



Criminalization of Solidarity – the case of Mimmo Lucano: a case of hope in Calabria, Italy?

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On 4th of April, borderline-europe launched a panel discussion on the criminalization of solidarity with refugees. In Italy, one very popular example of this criminalization was the destruction of the alternative model of integration of refugees and asylum seekers in the small town Riace in Calabria by accusing its mayor and initiator of the project of several crimes including facilitation of illegal immigration.

For about 20 years, Riace, a town of only 1700 inhabitants, has hosted several thousand migrants beginning with the arrival of about 300 Kurds on the shore of the town in 1998. At that time, there were no national or regional institutions for the support of migrants, hence the citizens of Riace became active themselves, founding the association "Città Futura – Giuseppe Puglisi" with the intention of transforming Riace into a city of hospitality¹.

In the following years, abandoned houses by citizens who had emigrated seeking to find work in northern Italy or other countries were renovated for the use of refugees, jobs were created by re-opening old laboratories and shops of handicraft, attracting solidarity tourism, schools and kindergartens could re-open due to the rising number of children living in the town. SPRAR projects (The national protection system for asylum seekers and refugees) were established, a local currency was introduced in order to guarantee the autonomy of refugees when the financing of the projects by the Ministry of the Interior came with delays, only naming a few of the projects being initiated.

But the idea of giving new life to a town having to deal with the consequences of massive emigration, especially by young people, through the welcoming of refugees was not welcomed by everyone: In 2018, as part of the structural changes introduced by the – so called – „decreto sicurezza“ signed by Italian vice minister Salvini, the SPRAR projects were closed, almost all of the migrants had to leave Riace without the possibility of joining new programmes and, hence, facing a future of radical uncertainty. Consequently, the school and the shops of handicrafts were closed again. Mimmo Lucano was first sentenced to house arrest, and then released but banned from his hometown Riace. The accusations were organising marriages of convenience, and falsely awarding contracts for waste disposal.

¹ <https://www.riacecittafutura.org/>

But on Tuesday, 2nd of April, it was known that the Court of Cassation (the highest Court in Italy) rehabilitated Lucano². The reaction of the Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini? No excuses for the accusations and attacks of the last months, but rather their repetition: "Thinking to revive places in Calabria, Sardinia or Lombardy with mass immigration is not Italy's future"³. For a few days, the rehabilitation of Lucano was seen as a victory for those who practice solidarity with refugees.

However, on 11th of April the prosecutor in Locri has decided to send Lucano – together with more than 20 colleagues - for trial, not considering the decision of the (higher!) Court of Cassation⁴.

One day later, he – together with other 10 people - was further accused of having faked documents relative to the renting of apartments for refugees⁵.

We can only hope that justice will prevail and that Riace will stand up again as a refuge of hope for a society of open arms.

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² https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/04/02/news/riace_la_cassazione_riabilita_il_sindaco_lucano-223140992/#gallery-slider=208340947

³ <https://video.repubblica.it/politica/riace-salvini-a-lucano-se-avessi-paura-dei-processi-non-farei-il-ministro/331202/331800?ref=fbpr>

⁴ <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/04/11/riace-il-sindaco-mimmo-lucano-rinviato-a-giudizio-insieme-ad-altre-29-persone/5104152/>

⁵ <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/04/12/riace-nuovo-avviso-di-garanzia-per-mimmo-lucano-truffa-e-falso-ideologico-per-le-case-che-ospitavano-i-migranti/5105288/>