. Reclamation was one of the unifying elements of the regime, as it managed to make the Italians feel part of a single territory. In the same way the political class of the time, thought to be able to carry out a “reclamation” also in other areas such as the cultural and moral one. The intent of the figure is therefore to highlight an empty space, Africa, which until the arrival of Fascism was impervious and hostile. Here Fascism finds in the territory and its transformation the perfect propaganda: the reclamation had to be exported as a reference model for the foreign colonization, adapting also the same Agro Pontino urban planning to the African territory (Acquarelli, 2011).

As Acquarelli argues, the cartographic representation has a role of primary importance when it comes to recording and imposing cultural changes in territorial borders, as the map is a strategic element that conventionally stops, in the cartographic symbol, the changes that have occurred in the territory and often it precedes them. The geographical map thus understood becomes an element on which the citizens project their political and national perception, that is, it urges the reader to build a collective geographical imaginary capable of grasping the upcoming elements of novelty in culture and history (Acquarelli, 2011). It is precisely for this reason that Fascism made use of cartography; here the images have the same role as the geographical borders, that is to carve out the world according to its own political rhetoric and make the regime’s dominion spatial through the use of an orthogonal plan of the symbol. The visual narrative of orthogonality becomes a *topos* of the imperial narrative that includes a total submission of space to cartographic vision (Acquarelli, 2011).

4. Eurafrica: the Italian living space according to Paolo D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota

The Italian foreign politics thus needed to address one look to the south to be able to bring Italy to its former role as a *pivot* in the Mediterranean. One of the main scholars and theorists of the concept of Eurafrica was the Africanist Paolo D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota, Professor of Colonial Geography at the University of Rome and collaborator of the journal *Geopolitica*. In 1930 he was defined by his colleagues as “the father of Eurafrica” (D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota, 1971, p. 4), precisely because of the in-depthness of his studies on this subject. Particularly interesting is the text entitled *La nuova Africa e l'Europa* (The new Africa and Europe) which puts together all the research, regarding the African continent, conducted during the period of Fascism. The book is referring to “All of Africa to interest all of Europe” (D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota, 1971) since according to the author, Africa would represent a continent similar to the European one for geographical and cultural factors. It is interesting to observe how the two continents with apparently such different territories, according to D'Agostino Orsini, had actually established a relationship not of complementarity but of reciprocity, and this explains why his thought was in many respects a precursor of the new colonial interpretations that supported a parity – apparently – between the two continents, giving life to a single Eurafrican territory. For the scholar Eurafrica represented a geographic constant (D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota, 1971) synthesized from the cohesion and unity report that Imperial Rome had established during the centuries with the southern shore of the Mediterranean; only by economically and politically controlling the *Mare Nostrum*, could Italy have subdued what D'Agostino Orsini called “the colonial continent par excellence” (D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota, 1971; Figure 5).

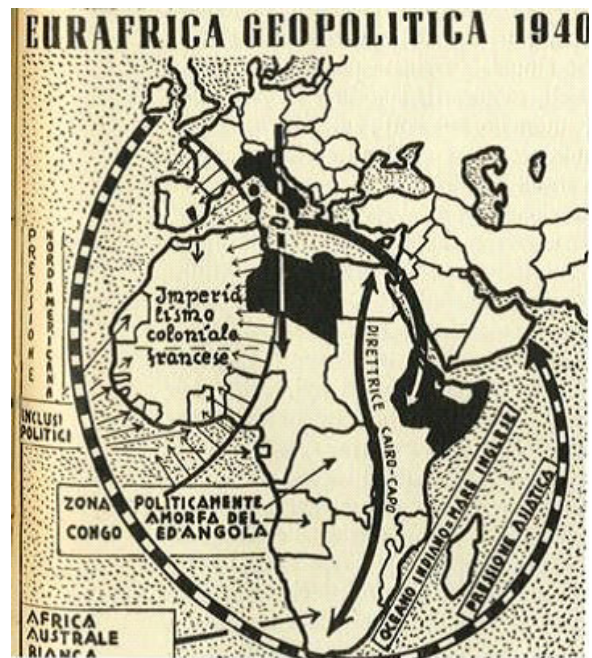


Figure 5. Geopolitical map of Eurafrica published in “Geopolitics” in 1940. The map shows an African continent surrounded by the enemies of the axis: France dominates West Africa while the Indian Ocean belongs to the English sphere of influence. To these expansionist policies the Italians opposed the project of Eurafrican unification.

The primary purpose of D'Agostino Orsini's research was to bring to the attention of the Italian readers and the political ruling class not only the colonies claimed as part of the fascist territory, but the whole of the African continent inseparable geographically and economically and fragmented from a political point of view between the various European colonial powers that competed for its primacy, as it also emerges in another text by the author entitled *Che cos'è l'Africa?*. Although the geographical environment had supported an apparent parity between the African and European population, what actually emerged in the scholar's texts was quite the opposite, as can be seen in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Images of the fascist colonial propaganda. From Gianni Oliva, *The Italian colonial adventure. Italian East Africa 1885-1942*.

In this cartoon the common feeling of the fascist class about the concept of African colonization is obvious: the indigenous people are represented with caricatured characters that aim to diminish and ridicule the local culture. The representation of “black” which assumes the superiority over “white” descends from an old social Darwinism, drawing on pre-existing racist stereotypes. Fascism describes the indigenous as a naive and wild child, often covered only by a skirt of banana skins, with wide open eyes full with amazement, an inhabitant of a mysterious, distant and primitive Africa. The white represented as an adult in military uniform, often with the torch of civilization in his hand, has the task of educating the black child and guiding him on the path of emancipation in the awareness of a European intellectual and moral

superiority, sustained by millennia of history mostly Roman. Even when the white and the black people are proposed in common actions, the reference value system is different.

A further feature of colonial propaganda is the reference to “living space”. D’Agostino Orsini was trained in the cultural geography environment in the early 20th century and the influence that Ratzel had on his studies is obvious. According to the author, colonization was an endogenous factor of society and represented a natural form of expansion of the people carried out by way of essential factors such as excess of population in the homeland or new cultivable lands, similarly to what Ratzel claimed that a state develops and increases its own territory like the organism of a living being. For D’Agostino Orsini the search for one Italian living space was possible only by using the sword and spade, necessary to subdue the people of Africa and export fascist values; an example was Ethiopia described as a fertile and luxuriant land, whose agriculture was only waiting for the arrival of Italian peasants to express their potential.

The scholar emphasized in his research the historical and cultural passage that over the centuries has led to a different conception of colonization. The causes which the colonial process is based on have diversified according to the people who put them into practice, according to the historical period, the attitudes and places where it was completed. In this transition the private phenomenon of the single individuals who migrate to look for food or work becomes a collective event that requires an intervention of the state, preceding the private initiative that would result in turmoil and chaos.

In the years of greatest expansion of the fascist rhetoric, the colonies represented the main expression of the Empire, a form of political-economic-territorial control that has crossed through the centuries and space, from the *lex romana* to the *lex colonica*, from Europe to Africa.

5. Conclusions

This study set out to elaborate the power of images in the construction of the collective cartographic imaginary. By examining different categories through which the power is articulated, it was possible to understand how maps reflect different types of political relations. Colonialism, national identity, the pervasiveness of the dominant ideology are clearly visible elements in the *map-making* process that took place during the fascist period. The deep knowledge of A.O.I., and its subsequent visual representation, has been used as a legitimizing tool by the colonizers, who conceived and observed the new territories as empty spaces in which to inscribe their own idea of Eurocentric and fascist civilization. The spread of postcards, textbooks for children, comic books and geographic maps aimed at emphasizing the supremacy of the ruling class and the Italian population, reflected an imperial rhetoric of control, government, management of the territory and also of the actors involved therein. In this way the colonial project was indissolubly

linked to the map and at the same time the geographical map reflected the colonial aspirations prevailing in that given historical moment, using the cartographic device as a symbol of power.

This article, therefore, does not intend to diminish the value of the map but on the contrary seeks to understand how and to what extent prominent scholars such as Paolo D'Agostino Orsini di Camerota, have been sensitive to the political context of reference and their social role. The way in which the maps are designed and subsequently used goes beyond the simple conception of the geographic map as a pre-established product; only by using a post-representational approach to cartography is it possible to understand the complex relationship between fascist propaganda and the map as a symbol of power.

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