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## Global migration, local communities and the absent state: resentment and resignation in the Italian island of Lampedusa

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### Abstract

This article draws on the case of the Italian island of Lampedusa to explore how global migration nurtures populist discourses at the local community level. Lampedusa, a key transitory site for migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe, revealed strong concerns about the neglect of local public services and the mismanagement of migration. These concerns fed a deep sense of resentment that the islanders addressed toward the Italian state, resonating with the experiences of other communities around the world and reifying populist ideas. Based on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, and disseminated by a film documentary, the article reveals how apparently similar global populist experiences disclose different local worries and long-term historical processes. In doing so, it unfolds the socially situated nature of Lampedusa's populist resentment and so it contributes to a more thorough understanding of the relation between local communities and the national state as it is being reflected through debates on migration.

### Keywords

Community, Lampedusa, marginality, migration, Mediterranean migration crisis, populism, social solidarity

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## **Introduction**

Migration is among the most profound challenges that Europe is facing today, often held responsible for increasing and deepening the divide between ‘the people’ and their governments, with important political implications. In this article, I address the question of how increasing migration flows affect local communities while accounting for much wider issues happening on a global level, such as the increasing revival of populist ideas. To do so, I draw on research on the Italian island of Lampedusa, which, with an area of only 25 square kilometres, is the first port of arrival in Europe for those coming from Africa via the Mediterranean Sea and is therefore central to the current European debate about migration.

As we shall see, Lampedusa is a rather unique case because it is only a temporary site for arriving migrants, who neither intend to remain there permanently nor are allowed to, but instead, are quickly moved to reception centres in other Italian regions. Hence, the island is not facing the settlement issues experienced by other Italian and European locations. The problems of Lampedusa are not specifically problems of long-term social integration (e.g. Ambrosini, 2013; Zhou Portes, 2012), ethnic diversity, super-diversity (Vertovec, 2007) or multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 2010). While drawing on these discussions, recent research studies have already focused on migrants’ agency and motivation to leave their countries and the implications of European border policy on their journeys and experiences of settlement (e.g. McNahon and Sigona, 2018; Della Puppa, 2018). Less attention has been given to how local communities affected by migration respond and articulate their perspectives. Lampedusa is a significant place in which to examine this question, also in relation to discourses about how global migration nurtures new populist ideas. Since the Brexit vote and Donald Trump’s election in 2016, concerns about the resurgence of ‘populism’ have risen globally, together with a renewed analytical interest in the idea. Scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds have focused on explaining what populism is (e.g. Canovan, 1999), analysing its origin and development (e.g. Mouffe in Panizza, 2005), its nature, working mechanisms (Gerbaudo, 2019) and its worrying implications (Mounk, 2018).

Migration is a central theme in the analysis of populism, often used to trigger the social divisions that exacerbate the malcontent behind populist views. In the 1990s, Betz (1994) had already anticipated that the emergence and rise of radical right-wing populist parties in Western Europe coincided with the arrival of growing numbers of migrants and refugees leading to an outburst of xenophobia, exploited by populists for their own political gain. There are also examples of migration serving less divisive purposes, such as Riace, the southern Italian town where the mayor set out a repopulation plan through the settlement of migrants (Zavaglia, 2012). However, an analysis of how migration links local communities to global political issues in the current Italian context – so relevant for the European political debate – is still lacking.

The simultaneous occurrence of populist phenomena in different regions of the world has led many to think that populism is global in the sense that it works in the same way everywhere. Particularly, since Trump’s election and Brexit, the experiences of American and British communities (e.g. Frank, 2007; Wuthnow, 2018; Hochschild, 2018 or Hobolt, 2016) have been elected as the models to explain how populism manifests itself. Even though populism may

appear having similar features all over the world, the history and motivations behind are likely to be different in different regions and contexts. These differences, which are often neglected, are important for understanding the dual nature of populism as both global and local, and so for politics to act and address both general and specific needs. This article aims to fill these gaps and so to understand the complexity of the role of migration in linking global malcontent to local worries. In so doing, it helps to shed light on the social processes that lead to the deployment of populist ideas at a local level by addressing the questions of what it is like for Lampedusans to live on the island today, and so what unites and what divides the community.

### **Lampedusa's History and Background**

Lampedusa, 200 km away from the southern coast of Sicily and 70 km from Tunisia, has a total resident population of 6,572 and a surface area of only 25 square km<sup>i</sup>. Over the past 20 years, the Italian island has acquired increasing global visibility (Mazzara, 2015) because of its strategic location as the first European port in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Tomasi family established itself and ruled the island, which was then sold to the Kingdom of Naples. From the time of the Italian unification (1861-1918) up to the fascist era (1922-1945), Lampedusa became a penal colony for political prisoners (Baracco, 2015). The island, which has a US coastguard station, suddenly became known during the late 1980s when Colonel Gaddafi aimed missiles at it as a response to the US bombing of Tripoli in 1986. The attack did not lead to casualties because the missiles did not reach their target (Baracco, 2015), but the event brought global attention to Lampedusa for the first time. During the 1980s, the island also experienced important economic and social changes due to a turnaround from fishing to tourism. This economic change had important social implications: the traditional 'ethics of fishing' (Orsini, 2015:529) – based on mutual assistance – was replaced by the increasing competition of the tourist sector, with consequences for the internal solidarity of the community (Orsini, 2015).

Today, Lampedusa is mostly known for its centrality in the movement of people often referred to as the 'Mediterranean migration crisis', a phrase criticized for contributing to the increased moral panic about an imminent migrants' invasion (Dines et al., 2018; Dines et al., 2015; Friese, 2010; Campesi, 2011). Because of its strategic position, the island found itself at the centre of 'this crisis', particularly between 2011 and 2013. During the outbreak of the Arab Spring in January 2011, which marked the onset of the uprisings in Tunisia, increasing numbers of people from North Africa arrived in Lampedusa. The population of the island, which in the winter relies on a ferry for food and main supplies, more than doubled, reaching about 15,000 (Orsini, 2015) and stretching its already limited resources. The delayed and ineffective responses marked the institutional failure of both the Italian government and EU institutions (Orsini, 2015). The situation worsened in autumn 2013 when a boat carrying Eritreans, Somalians and Ghanaians sank close to the Lampedusa shore, leading to 366 deaths (Dines et al., 2015). These events have placed Lampedusa in a liminal position between the new global attention and its persistent local marginality: 'simultaneously brought to the centre and yet remain[ing] at the periphery' (Baracco, 2015:445). As a consequence of its increased visibility, Lampedusa has also been subject to opposing representations (Mazzara, 2015) as either the island of 'hospitality' that welcomes the migrants or a place of 'hostility' (Derrida, 2005),

where local interests are opposed to those of the arriving migrants (Franceschelli and Galipò, 2020). These events make the island a key site to explore questions about global migration and local communities.

## **Migration, Populism and Communities**

During the 1990s, Betz (1994) had already highlighted that the growing number of arriving migrants in Western Europe was going to produce new antagonisms, with alarming implications such as the rise of the ‘politics of resentment’ (Betz, 1993; Cramer, 2018). Migrants, who are feared for causing the loss of jobs and the underperformance of welfare services (Mau and Burkhardt, 2009), are also accused by natives of undermining national unity and identity. These fears converge into attacks toward the governments, blamed of failing to prioritise national citizens, and are used to advocate protectionist and nationalistic policies promoting racism and bigotry (Wuthnow, 2018). The growing anti-state feelings have, as Betz (1993) argues, neoliberal roots and are used to contest high taxation, state interventionism and welfare outlays. Today, the social-cultural changes brought about by migration also revive a sense of nostalgia about a shared sense of national community, the remembrance of a past wealth, which is reflected in Trump’s slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ and the Brexit mantra of ‘taking back control’. Populism is where these discourses tend to converge.

The term ‘populism’ is appointed as the common denominator behind a variety of local/global phenomena such as the political success of Donald Trump, the Brexit referendum and the contested victory of the Italian coalition government between the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S) and Lega<sup>ii</sup> in 2018. Often considered an elusive and ambiguous term, populism is for some a ‘thin ideology’ with limited analytical power, lacking a programme and a social base (Stanley, 2008). Nonetheless, the contemporary revival of this concept in the public sphere has also involved a renewed theoretical interest in the term. Populism is most often defined as a system of ideas (Canovan, 1999), but also a style of doing politics, which divides antagonistic groups in society around specific political demands (Mudde, 2004). Ernesto Laclau (conceptualises the very nature of populism in the ‘antagonism’ between ‘the people’, a social group with no class connotation, and the elites in positions of power (Stainley, 2008) referred to as ‘the dominant ideology’, ‘the dominant bloc’, ‘the institutional system’, ‘an institutionalized ‘other’, or even ‘power’ itself (Beasley-Murray, J., 2006: 363). According to Laclau, this antagonism emerges from people’s shared experiences of dissatisfaction:

If a group of people . . . who have been frustrated in their request for better transportation find that their neighbours are equally unsatisfied in their claims at the level of security, water supply, housing, schooling, and so on, some kind of solidarity will arise between them all: all will share the fact that their demands remain unsatisfied (Laclau in Stainley, 2008: 97).

Laclau argues that the logic of populism goes beyond rhetoric and extends to ‘solidaristic ties’ that drive political practice in the form of ‘modes of articulation’ (Laclau, 2005:34) around unsatisfied social demands, which then become the ‘signifiers’ (Laclau, 2005:34) of those bringing forward these demands. In a different context, while exploring the rise of totalitarian

regimes, Hanna Arendt (1951/2017) reflects on the bonding function of ideologies. ‘Given the aleatory and unstable nature of individual interests, and given the complex nature of social relations in modern societies’ it is not surprising that ideologies become like a new religion that connects otherwise atomised individuals by giving them a place in something (Rosati, 2003:175) and so providing what Emile Durkheim described as ‘social solidarity’ (Durkheim, 1893/2013).

The analysis of the nature and the fashion of these ‘solidaristic ties’ that produce new antagonisms has led to the identification of economic and cultural factors. On one hand, it is argued that increasing income and wealth inequality have been fuelling the resentment of the working classes toward the political establishment. As Frank’s (2007) *What’s the matter with Kansas?* reveals long before Trump’s election, the political outcome of this resentment had already involved a reactionary shift of blue-collar Americans. On the other hand, those who prioritise cultural aspects suggest that anti-establishment feelings and people’s malcontent are the result of the ‘cultural backlash’ (Inglehart and Norris, 2016:1) affecting those who feel threatened by progressive cultural changes. Ultimately, cultural and economic explanations tend to converge into the idea that a class-based culture war is taking place, where those who are culturally left behind overlap with the least educated white working class living in rural communities (Hobolt, 2016). Yet, this conclusion does not come without criticism: in line with others, this research also found that the class basis for populist support is much more nuanced (Bhambra, 2017; Bartels, 2006).

In-depth studies of rural communities have become central to better understand the development of these mechanisms. As Cohen (2013:15) points out: ‘community is that entity to which one belongs, greater than kinship but more immediately than the abstraction we call “society”. It is (...) where one learns and continues to practice how to “be social”. Robert Wuthnow’s (2018) found that American communities are greatly defined by their moral character and so by the ‘reciprocal obligations to maintain local ways of being’ (Mason, 2000:27). Wuthnow argues that, when the moral order that sustains a community is disrupted by the advent of new progressive values, the community experiences a sudden lack of ‘boundedness’ (Wuthnow, 2018:43), similar to Durkheim’s anomie. From here, the feeling of being ‘left behind’ emerges and increments a rage against those held responsible for this neglect, mostly the federal state. Jennifer Silva’s (2019) exploration of rural Pennsylvania also evidences broken communities and anti-establishment feelings, but it unfolds deep and personal experiences of ‘pain’. Silva highlights how in making sense of structural hardship and economic adversity, her participants relied on self-blame and individualised coping tactics, which incremented their suffering.

### **The ‘Deep Story’ of Becoming a Stranger in Your Own Land**

In her study of the Tea Party’s supporters in Lake Charles, Southwest Louisiana, Hochschild (2018) provides an understanding of how cultural, economic and moral factors work together to shape a ‘deep story’ (Hochschild, 2018:135), which explains how and why people ‘feel’ in a certain way. The ‘deep story’ of Lake Charles makes sense of how the local people, who see themselves as patiently waiting in the line for years, felt betrayed by the federal government

accused of favouring the new ‘line-cutters’ – migrants, refugees, ethnic and sexual minorities and women – over them. The experience of betrayal unites those feeling they lost their place in the line and turns them against the government held responsible for making them like ‘strangers in their own land’ (Hochschild, 2018: 140). The political outcome becomes a ‘great paradox’ (Hochschild, 2018: 8) where people make political decisions against their own interests, such as opposing public investments that could instead support them.

Hochschild, Wuthnow and Silva use an emotional diction to capture the sentiments of their participants, which take the form of betrayal, outrage and pain. Pankaj Mishra’s (2017) analysis of our age as an ‘age of anger’ takes these sentiments even further by setting them in a wider, historical, on-going process, which is deeply seated in the crisis of the cultural, intellectual, socio-economic and political foundations of the current global order. And so, the humanism and rationality of the Enlightenment’s project have reached their limitations, inequality is still rising, modern capitalism has failed to deliver wealth and social mobility and western democracies are undergoing a major legitimacy crisis. In this dystopian context, ideas of human rationality – as purposive and devoted to self-interest – leave space to irrational behaviours led by strong feelings captured by Hochschild’s deep story, and by the experiences of rage and pain described by Wuthnow and Silva. These processes and discourses are both local and global, showing how different circumstances converge toward a similar rhetoric (Mounk, 2018).

### **Antagonism and the National State in Southern Italy**

Both Hochschild and Wuthnow come to describe the communities’ anger towards the state as – to some extent – unfair. Nonetheless, the populism surge of the 2018 Italian parliamentary elections cannot be explained without accounting for the failure of several Italian governments to tackle years of slow growth, high unemployment and rising inequality (D’Alimonte, 2018:115). The lack of actions ‘from the top’ has fuelled ‘the rebellion from below and the growing gap between the elites and the people. Lega and M5S won by promising radical change’ (Ibidem: 115).

These types of pressures and related anti-establishment sentiments are not new antagonisms in Southern Italy, but they are rather rooted in the historical and cultural context of the region dating back to the 1860s, where, with the Italian unification, the divide between the North and South of the country became a political matter. In 1876, a government inquiry – ‘La Sicilia 1876’ (Sicily in 1876) – led by two liberal-conservative politicians, Leopoldo Franchetti and Sidney Sonnino, portrayed a poor and feudal-looking South where ‘people despise the government and any government officials’ (Franchetti and Sonnino, [1876], 1925: 29-30). Government representatives were perceived as negligent and alien to local circumstances and the state was regarded as untrustworthy and having an hidden exploitative agenda. The inquiry also informed the work of the Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga (1840-1922), whose novels further expose the image of an underdeveloped and impoverished South: in *Rosso Malpelo* (2013; 1878), Verga describes the poor living conditions of Sicilian children working in sulphur mines, and in *The Malavoglia* (2012; 1881), he goes deeper into the representation of feudal-like social relationships characterised by injustice and the exploitation of the

subordinated poor by the rich aristocratic class of Sicilian landowners. The nature of the North and South divide is still the object of discussion amongst historians and Italian studies scholars. Some consider it as the consequence of two different systems of production - the fast-growing industrialised North and the left-behind agricultural South – whilst others deem that the nature of the divide is rather cultural and historical rooted in issues of loyalty dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the time of Italy's unification the Savoy family, from the North West of Italy, defeated the Bourbons, who ruled the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and annexed the southern regions to the Reign of Italy. Many Southern Italians struggled to show their loyalty to the newly formed Italian State perceived as an alien northern-led political project, which was imposed on them from outside (Di Maria, 2014). We shall see that these complex loyalties are even stronger in Lampedusa, with its history of foreign rulers and its geographical isolation.

## **Methodology**

This research draws on interviews with local people who are permanent residents of Lampedusa (n=65) and an ethnography conducted on the island in 2017. Interviews constitute the bulk of the data, while the ethnography has provided a background to the analysis and the writing up of the findings. As Lampedusa has acquired importance for its strategic position in the Mediterranean Sea, several international organizations such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) have now placed a number of staff on the island. Although these people are permanent residents, they were not involved in the project, which aimed to focus more closely on the views and experiences of those who considered themselves 'Lampedusans', having grown up on the island, settled and spent long periods there. Moreover, in the ethnography, we engaged with and spoke to many migrants, but did not include them in the interview sample. This choice is in line with the research aims and questions about local Lampedusans.

The interviews focused on understanding how everyday lives on the island relate to wider debates about migration. The sample includes participants aged from 20 to over 70 years old from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and therefore both seasonal workers and entrepreneurs in the tourism sector. Care was also taken to speak to similar numbers of men and women. The sampling followed a snowballing approach beginning with targeting initial contacts achieved through the ethnography. The ethnography provided an important contextual background for the interviews, focusing on the key places where 'community' is enacted. Hence, we attended events that were part of the local election campaign and the Sunday mass, we got involved with a grassroots organisation which welcomes migrants at their arrival to the docks, we volunteered at the Archivio Storico where migrants attended Italian language classes and we also participated in evening cultural events open to the public in the main square of the town. Data from these interviews and field notes were analysed thematically using NVIVO and by combining inductive and deductive coding (Braun and Clarke, 2019). The writing up of the final themes was integrated with field notes, and key extracts of the interviews were translated from Italian to English by the researchers.

An important element of the methodology was dissemination via a film documentary *CCÀ SEMU. Here we are, lives on hold in Lampedusa*<sup>iii</sup>, directed by a professional filmmaker. The film was based on video-recorded interviews conducted by the film director, which were followed by face-to-face and more in-depth interviews with the researchers. As the film was designed to disseminate the research findings rather than employed for data collection (Franceschelli and Galipò, 2020), its content reflects and reports the thematic analysis of interview data.

### **‘So Many Islands in One Island’**

The moral obligations envisaged by Wuthnow (2018) as the enduring force of communities have their own features in Lampedusa and were very different from the American cases. In the research, we asked participants to describe their community, which emerged divided and with many internal contradictions, as Francesca, a philosophy graduate and writer, points out: ‘We are bipolar people; we change our mind continuously (...) Lampedusans are a very peculiar and contradictory people’. Many Lampedusans spoke of a complete lack of a sense of community, as a nursery teacher summed up:

There is a lack of sense of community; we are a bit selfish, including myself. The important thing is that ‘I’m fine, then I do not care about the other’. Even in this situation [migration], we have been praised because we appear united in the eyes of people, but in reality, it is not so. Indeed, there is a lot of competition, envy, it has to do with tourism ... We are so many islands in one island.

The idea that tourism was the main cause of internal competition and low social solidarity in the island was challenged by two participants – Loreto and Pippo – who told us about the historical roots of Lampedusa’s internal divisions: the Bourbon family, which ruled the island during the 1800s, brought to Lampedusa families from different regions who maintained separate and private interests, showing little interaction with each other. Pippo argued that this diversity of origins has been passed on over time and it has led to distrust among Lampedusans.

Yet, a weak inner solidarity was compensated by a rather strong outer solidarity – exemplified by descriptions of Lampedusans as ‘brava gente’ (good people), ‘hospitable’ and having a ‘big heart’ with ‘outsiders’: ‘We welcome foreigners and those who arrive, whilst we are often quite harsh to each other’.

There was only one quoted example of traditional practices that were considered able to unite the community. Francesca was amongst the few who highlighted the importance of traditions and old rituals for community bonding, referring to the festivity of ‘La Madonna di Lampedusa’ (The Virgin Mary of Lampedusa) that takes place on 22 September. On that day, the statue of the Madonna is taken from the sanctuary back to the centre of the town and the people of the island gather together for the special event. Many Lampedusans living elsewhere even come back for the day of the procession: ‘This is the only time when we feel truly Lampedusan’.

Resilience was a required feature of the community, as demonstrated by Giusi Nicolini, the mayor of the island between 2012-2017, who compares Lampedusans to the struggles of juniper trees to adapt to the rough and dry soil of the island:

When you look around, you will see some unusually small junipers. In order to adapt to the very extreme conditions in which they grow, they become like natural bonsai trees. Like these junipers that adapt to the changing climate to survive, so people also adapt and turn themselves from farmers to fishermen, from fishermen to entrepreneurs, and by necessity, they eventually become self-sufficient.

There were examples of solidarity and activism reflected in the work of local grassroots organizations such as the Solidarity Forum of Lampedusa (Lampedusa Forum Solidale), Alternatives for Young People (Alternativa Giovani) and Askavusa. Paola, one of the founders of the Solidarity Forum of Lampedusa, told us how the group developed ‘from the bottom up’, by doing things together such as offering tea and welcoming migrants at their arrival. However, activism came together with a general sense of resignation and fatalism, and hence the acknowledgement that effort and endurance were not going to produce any sustainable change. The destiny of the community remained strongly tied to external conditions and to the decisions taken at a national and international level.

### **The Deep Story of Lampedusa Between Migration and Tourism**

Rather than consequence of a cultural backlash, there were very specific economic concerns behind Lampedusans’ resentment, to do with protecting the tourism sector from possible interferences that could negatively affect its performance, and calling for public investments to improve the precarious social services on the island.

The ‘deep story’ of Lampedusa begins with the backdrop of pre-2011, when the island was less globally known and tourism was the central focus of the community. Islanders described Lampedusa at that time, as a quiet place where life had a slow pace, there was no fear and ‘you could leave the door open and the keys in the car’. In the second scene of the story, which starts after the Arab Spring and the shipwrecks, the dual identity of the island – divided between migration and tourism – becomes prominent. Loreto, the co-owner of a family business, argued that ‘there is no community without identity’, the two ‘must come together in order to exist’ and ‘tourism (no longer fishing) is part of what we are and what we do’. Gianni, who runs a restaurant with his father, explained that since the events of 2011, when earnings from tourism dropped, Lampedusans have been increasingly worried about economic loss:

The only concern we have is about a drop in tourism. Tourists may perceive migrants as a problem, because the media never speaks about the sea rescues, but only of arrivals directly on the island. Tourists may fear that migrants will arrive straight on the beach while they are sunbathing. But this has never happened here.

Nancy, the manager of a bar, also suggested that migrants are a potential deterrent for tourism:

Tourists obviously complain when they see migrants wandering around the streets or on the beach. It’s natural that they are afraid. They are not used to this situation, which for us Lampedusans is absolutely normal.

Media reports were also blamed as among those responsible for spreading moral panic about a migrant invasion, leading to dropping tourist numbers. One young woman working in an ice-cream shop explained:

Tourists often asked a friend of mine, who worked in a travel agency, if they had to get a jab before coming to Lampedusa. This happens because of misinformation spreading fear about migrants [spreading diseases] and the feeling of not being protected.

There were strategies put into place in order to make the presence of migrants less visible, such as restricting their freedom to walk around the city centre or beaches during the peak of the tourist season. The invisibility was also endorsed by how the Italian reception system works and particularly by the emergency-led hotspot approach<sup>iv</sup> (Tazzioli and Garelli 2018). Migrants are taken to the docks by the Italian coast guard, then quickly to the hotspot where their details and fingerprints are taken, and finally moved within a few days to elsewhere in Italy or deported back to their own countries: ‘they don’t bother us; they are only in transit’, explained Miriam, a bartender. Hence, the changing ethnic composition and increasing diversity have never been a worry for Lampedusans, who see migrants only as ‘*en passant*’:

In other cities, they [migrants] settle and try to integrate, but here they are only *en passant* – it is almost unnoticeable whether they are here or not. Sure, people feel in the summer they [migrants] bother us because they do not want them on the beach in their underwear, almost with the fear that they ‘consume’ our water [ironic laughter]. These idiots are everywhere, [you can’t help it]. Here, [migrants] are accepted by everyone as long as they stay only for a little time. (Antonio, B&B manager)

Like the conservatives in Louisiana, Lampedusans highlighted a divide between themselves as line-standers and migrants as line-cutters. While some spoke of a long tradition of hospitality – ‘part of the DNA of the islanders’ deriving from the ‘fishermen ethos’ – others felt their rights as ‘citizens’ have been neglected:

At the A&E, you often do not get assistance because migrants are constantly given priority. But I am an Italian citizen, I am Lampedusan and, as such, when I go to the hospital, I demand to be given appropriate attention and to be helped. (Nancy, bar manager)

Gregoria, a mother of two, referred to negative feelings toward migrants emerging when islanders felt disfavoured:

(If) I go out and see one of them [migrants] in need [I help]. But we get angry when we feel disfavoured. For example, this winter it happened that our plane did not leave, (even when) there were people from here who had to leave for health-related reasons. Then they (migrants) arrived and boarded (their plane) and left. And we, Lampedusans, (were left) here. You are angry at the state. Typical sentence: if you were a clandestine, you would immediately have the doors opened for you.

The argument that migrants are line-cutters and feared as disincentives for tourism legitimises racialised views of them and resonates with prejudice that is evident in many other parts of Italy. However, the locals’ fear of being neglected or disfavoured did not turn into open xenophobia or explicit hostility towards migrants like in the American cases but it remained

subtler. The possibility of resentment towards migrants was also mitigated by the direct and constant contact with them. In Lampedusa, locals have the opportunity to see and meet the people behind the new stories, as Paola, an activist originally from Palermo, explained:

It is a fact that you see them here [face to face] coming from the sea and therefore you can't be nasty. But not because we [Lampedusans] are particularly good people, but anyone [wherever they are from] from Bergamo to Brianza, would not be able to be so bad to another human being. On the other hand, if we were living in the city, we would not be as good as we are in here.

Generally, Lampedusans' representations of migrants were captured by phrases such as 'they are human beings' in need of help and they resemble what scholars refer to as 'bare lives' (Dines et al 2015) and so depoliticized and helpless individuals depicted as the ultimate 'victims'. There was empathy and acknowledgement of their suffering, but also hardly any reference to the reasons why migrants got there and any discussion about the actual responsibilities with the exception of the few political activists. Overall, migrants in our ethnography were positive about Lampedusa, possibly because of what it represented in relation to their longer and complex journey: a 'safe place' and a 'place of hope' after their traumatic previous experiences.

Finally, migration featured as an important element of the deep story of Lampedusa. However, it was not a stand-alone issue, but it rather fed into other domains of dissatisfaction addressed more generally toward the 'state and the establishment'.

### **The Resentment of Lampedusa and the State-Endured Marginality**

The subsequent scene of Lampedusa's deep story was less about betrayal than that of Louisiana and more about feeding a pre-existing malcontent rooted in the history of the island with different implications. A recent blog from the independent Lampedusan collective organisation Askavusa reads:

Our island lives a historic absence of the state in regards to public services and citizenship rights: a characteristic that has contributed to transforming the geographic distance from the mainland into a political and social distance, an exclusion from guarantees and rights which remain more accessible elsewhere.v

It was evident that migration had worsened an already established resentment that was addressed toward what the priest of the island, Don Carmelo, called 'the system': 'There isn't a conflict between migrants and Lampedusans. People here tend to address their criticism toward 'the system' rather than the migrants'. Betrayal entails a presumptive trust, while Lampedusans explained they never felt supported by 'the system' but rather 'always neglected'. 'The system' was synonymous with 'the establishment', mostly associated with the national government and so with the Italian state. The hostility towards 'the state' was deep-seated and persistently attached to a sense of 'marginality' acquired because of the widely shared feeling of 'being abandoned by the institutions': There was a point when we were left completely alone in

handling this emergency (Francesca, philosophy graduate). The words of Gregoria capture well the nature of feelings toward the state:

Sometimes we get angry against the state, against the institutions and the way in which they relate to them [migrants] and to us. But if there is a need to help, we are the first to do it. In 2011, we were the first to help. I used to walk around and see them [the migrants] lying down everywhere, so I went home to get blankets. I gave them the bread that I bought for myself. But you cannot do everything. You have to wait for the state to act, [we can't] resolve a situation that is bigger than us.

The use of language was particularly important for some participants who spoke in Sicilian dialect, as opposed to Italian, to express more emphatically their anti-state feelings: 'The Italian government doesn't show any interest in Lampedusa, as if this island doesn't exist' (in a strong Sicilian dialect) (Concetta, farmer). Moreover, local authorities, local policies and the mayor were also blamed for perpetuating the ineffectiveness of the national state. This widely shared resentment toward 'the system' was a unifying feature of Lampedusa's community, but it came together with other more complex feelings that shaped the mood of the island.

The absence of the state was epitomised by a long list of complaints about failing public services, which contributed to augmenting the marginality of Lampedusa, enlarging the divide between the migration question (perceived as global) and the everyday (local) issues experienced by the islanders. The marginality of Lampedusa was an important marker of the island's identity, reiterated in discourses about its insularity and evident in its description as the isolated periphery of Italy and Europe. The isolation was geographical and connected to the sea, which was perceived as bridging people and cultures, but also creating distance – as Pietro, who worked for an environmental protection agency, suggested: 'There are times when you feel like you're in a cage (because of the distance from anything else), even though the sea can also give you that feeling of connection with the rest of the world'. However, this geographical isolation related to a deeper social marginality, which was induced by failing national and local institutions unable to provide efficient public services. Many interviewees criticised the poor transport links, making it difficult to reach the island, particularly during wintertime. Islanders spoke about their dependency on the ferry, which usually runs twice a week, subject to weather conditions. When the sea is rough, the community experiences shortages of foods and other goods, as Gianni pointed out, but also re-discovers its solidarity:

In these cases, when there are shortages of food supplies, there is not enough fruit, meat or fish, but we keep going. During these difficult times, we get closer to each other, we do more things together, like making bread or biscuits, and we become a community again.

One young participant, who was running for local elections, recounted how he spent almost two days on the ferry in an attempt to reach the island in time for Christmas. The ferry particularly exemplified some characteristics relevant to the collective conscience of the islanders: the dependency upon externalities that lead them to be in a constant state of 'waiting':

We always wait for something coming from outside. We wait for the ferry, even if you are not expecting anyone you know. It's a psychological issue. (...) [The ferry] is like the umbilical cord that connects us to the rest of the world.

When it arrives, you naturally feel more relaxed. (Giusi Nicolini, local mayor, 2012-2017)

Everything is about ‘waiting’ in Lampedusa. Even life and death. There are people who die and remain in Palermo, because they cannot come back to Lampedusa by plane (...). If the ferry does not arrive, there is a family here crying for a dead relative who is not on the island. (Filippo, insurance broker and local politician)

Don Carmelo reflects on how ‘waiting’ reinforces the sense of dependency on externalities: ‘Life here makes you understand what it means to depend on someone or something’. Education was another area where the absent state underperformed and was a source of concern because of its poor quality, related to the high turnover of teachers. Teachers who come from the Italian mainland struggle to adjust to a life of isolation on Lampedusa, particularly during the winter, and they tend to stay temporarily, sometimes for just one term or two. Parents feel that the high turnover negatively affects the quality of secondary education and – for those who can afford it – they pay to send their children to the mainland to continue studying in better schools.

Most of the worries and complaints about the state are related to poor healthcare and its costs. Having to seek specialised medical support outside the island, Lampedusans have to self-fund flights and accommodation every time they need health check-ups. Things are worse in cases of longer-term illness and there was a well-known story about a Lampedusan man who died of cancer because he could not afford to pay for travelling and accommodation on the mainland to complete his chemotherapy. Marginality was epitomised by the stories of pregnant mothers and their difficulties to access healthcare services, as Nancy points out:

I’m pregnant and every month, I have to leave Lampedusa to go to the mainland for medical check-ups, all at my own expense. I have to pay for the flight, the hotel and all the check-ups. Eventually, I will have to give birth somewhere else, because nobody is born here anymore, as there isn’t a maternity ward.

When we spoke to another young mother working in an ice-cream shop, she explained:

Before I became a mother, living in Lampedusa was perfect. Then when you become a mother, you start worrying about your baby’s health because getting the medical assistance you need, it’s a matter of luck. You must be lucky to find a good doctor who can treat a baby. You must be lucky that the rescue helicopter is already on the island to take you to Palermo or Agrigento, in case of an emergency. You must be lucky to arrive on time. So you can’t relax because of all these matters.

Young people raised a range of other issues from the lack of a cinema, a bookshop, a museum and more generally cultural and social spaces and concerns about the environment. Economic issues were also relevant: the state was accused of increasing taxation and disfavours small businesses, which the economy of the island relies upon. These local concerns became the centre of an animated political debate that we caught in May 2017, just at the outset of the campaign for local elections. There was a sense of resentment towards local politicians for

having neglected local questions to prioritise migration and seek attention from the ‘outside world’. For some, migration had become a ‘business’ or a ‘brand’ aimed at increasing the visibility of local politicians and making earnings. Lega (initially known as The Northern League Party), surprisingly active in the most southern territory of Italy, based their campaign on a slogan which resembles the idea: ‘Lampedusans first’.

## **Conclusion**

The research has explored how a local community responds to global migration flows in the context of the global revival of populist ideas. In so doing, it has contributed to an understanding of populism, which accounts for local and longer-term historical processes. It suggests that the prime concern of the island that has been at the centre of the migration debate in Europe is not migration in itself. Lampedusans expressed their resentment towards the Italian state, which was accused of being ‘absent’ and unable to meet the most basic needs of the community. These same pressures resonate with a widely spread global malcontent and anti-establishment feelings, which reify populist ideas affecting communities all over Italy, Europe and around the world. In Italy, these mechanisms are played out on a larger scale in different regions, especially by Lega. In other countries, these sentiments have questioned traditional solidarities and formed new bonds, leading to specific political outcomes from Brexit to Trump. In this context, the article sheds light on populism as both the product and the producer of ‘curious new alliances’ (Davies, 2017:419) – or solidarities – coming together to face shared antagonisms about anti-state resentments.

The ‘deep story’ of Hochschild (2018) has been useful to make sense of how local circumstances and global issues meet. Lampedusa also tells a ‘deep story’ of how migration has become part of a globally shared anti-state rhetoric, portraying how global sentiments of malcontent are articulated at a local level. The way Lampedusans manifest their populist resentment initially resembles that of rural Americans and the Louisianan conservatives. In Lampedusa, migrants are objects of subtly racialised discourses and also associate with line-cutters. However, different to the American cases, they were considered a symptom rather than a cause of concern, whilst the resentment was addressed more directly toward the ‘system’. The ‘deep story’ of Lampedusa reflects the volatility of Italian politics: a stronghold of the Movimento Cinque Stelle in the 2018 national elections, the island supported Lega in the 2019 European vote, but it has been divided about its harsh anti-migration policy. However, this deep story is not new and so it did not originate with a crash of the community’s moral order being questioned by progressive values, but it has roots in the complex history of Southern Italy and its relation to the national state since Italy’s unification.

Economic rather than cultural factors were more relevant to Lampedusans, though focus on the economic factors does not mean their populist resentment can be explained by the dissatisfied requests of a homogenous class group. Hence, the islanders were not representative of the least educated or an impoverished working class, but were instead citizens from different socio-economic backgrounds preoccupied about their businesses and poor facilities on the island.

Finally, the island’s deep story involves a different range of emotions such as abandonment and resignation, rather than pain (Silva 2019), betrayal (Hochschild, 2018) or anger (Withnow,

2018; Mishra, 2017). In Lampedusa, there was no self-blame (Silva 2019), but rather the acknowledgement of dependency on external forces (e.g. national and international) epitomised by the idea of islanders waiting for change to come from the outside. This idea is captured by the local fishermen's saying '*ccà semu*', which in Sicilian dialect means 'here we are', expressing Lampedusa's resignation to its marginality even in conditions of global attention.

In his latest book, Pankaj Mishra (2017) speaks of our time as 'The Age of Anger', where individuals feel increasingly helpless and desperate to take back control of their lives from leading authorities, and rootless elites, which are blamed for having stolen power from the people. Yet, there is uncertainty about how these sentiments are able to re-empower people or rather reinforce that same establishment that people claim to contest as a 'great paradox' (Hochschild, 2018). Lampedusa shows how its deep story and great paradox are not only wider global trends, but also the ultimate outcomes of a historically and socially situated resentment.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>i</sup> Retrieved from regional statistics in <https://ugeo.urbistat.com/AdminStat/en/it/demografia/dati-sintesi/lampedusa-e-linosa/84020/4>.

<sup>ii</sup> The Five Stars Movement is a new political movement founded by the comedian Beppe Grillo. The League was initially called the 'Northern League'. It is a right-wing political party that supported the autonomy of Italian Northern regions from the South.

<sup>iii</sup> The award-winning documentary was produced by the author and directed by the Italian filmmaker Luca Vullo. Link to the film: <https://youtu.be/yWwklC6yorc>

<sup>iv</sup> Hotspots are emergency reception centres located in areas of major migrant arrivals (e.g. Lampedusa, Pozzallo, Trapani, Taranto etc.). They are mainly aimed at the initial identification of migrants and based on a temporary/emergency approach. Asylum seekers are moved quickly from the hotspots into other types of support centres, while waiting for their claims for asylum to be processed.

<sup>v</sup> Translated by the author and retrieved from <https://askavusa.wordpress.com/2018/07/11/lampedusa-istruzioni-per-luso-2018/>.

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