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I Buoni di Riace:

Migration Crisis as a

Chance to Resist *Mafiopoli*

*San Cuosimu e San Damianu porgitimi
la manu ca sugnu foresteru e biegnu
di luntanu!*

(Saints Cosmas and Damian, please
lend me your helping hands, as I am a
foreigner and come from faraway!)

—lyric from popular Calabrian song

In this paper, I consider the visual and material strategies Domenico Lucano employed as mayor of Riace, Italy with *I Buoni di Riace*, an initiative developed in response to two significant social issues in the city: depopulation due to mafia activity and massive increases in migratory fluxes.¹ Lucano's tactic was to manipulate money to make it an instrument of social cohesion and inclusiveness within the small Calabrian city of Riace. *I Buoni di Riace (Riace Vouchers)* was a community currency (referred to from here on as *co-currency*), a series of thirty-six colorful paper banknotes that circulated between 2008 and 2018 within the city of Riace in the south of Italy. Alternative currencies are parallel monetary systems, often created by the NGO sector or artists, which are used within a specific place and community. These currencies are implemented as an expedient and have been adopted increasingly in recent years, especially after the global economic crisis in 2008, by small marginalized communities around the world in order to keep their local economies moving. Indeed, alternative currencies provide people with liquidity even if their country's national economy is in crisis.

Domenico Lucano, now former mayor of Riace, was elected for three consecutive terms from 2004 to 2018.² When he was first elected, he had the vision of a new Riace, which he called a "global village," made

1 In the years *I Buoni di Riace* was introduced, Riace was a destination of continual migrant landings. More recently in 2018 and 2019, the Italian government restricted possibilities for NGO organizations to land their boats, full of migrants rescued at sea, at Italian ports. The restriction caused a decrease of the migratory flow in the peninsula.

2 In 2010, Lucano placed third as World Mayor, a world competition organized by the City Mayors Foundation that ranks best mayors in the world every two years. In the same year, he appeared in fortieth place in a list of most influential leaders in *Fortune* magazine.



Figure 1. In Riace, a man shows some banknotes from the series *I Buoni di Riace* (€10 Ernesto Che Guevara; €20 Martin Luther King; €50 Mahatma Gandhi), 2014. Photo: John Laursen.

of elderly people from Calabria as well as young migrants from Kurdistan, Nigeria, Iran, and from other countries. Lucano introduced *I Buoni di Riace* in 2008 to provide liquidity to these migrants, circumventing the long waiting periods for public money allocated by the Italian state to get to migrants, which would have taken up to one year due to bureaucratic issues. Lucano instituted *I Buoni di Riace* (fig. 1) as an effort to create social cohesion in the city through various activities.³

With *I Buoni di Riace*, Lucano also took aim at organized crime (known as the mafia) in southern Italy in an attempt to repopulate the city. Riace had become a ghost town due to the oppression of the Calabrian mafia 'Ndrangheta and to the consequent lack of job opportunities for young people. Like many other *borghi* in Calabria, Riace is a magical place.⁴ Two of the most ancient Greek sculptures of all time, *I Bronzi di Riace* (*Riace Bronzes*), were found under the Ionian Sea of Riace's coast. Yet, it is also one of the most oppressed places by the mafia in the entire country. One of the 'Ndrangheta's prerogatives is to build its fortune by suffocating the local economy in order to gain more and more control over the territory.

³ *I Buoni di Riace* was part of a series of actions aimed at repopulating the abandoned Calabrian village: a public well, an educational farm and clinic, a multiethnic kindergarten, an olive oil mill, several restaurants and shops, a hotel, and the recycling collection of garbage. Everything was run by both citizens and migrants.

⁴ In the Middle Ages in Italy, a *borgo* was the space of the city dedicated to its citizens, situated out of the fortification walls that embraced the castle. The word *borgo* is still used to refer to the historic center of small cities that were built in the Middle Ages.

The principal instrument used to rise up against mafia violence and create a transnational anti-racist solidarity through hospitality was the visual profile of *I Buoni di Riace* banknotes. First, to design the *co-currency*, the mayor drew inspiration from various artistic productions that were created in the town by Riace citizens and migrants, following its repopulation by immigrants. These included murals, installations, road signs, and colors from flags corresponding to the migrants' countries of origin (mostly Kurdistan, Syria, and Turkey)—all of which appeared in public spaces throughout the city. Second, the thirty-six banknotes showed mafia violence and injustice by featuring the faces of victims of the Calabrian and Sicilian mafia. Last, the *co-currency* portrayed other national and international personalities as symbols of peace, culture, anti-racism and inclusion, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, Rita Levi-Montalcini, Che Guevara, and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

From a visual point of view, another crucial aspect of the banknotes was that they resembled the official European currency, the euro. Indeed, they were also known as the *Euros of Riace* as they display the euro symbol "€" many times on the front and back side, next to the banknote value number (*fig. 2*). In official euro banknotes, a vertical band is shown on the right, with the value and the euro symbol "€" beneath (*fig. 3*). On Riace banknotes, the word "€URO" in capital letters is found on top of two vertical bands (*fig. 2*). This element is reminiscent of the official banknotes, where the value of the coin is written in Latin: "EURO," Greek: "ΕΥΡΩ," and also in Cyrillic: "EBPO." The official currency design also comprises the European Union flag on the left, with the signature of the European Central Bank President under it, and its acronym in nine languages: "ECB, ECB, EЦБ, EZB, EKP, EKT, EKB, ECB, and EBC" on the left.

The repetition of the euro symbol "€" on *I Buoni di Riace*, as well as the complete word "€URO," demonstrates the mayor's desire to create a visual connection between the alternative monetary system of the city with the country's official one. By making recognizable visual



Figure 2. The front side of *I Buoni di Riace* €1 banknote, 2019. Photo by the author.

Figure 3. The front side of the official €20 banknote, 2019. Photo by the author.



elements of the official money on the community currency, both the citizens in Riace and the migrants were more open to trusting the new local economic system. Thus, the emphasis on the visual similarity to the euro can be understood as part of Lucano's strategy to get people used to the new currency and gaining confidence in the new system. This tactic also allowed the mayor to circulate images that were evocative of specific values based on his understanding of the community's needs through the banknotes.

Once the strategy to convince users of the reliability of the local currency was developed, the mayor's second step was to exploit the design of the banknotes for a visual narrative. As previously mentioned,



Figure 4. Coco Cano, *Mundos*, 2008. Mixed media installation. Photo: Amedeo Petrocchi, 2019.

the European flag is displayed on the official banknote (*fig. 3*). On the Riace *co-currency*, however, no official country flag is depicted, but instead, some triangular and colored paper cut-outs that recall the shape of a flag appear. More precisely, these irregular paper cuttings are scattered on the upper part of the front of each banknote and are very vibrant in color with details in red, yellow, orange, purple, blue, and green (*fig. 2*). Not coincidentally, they have a strong pictorial profile.

In 2008, the artist Coco Cano, an immigrant from Uruguay, was asked by Lucano to create an installation for Riace's central square. Thus, Cano produced a site-specific installation, called *Mundos* (*Worlds*), composed of a half-moon mosaic surrounded by other individual mosaic pieces. The pictorial elements were painted on the fragments and included fantastical creatures in bright colors (*fig. 4*). The design of *I Buoni di Riace*, in particular the half-moon shape surrounded by mosaic fragments, was inspired by Cano's work (*fig. 2*).

The colored triangles on both Cano's artwork and the Riace vouchers are reminiscent of the flags from the native countries of the migrants and current residents. Indeed, the title of Cano's artwork,



Figure 5. Welcome signs in Riace, 2019. Photo: Nicola Zolin.

Mundos, represents the union of different worlds in Riace. The city's welcome road sign included flags and names of the countries from which immigrants came (fig. 5). In nine different languages, "Benvenuti a Riace" ("Welcome to Riace") also appeared on the sign. Behind the word "Riace" was a rainbow, which appeared throughout the city, including on the stairs of the central amphitheater (fig. 6).

Lucano, therefore, found his visual references in the official euro, in the reproduction of the artistic work of migrant painter Cano, and of visual elements derived from public spaces in Riace. Thus, the visual narrative of Lucano's *co-currencies* references artworks throughout the city, some of which were created by migrants. This evokes the inclusive reality of the village, an inclusivity that was aimed at protecting migrants and was recognized as a chance for Riace to be reborn.

Because the cause of Riace's historical depopulation was mafia oppression, Lucano tried to avoid a new period of criminal oppression by showing mafia violence and injustices on his banknotes. Among the thirty-six banknotes, twelve display the faces of mafia victims. The



Figure 6. The amphitheater of Riace during Riace in Festival, a cultural event in 2018. Photo: Riace in Festival.

most portrayed figure is Giuseppe “Peppino” Impastato. He appears on several banknotes, in particular, on the 100 euro note in the series. Impastato was an Italian journalist and activist, a member of the Proletarian Democracy Party. He was well known for his rebellion against criminal activities by Sicilian mafia Cosa Nostra. He was assassinated on May 9, 1978 for his resistance. Impastato is iconic because he was born into a mafia family, but he decided to rebel against and fight their power through the foundation of a new radio station called AUT Contro-Informazione Radio Diffusa (AUT Counter-Information Diffused Radio). Impastato’s most ironic and effective radio program was titled *Onda pazza a Mafiopoli* (*Crazy wave in Mafiopoli*) where he invented caricatures of real mafia bosses in Palermo and made fun of them publicly.

In 2009, many Italian artists arrived in Riace to take part in Colors of Memory, an entire week dedicated to the production of murals and installations in Riace with the help of residents and migrants in the city. On this occasion, the logo of Impastato’s radio station, as well as his



Figure 7. Mural dedicated to Giuseppe Impastato, Riace, 2011. Photo: Natale Bianchi.

portrait, were painted on wood panels and installed as a mural in Riace (*fig. 7*). On the mural, Impastato's face is depicted as a black and yellow stencil against a background with colored lines. These lines, alternating orange and blue, move out from behind Impastato's head towards the left like rays. On the right, the rays, impressed on a black background, assume different colors (red, yellow, orange, purple, white, and light blue) and are curved. Their sinuosity recalls sound waves, and indeed, they culminate in the logo of the AUT Contro-Informazione Radio Diffusa. The word "AUT" is colored in red, and it is inscribed on a yellow square with the image of headphones painted next to it.

The image of the mural is partially transposed onto the €20 banknote of *I Buoni di Riace* (*fig. 8*). Here, a detail of the mural is reproduced with Impastato's face and the background of lines and rays. As in the other banknotes of the series, the image is inscribed into a half-moon in the middle of the front. On the top curved border of the half-moon read "LIBERTE', EGALITE', FRATERNITE'" ("FREEDOM, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY"), a motto from the French Revolution. Below the image, "NO RAZZISMO" ("NO RACISM") is repeated several times,



Figure 8. *I Buoni di Riace* €20 banknote (Giuseppe Impastato), 2019. Photo by the author.

appearing larger in the middle. All of these design choices are linked to Lucano's objective to emphasize, through the visual profile of his banknotes, mafia atrocities and the crucial value of pacific resistance and anti-racism ideals.

Lucano aimed to repopulate Riace, and most of all, to influence a radical overhaul of the culture of the city, promoting migrants' social inclusion and criticism of the mafia. To do so, he portrayed mafia victims onto the banknotes, giving Impastato a crucial role; he immortalized international symbols and figures of anti-racism and peace such as Mahatma Gandhi and Rosa Parks (*figs. 1 and 9*); and finally, he used the rainbow colors found in Riace road signs, murals, and migrants-citizens' co-artworks that were installed in the city.

The *co-currency* system introduced by the mayor was realized through a visual, but also material strategy that comprised the manipulation of money. From a material point of view, even though the dematerialization of society through digitization had already started back in 2008, the only valid version of *I Buoni di Riace* was a paper one. Indeed, in order to use the vouchers in exchange for products and services,



Figure 9. *I Buoni di Riace* €50 banknote (Rosa Parks), 2019. Photo by the author.

the migrants had to meet the local Riace merchants in person, face-to-face. This meant social interactions, dialogue, and direct contact. The only available digital version of *I Buoni di Riace* was created later in recent years by the non-profit organization Chico Mendes within the project *Solidali con Riace* (*In Solidarity with Riace*), in the form of an online catalog (fig. 10).

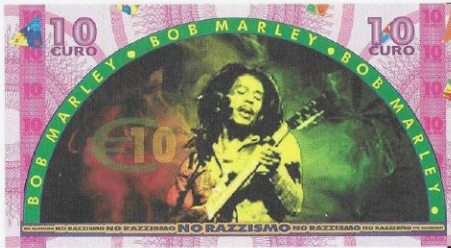
In 2018, when the conservative party Lega was elected to the government of the country, mayor Lucano was arrested with the accusation of fraud and corruption in the management of public funding for migrants in Riace. As soon as he was accused, public funding was denied and many local merchants, who expected a reimbursement by the state for having accepted the vouchers as money, remained unsatisfied and literally lost thousands of euros. Chico Mendes scanned the banknotes and shared them online in order to sell them and donate the earnings to Riace merchants. The solidarity project ended on February 17, 2019, and they collected over 77,000 euros. In the meantime,



5€ - Franca Rame
 (Parabiago, 18 luglio 1929 –
 Milano, 29 maggio 2013)



10€ - Ernesto Che Guevara
 (Rosario, 14 giugno 1928 –
 La Higuera, 9 ottobre 1963)



10€ - Robert (Bob) Nesta Marley
 (Nine Mile, 6 febbraio 1945 –
 Miami, 11 maggio 1981)



10€ - Gianluca Congiusta
 (Siderno, 19 dicembre 1973 –
 Siderno, 24 maggio 2005)

Figure 10. Screenshot of one page from Chico Mendes's online catalog of *I Buoni di Riace*, 2019. Photo by the author.

a democratic party, Partito Democratico, replaced the Lega at the government of Italy, and Lucano was released. The legal trial is still in progress, but most of the accusations against the former mayor have been dismissed. During the Lega government, Riace's road signs were removed and replaced with new ones that display the faces of two Catholic saints, Saint Cosmas and Saint Damian, who are recognized as Riace's protectors. No traces are left of the migrants' native countries' flags. Impastato's portrait on the wood panels has also been removed.

The catalog on Chico Mendes's website (*fig. 10*) is rudimental and testifies to the exclusivity of the original paper Riace vouchers.

The digital version shows all the paper defects and wear due to the banknotes' use. At that time, Lucano needed occasions for Riace citizens to meet with the newly arrived migrants. By inventing an exclusive paper currency, he literally created those occasions for direct contact and building of social relationships. In addition, the local businesses were able to survive the Italian economic crisis thanks to the circulation of the *co-currency* that would have been impossible without the migrants' arrival. Indeed, the vouchers represented a legitimate stipend provided by Italian migration law to the migrants. The tangibility of the vouchers, their materiality, was part of Lucano's tactic aimed at the creation of a new community where people with different cultural backgrounds had to interact and coexist.

As Impastato suggested in the choice of *Mafiopoli* as the title of his radio program, the capitalist system is intertwined with the criminal organization. Nevertheless, *Mafiopoli* is reminiscent of the word *Monopoly* that derives from the Greek word *monopólion*, which is composed of *mónos*, "alone, exclusive" and *pōlion*, "sale, selling." Thus, *Mafiopoli* suggests the domain of mafia over the economy of a place—the monopoly of the mafia. This elucidates the link between the criminal organization and the capitalistic system, and at the same time, clarifies why Lucano chose to manipulate money—the capitalist tool *par excellence*—to protest against it.

Mayor Lucano developed an alternative banknote system that had three goals: support migrants as they became a part of the new Riace community after its depopulation; mitigate racist attitudes in order to let the new community grow; and weaken the mafia and its economic control of the city. His strategy to realize this project was both visual and material, and he integrated these into the design of the banknotes. Lucano promoted the notion of Riace as a "global village" by drawing on public art in Riace, including Cano's *Mundos*, the official euro currency, iconic figures, and anti-racist and anti-violence messaging. By using only paper banknotes, migrants could integrate into the social fabric of the city. No online transactions or digital surrogates were

possible in Riace. Instead, Lucano's strategy required face-to-face interaction. Finally, through both visual and material strategies, resulting in the manipulation of money—capitalism's principle signifier—Lucano critiqued the capitalistic system and its implications with the mafia asset.

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