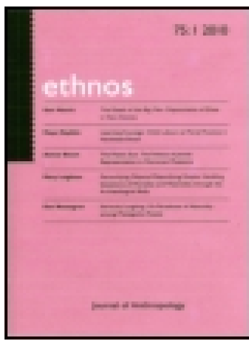

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There's a Hole in the Fence: Civil Pragmatism in Ambiguous Encounters on Lampedusa, Italy

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ABSTRACT
This article revolves around a specific materiality: a hole in the fence surrounding Lampedusa's refugee centre. By allowing migrants to informally leave the violently guarded centre and enter Lampedusa town, the hole connects social worlds that on paper should be separate. For the local population, the hole materialises an absence of state management and 'clear rules', but it also facilitates encounters between locals and migrants in the form of economic transactions and acts of helpfulness. This does not mean that anti-immigration sentiments are absent, but they remain generally concealed beneath *civil pragmatism*—measures of etiquette aimed at peacefully preserving public space. Further, by highlighting everyday ambiguity and pragmatic interests, the article provides a tempering of the ideologically overdetermined vocabularies that dominate much discourse on migration in Europe.

KEYWORDS Borders; materiality; the state; civility; pragmatism

Introduction

Lampedusa's migrant reception centre is located at the end of *Contrada Imbriacola*, a long dead-end street that leads from the northern part of town to a valley in the middle of the island. In this out-of-the-way location, on a piece of land owned by the Ministry of the Interior, surrounded by hills, cliffs, cacti, and a wire fence, the facility is effectively out of sight for anyone who does not deliberately go looking for it. Should one be inclined to do so, the only entrance is a checkpoint gate from Contrada Imbriacola which is guarded by military and/or police at all times. Entering the premises without a written authorisation from 'a higher place' is impossible, as a heavily armed sentinel told me when I went there myself. The only way to get a view of the centre is to climb the surrounding hills and peek down from above.

Lampedusa. The very name evokes images of migrants crammed together on rickety boats, suspended between death and survival on their way to Europe. Situated closer to

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Africa than Sicily, Lampedusa, Italy's southernmost piece of territory, has become a key gateway into Europe for boat migrants setting out from the shores of Tunisia and Libya. Although measuring a mere 20 km^2, the island is a powerful emblem of the so-called 'refugee crisis' and undocumented boat migration in the Mediterranean more generally: since the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of migrants have set foot on Lampedusa, while thousands have arrived in the coast guard's body bags (Bassi 2018, Horsti and Neumann 2019, Dines *et al*. 2014). Correspondingly, Lampedusa has become a heavily militarised border post and a strategic node for Italian and European border enforcement in the region. 'Migration management'—as the jargon has it—is a professional, and largely military, endeavour carried out in collaboration between Italian state authorities, European agencies and various private sector subcontractors (Cuttitta 2012). In the words of geographer Paolo Cuttitta, Lampedusa has thus come to constitute a 'quintessential embodiment of the Euro-African migration and border regime' (2014, 199).

When migrants land on Lampedusa, typically escorted ashore by authorities onto a closed-off military quay, they are transported directly to the centre at the end of Contrada Imbriacola to be identified by fingerprint before being eventually transferred to facilities on the mainland. Even though the reception centre is not a carceral space *per se*, the isolated, fenced, and guarded facility certainly seems to share with prisons the form and function of an architecture of separation and subjectivation (see also Tazzioli and Garelli 2018, Pollozek and Passoth 2018), and the refugee centre does indeed occasionally work as a place of de facto long-term containment.

Because I had familiarised myself with this spatial setup before embarking on my fieldwork on Lampedusa in 2015, I was surprised to encounter hundreds of migrants hanging out in places such as streets, shops, and bars, seemingly able to freely roam public space in broad daylight. 'How come there are migrants in the street,' was thus one of the first questions I asked Alessia, my landlady, whose immediate response was a very confused grimace—after all, migration is the sole reason why Lampedusa has become known to a wider public, including anthropologists, in recent years. It was not until I elaborated my impression that the centre was supposed to be a containment facility that she understood what I meant: 'Oh, right. Well, there's a hole in the fence.'

This article's ethnographic fulcrum is this somewhat peculiar, yet appealingly banal, materiality: a hole in the fence that allows migrants to informally leave the otherwise violently guarded centre and enter the everyday spaces of the local population. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork among Lampedusa's permanent inhabitants—approximately 6,000 Italian citizens living primarily off fishing and seasonal tourism—I employ the hole in the fence as an ethnographic springboard for considering a series of everyday dimensions of how the local Lampedusan population deal with the presence of migrants and the island's transformation into a border *par excellence*.

The article is organised as follows. I begin by drawing an ethnographic sketch of the hole in the fence and its surrounding practices which I then contextualise through a comparative analysis of the fence's function as a technology of data capture rather than permanent territorial enclosure. At the same time, however, I argue that for

my Lampedusan interlocutors, the fence does remain linked to an aesthetics of enforced and bounded territory, and that its perforation thus instils a profound sense of ambiguity and an experienced absence of 'clear rules' in relation to official migration management efforts. In this way, I suggest that the perforated fence materialises a paradoxical local experience of a heavily armed state apparatus that is seemingly uninterested in enforcing its own demarcations.

The second part of the article provides an ethnographic close-up of how the hole in the fence quite literally opens up a space of possible interactions between islanders and migrants, focusing on how many Lampedusans—in the ostensible absence of state control and 'clear rules'—rely on what I call *civil pragmatism* in encounters with migrants, i.e. forms of polite standardised engagement that serve to peacefully maintain public space. While civil pragmatism does not entail the absence of anti-immigration sentiments among my interlocutors, it does mean that these are generally downplayed in public, as migrants are often met with politeness and courtesy (or at least something resembling quiet acceptance). Specifically, I investigate civil pragmatism in relation to small-scale economic transactions, the downplaying of anxiety in public, and mundane acts of kindness.

The article thus suggests that everyday relations between Lampedusans and migrants should be understood neither as rosy nor in terms of collapse, but along the lines of efforts to make the everyday 'work' in the face of unclear official management. By highlighting the prevalence of the 'small politics' (Trundle 2012) of everyday co-presence, the article sets out to provide an ethnographically grounded antidote to the often dramatic and spectacular vocabularies that tend to dominate public discourse in relation to Lampedusa as well as boat migration in the Mediterranean more generally. In this sense, I propose that the perforated fence itself be read as a material analogy to civil pragmatism by bridging spaces of separation in the realm of the everyday.

A Safety Valve?

One of my first impulses when I first arrived on Lampedusa in the fall of 2015 was to look for the refugee centre. And initially, my hopes were high when I consulted Google Maps and saw the centre clearly marked out—it was even very close to where I lived, just a short walk from my flat. However, the place where the centre should have been according to the map turned out to be a small roundabout just outside of town, behind a pizzeria and a couple of hotels closed for the winter.[1] No centre.

The following days, I asked locals for directions, but nobody seemed very keen to talk about the facility in much detail. 'It's a little outside of town, not too hard to find,' or 'it's quite close to the abandoned *piscina,* you know'. Directions were never really precise, and I almost got the sense of a kind of public secrecy—something well-known, yet troubling to articulate (Taussig 1999, 5). Or perhaps, and this should not be ruled out, their reluctance to talk was simply a weary reaction to my being yet another nosy stranger inquiring into migration-related matters. In any case, it was not until I talked to Aziz, a Tunisian cultural mediator[2] (*mediatore*

culturale) working at the centre, that I was given proper and precise directions (those described at the very beginning of the article).

After being sent away by the soldier guarding the gate at the end of Contrada Imbriacola, I never managed to actually locate the hole in the fence myself, so my description of the hole is based on other people's accounts and photographs. Somewhere along the tall, yet rather flimsy-looking fence, well out of the way from the main entrance, an almost man-sized opening has been cut, allowing detainees to quite comfortably exit. The hole is effectively an informal 'back door' onto a dirt path behind the centre that migrants use to walk into town. By taking the dirt path, migrants avoid Contrada Imbriacola, which is probably Lampedusa's most well-lit and well-kept road, paved with the smooth tarmac so characteristic of military infrastructures (and a stark contrast to the pot-holed and bumpy roads that one encounters everywhere else on the island).

By allowing such movement, the hole constitutes an informal infrastructure for migrants to enter spaces that would otherwise be out of reach—i.e. when its 'guardians' (the police, *Carabinieri*, military, etc. that man the centre) choose not to police it: 'They are usually only allowed to go out in winter and early spring,' Alessia told me, when we were standing on the port, observing hundreds of migrants being helped ashore by the coast guard on the opposite side of the basin. 'In summer, they typically keep them inside the camp, and *sbarchi* (migrant landings) like this one are usually carried out at night—so the tourists won't see them.'

In winter, though, the hole establishes a connection between the everyday spaces of Lampedusa's inhabitants and migrants from all over the Global South who have made it to this little rocky piece of Europe alive.[3] In the wake of a migrant landing, the piazza in front of the *Parrocchia di San Gerlando*, Lampedusa's parish church, is usually packed with groups of young, head-set wearing African men deeply immersed in the screens of their mobile phones. For several years, the church has offered freely accessible wi-fi, and migrants are thus able to use the church premises to get in touch with relatives and friends or simply kill time browsing the web. Apart from the small clusters of retired Lampedusan fishermen that spend most of their days chatting to each other and greeting familiar passers-by, migrants seem to be the only people who use the space for more than transit on regular weekdays. Also, the fact that migrants are present in large numbers in the middle of public space—in plain sight in one of Lampedusa's most central locations—highlights how their movement outside of the centre is completely tolerated by authorities; there is no need to sneak around or act surreptitiously in any way. I subsequently found out that the hole had been reported on (although in passing) not only in a few academic publications (e.g. Zagaria 2016, 199, Andersson 2019, 167, Bassi 2018, 348) but in big national news outlets such as *La Repubblica* (2019) and *La Stampa* (Anello 2018) as well. So if the hole is indeed a secret, it is not a very well-kept one.

Beyond the church piazza, one often encounters migrants in and around town, wandering about in the attempt to make time pass, or simply hanging out in conditions less stressful than those of the reception centre—for example the island's harbour, piazzas or bars. For this reason, my Lampedusan interlocutors have sometimes

referred to the hole in the fence as a 'safety valve' (*valvola di sicurezza*). This imagery of releasing built-up internal pressure evokes how the centre is often full significantly beyond its official capacity of approximately 500 (European Parliamentary Research Service 2018), and on more than one occasion, detained migrants have set the centre on fire, protesting against the often dire conditions they encounter (e.g. Anello 2011, 2018). Indeed, conditions within the centre have often been deemed highly questionable: frequent overcrowding, a range of violations, and generalised uncertainty appear to be more or less the order of the day (European Parliamentary Research Service 2018). A Sudanese migrant hanging out by the church put it this way: 'Lampedusa is still Libya,' a metaphor that should require no further elaboration.

A State of Ambiguity

In September 2015, Lampedusa's migrant reception centre officially became the EU's first so-called *Hotspot*.[4] A primary purpose of the Hotspot system, which comprises 10 migrant reception centres in Italy and Greece[5], is to swiftly identify and register incoming migrants in order to distinguish between migrants with a legitimate asylum claim and so-called 'bogus refugees' entering the European space (Tazzioli 2018, 2768). To this end, national authorities are routinely assisted by European agencies such as Frontex and Europol in gathering 'hard' biometric data such as fingerprints (European Commission 2015, 6). The identification process, however, also revolves around a qualitative assessment of parameters such as nationality, age, name, and motives for migrating, and because migrants are generally not trusted to reveal their true identities, an official 'expert screening' will eventually establish 'who' the migrants are (cf. Pollozek and Passoth 2018).

As such, the Hotspot system can be understood as an exercise in *legibility* (cf. Scott 1998, see also Kalir and Rozakou 2016, Pallister-Wilkins 2018), insofar as the collection and processing of data is aimed at ascribing a bureaucratically operational status to the incoming migrants (for a critical ethnographic perspective on whether this succeeds in practice, see e.g. Rozakou 2017). Drawing on fieldwork in and around the Hotspot on Lesbos in Greece, Silvan Pollozek and Jan Passoth have correspondingly conceptualised Hotspots as *logistical devices* that 'locat[e], sor[t], and detai[n] those who arrive at the hardened EU border,' effectively producing 'a data infrastructure for controlling, monitoring, and governing further movement' (Pollozek and Passoth 2018, 9). From this perspective, the Hotspots at the external borders of the EU do not in themselves appear aimed at the creation of a kind of impermeable 'Fortress Europe,' but rather at channeling and managing migration in an organised manner by establishing a reliable data infrastructure based on data doubles for migrants (cf. Pallister-Wilkins 2016, see also Bigo 2010). Rather than 'traditional' concepts of territoriality, this speaks to recent theorisations of physical security barriers as temporary chokepoints that facilitate the production of 'data that are often used, at a later time or in another place, to govern movement and wider (in)securities' (Pallister-Wilkins 2016, 158, see also Tazzioli and Garelli 2018).

Consequently, the fence around the Lampedusa Hotspot may well be understood as a technology that keeps migrants 'in' only to the extent required for gathering biometric and other forms of personal data—and being allowed to informally leave the centre through an unpoliced 'safety valve' is not necessarily in conflict with this objective, but may simply constitute a practical way of mitigating e.g. the problem of overcrowding.[6] From this angle, the hole in the fence constitutes a parallel to similar cases of everyday rule-bending in the Moria Hotspot on the Greek island of Lesbos reported by e.g. Katerina Rozakou—notably 'a hole in the barbed-wire fence' routinely used by journalists to gain access to the officially closed-off premises (2019, 68).

But even so, fences do remain closely linked to an aesthetics, or indeed *spectacle* (e.g. Larkin 2013, De Genova 2002, 2013), of enforced territory[7] (Wilson and Donnan 1999, Jones 2016, see also Kapferer 2010). Surely, the fences, road blocks, checkpoints, and barbed wire universally employed in the world's border zones are among the most tangible symbols of state sovereignty and territoriality (e.g. Wilson and Donnan 1999, Brown 2010). In the context of migration controls, it is particularly evident how demarcation technologies such as fences serve to classify both people and spaces[8] (Fassin 2011, Green 2013, De Genova 2002). Just consider the iconic images of African migrants attempting to scale the fences surrounding the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, or Victor Orban's infamous barbed wire fence intended to keep migrants on the 'Balkan route' out of Hungary. Elsewhere, Donald Trump's ambition of building a concrete wall on the US-Mexico border, or indeed the Israel-Palestine border wall, similarly testify to the immense symbolic potential of fencing in the contemporary political order.

But if fences ostensibly impose physical order along social lines (however contested) and vice versa (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Sibley 1995, Barth 1969, Jones 2016), the perforated fence around the Lampedusa Hotspot is of a much more ambivalent nature. The hole (when 'open' for passage that is) precisely seems to undermine the fence as a symbol of control and socio-spatial orderliness, leaving an impression of a political materiality in conflict with itself—and among the island's population, this kind of 'make-believe' territoriality activates ambiguities and insecurities (as the somewhat secretive atmosphere surrounding the refugee centre alluded to previously could also seem to suggest). As Salvatore Martello, mayor of Lampedusa and Linosa[9], put it upon his election in 2017:

> 'If you keep *Carabinieri* or police at the entrance gates, you cannot allow people to leave how and when they want through holes in the fence. For me, this is what having clear rules *(regole certe*) means […] it is pointless to have surveillance around the exits and then you see the migrants in pyjamas that roam Lampedusa at night or go to the beach' (Femiani 2017, my translation)

Martello's desire for 'clear rules' aligns with a broader uncertainty regarding the legal status of the migrants' ability to leave the centre through the hole. While some of my interlocutors strongly suspected that it would, in fact, be unlawful to physically detain migrants within the centre and that the hole in the fence is thus a literal legal loop-hole, others were convinced that 'according to the law, they cannot leave' (*per legge non*

possono uscire). Either way (this is not the place to make such legal assessments), a perforated fence seems antithetical to any concept of 'clear rules'—it is an inherently fuzzy arrangement and, as mayor Martello's quote also alluded to, it imparts a taste of facade by postulating enforcement where, in practice, there appears to be none.

But if enforcement is, at least in part, a spectacle, it is certainly an elaborate and expensive one. For more than a decade now, the island has served as a key location for the increasing enforcement of Europe's external borders in relation to third-country immigration (Cuttitta 2012). Since the mid-2000s, Lampedusa has gradually become a heavily militarised border hub, and all imaginable kinds of stationed military personnel have become a conspicuous component of the island's human landscape—to the explicit regret of many islanders. As Valentina, a self-employed tourist worker, noted on this process of militarisation:

> I think it really started about 2008 or 2009. I mean, in a way that we noticed it, before that it was more gradual; a few people today, a few more tomorrow. But it was awful in that period—for instance, if you wanted to take the plane to the mainland, it was not a given that you could bring your luggage with you, because there might be an overweight problem with all the military gear on the plane!

To my knowledge, no official sources are available concerning the number of soldiers on Lampedusa, and 'too many' is the most accurate answer that my Lampedusan interlocutors have been able to provide. And while not being able to bring luggage onto a mainland-bound plane may, in itself, come across as a nuisance at most, being constantly surrounded by armed forces is not without affective reverberations. Valentina elaborated:

> It is truly awful when you live in it. It is like being in a war, not one that is declared by the government, but an undeclared war, I don't know against who! It was really bad in 2011 [during the so-called Arab Spring] and later with the war in Libya … Because we had all these guns and rifles walking around—there was something in the air. With the military people on the island, military ships at sea, military helicopters, those planes, what are they called, Tornados? You know, they make this noise, like a 'bang!', and it scares the hell out of you!

The notion of an 'undeclared war' is strongly suggestive of insecurity and trepidation, but it also indicates an experienced lack of transparency, of not knowing exactly what is going on. Such an atmosphere of generalised violence and war that, simultaneously, seems to lack a clearly defined object, certainly highlights the fundamentally frightening properties of the state's capacity for realising death and destruction (e.g. Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015, Taussig 1992, Aretxaga 2005). At the same time, however, the excessive display of the state's violent potential clashes with a local perception of work-shy officials who cannot seem to be bothered to manage migration and the reception centre in a coherent manner. Indeed, what is the use of a fence if there is a man-sized hole in it?

Along these lines, many Lampedusans exhibit a rather condescending attitude towards the military presence on the island, as soldiers and other border workers (who are practically all stationed non-locals) are often talked about as lazy and too

busy enjoying the perks of Mediterranean island life to act as reliable state representatives. On an early weekday evening, for example, I was chatting to a couple of parents outside Lampedusa's children's library in the middle of town. Their children were inside the library, reading, drawing, or playing, and the two were waiting outside the entrance, patiently smoking their cigarettes. We touched upon the subject of militarisation, and a rather fascinating scene occurred: The two, a man and a woman, began listing all the forces and corps they could think of that were present on the island, then jokingly asking each other about the exact purpose of their presence: 'The airforce, what are they *doing* here?'. The reply would come swiftly: '*Niente*!' Nothing! 'What about the *Carabinieri,* then?' '*Niente!*'—'The *Finanza*, what do *they* do?' '*Cazzo!*' Fuck all! And so on and so forth with the navy, the state police, and a range of private-sector subcontractors—the state's hired hands that also operate within the migrant reception system.[10]

Civil Pragmatism in Everyday Encounters

However, despite everyday insecurities and a perceived lack of transparency, the two parents at the library would be unlikely to express such disdain to the soldiers directly. This kind of talk would be generally reserved for such (quasi-)private occasions, as meeting strangers with non-confrontational politeness in direct encounters seems to be the rule rather than the exception on Lampedusa. Such a consensus-seeking approach is not just mobilised in relation to soldiers, but to other kinds of strangers, too. I can certainly say that this is the case for anthropologists, but more importantly, it also applies to migrants to quite a significant extent.

Indeed, once migrants have left the Hotspot and have entered Lampedusa town through the hole in the fence, their presence is often dealt with by locals in accordance with what I term *civil pragmatism*—a standardised repertoire of ways to engage and exchange with strangers. When talking about *civility*, I refer specifically to how well-established collective norms pertaining to what is considered appropriate public behaviour[11] seem to prevail (Thiranagama *et al*. 2018). Indeed, 'making the everyday work' by avoiding conflict and upholding at least some superficial sociality in encounters with migrants seems to be a predominant concern. This attitude can, in turn, be considered *pragmatic* in the sense that it is largely unrelated to—and even provides a contrast to—the often polarised ideological positions that usually dominate public and political debate concerning migration (see also Whyte *et al*. 2019). The concept thus draws attention to the 'small politics' of everyday co-presence rather than the 'big politics' of national, or even European, struggles surrounding 'immigration' writ large (cf. Trundle 2012).

However, I am not suggesting that Lampedusans do not orient themselves toward such large-scale political debates, nor that anti-immigration sentiments are absent among Lampedusans. On the contrary, as Mimmo Zambito, Lampedusa's parish priest from 2013–2016 put it during one of our conversations, 'on Lampedusa, as in the parliaments, as in the bars and in the streets, the whole spectrum of interpretations is represented.' I do argue, though, that the application of civil pragmatism results in a

relative (not absolute, see for example Elbek 2020) absence of open displays of hostility—largely regardless of individual political orientations, and even if the influx of migrants does occasionally lead to a degree of apprehension for some islanders. So while one may at times overhear someone muttering complaints about those *maledetti clandestini* (damn immigrants) over a beer at the bar (or indeed on Facebook), acts of hostility in encounters with migrants seem quite rare indeed. As Nigel Thrift reminds us, 'sociality' should not necessarily be confused with 'liking'—but the alternative, however, is often collapse (2005).

In this regard, it is important to dwell on the fact that encounters between locals and migrants predominantly occur ephemerally and in public space, e.g. the piazza in front of the church or the island's streets, bars, and shops. In general, such public encounters typically carry expectations concerning 'appropriate' behaviour that serve as a regulatory framework for interaction (Valentine 2008, Smith and Davidson 2008)—and this appears to be very much the case on Lampedusa, too. For example, Gianluca, a local middle-aged fisherman described how he would normally rely on conventional measures of politeness when encountering migrants:

> So, I was taught that when you pass by someone in the street, you say 'good evening,' 'good morning,' 'good night,' even if I don't know you, and even if you don't care. This is what I have been taught to do. So if I make eye contact with migrants, I greet them. If they don't look at me, I would never stop and say, you know … I don't want to enter the privacy of another person. I treat them like other people, they don't need special behaviour from me.

Rather than substantial or 'deep' contact, public spaces have often been related to an ethics of what Goffman termed 'civil inattention' (1966)—a slight (often merely visual) recognition of the fact that 'we' are present in a shared space, and a corresponding exhibition of consideration towards the 'personal space' of others (see also Smith and Davidson 2008). This kind of consideration is explicit in Gianluca's quote, which also highlights the somewhat codified nature of the relation: migrants are not seen to need 'special behaviour'—what they often get, on the contrary, is standard(ised) behaviour.[12]

From Clandestini to Customers

Across Lampedusa town, shops and supermarkets visibly display signs at the entrance explaining—in Italian—that authorities have prohibited the sale of alcohol to *extra-communitari* (literally people from outside the EU, but implicitly referring to migrants). One evening, I incidentally found myself in a supermarket aisle next to a small group of Tunisian migrants who were interestedly scanning the wine shelves and appeared to be discussing the selection in Arabic. As if out of thin air, a supermarket employee emerged and approached the group. In a very polite fashion, pointing towards the sign that was just about visible from where we stood, she explained (quite slowly and in standard Italian rather than the local dialect, as if to underline her consideration towards the 'outsiders') that 'we are sadly not allowed to sell alcohol to you gentlemen. But, if you should be interested, we have a fine selection of non-alcoholic beers right here on the next shelf!' The Tunisians looked slightly puzzled but seemed to somehow understand the message; in any case, they exchanged

a few words among themselves, shrugged, and decided on a carton of what I believe was orange juice.

This completely mundane scene exemplifies how, in some situations, Lampedusan shopkeepers are required to enforce regulations on migrants' behaviour imposed by authorities and how this potential source of conflict may, in turn, be downplayed through measures of politeness. The supermarket situation evokes the potential and purpose of acts of civility to mitigate or avoid tension (e.g. Thiranagama *et al.* 2018), but it also specifically points to a further dimension of the Lampedusan-migrant relationship: i.e. how the hole in the fence has allowed migrants to occasionally transform from *clandestini* to customers in relation to local shopkeepers[13]—and paying customers are, of course, to be treated with polite consideration. Here, it is worthy of mention that Zachary Whyte *et al.* (2019) have observed a strikingly similar dynamic in relation to local perceptions of asylum centres in rural Denmark. In this context, asylum seekers become similarly incorporated into structures of mutuality and exchange precisely through economic contributions to local communities, thus allowing refugees to be cast not only as 'others,' but also occasionally as assets. Importantly, and very much in line with my argument in this article, the authors underline how, in the Danish case, the accommodating local attitude towards refugees should not be understood as particularly 'humanitarian' or open-minded, but rather as the result of everyday pragmatism shaped by specific economic and social interests (Whyte *et al.* 2019, 1965).

However, selling orange juice to migrants does not exactly constitute any Lampedusan shop's core business model—on the contrary, migrants on Lampedusa rarely carry much cash, so their contribution to the local economic circuit is relatively negligible. It is, though, not entirely non-existent, and one will often see migrants buying smaller items such as coffee at bars, some fruit from the carts of *fruttivendoli* that occupy many a street corner, a panino from a *tavola calda*, or a pack of cigarettes (sometimes with the assistance of a local resident, as one needs an Italian ID-card to use the vending machines outside of the *tabaccherie*'s opening hours). In this way, a minor additional cash-flow has been brought into the community through the hole in the fence, and some locals thus do make smaller profits off the presence of migrants. Some even explicitly advertise *for* migrants—I particularly noted a handwritten sign in French outside a bakery: *Every morning from 8 o'clock, we serve* chakchouka.[14] *Only €4.* The sign, of course, specifically targeted the many Tunisians that had arrived on Lampedusa in the course of the past few months, many of whom speak French for well-known historical reasons.

And while such small-time exchanges with migrants may not in themselves constitute a very valuable economic resource, everything counts in winter when the tourist business is dormant. In this regard, however, the economic contribution of soldiers and other border workers would seem to be somewhat more substantial, as they are usually stationed for extended periods of time and will generally have more money to spend, and some (though far from all) representatives of the 'hospitality industry,' restaurant and hotel owners in particular, benefit from their presence, often hosting larger squads of soldiers or police. Especially during the off-season, 'the border' thus seems to

have provided the local community with an additional source of income. And living largely off tourism, one might add, many Lampedusans are not exactly strangers to engaging in a service economy with 'outsiders' more generally—whether they are tourists, wear a uniform, or have snuck out through the hole in the fence.

But these economic benefits from 'the border' and the polite pragmatism it stimulates also remain underwritten by a sense of profound ambiguity. In addition to the affective consequences of the military presence described by Valentina, there is a tangible local concern that migration and militarisation are potentially harmful to the Lampedusan tourist industry. And with as many as 60,000 visitors a year, this sector is far more important for the local economy than the combined spending of a couple of hundred migrants, police officers, soldiers, journalists, and the occasional anthropologist. It is, after all, tourism that has allowed many Lampedusans to markedly heighten their living standards in the course of the past 30 years or so, having practically transformed the island from a poor and isolated outpost to a relatively well-to-do tourist destination—at least in comparison to many other historically and presently poor locations in Italy's southernmost periphery (see also Taranto 2016).

Fare Buon Viso a Cattivo Gioco: Downplaying Anxiety in Public

As I have already pointed out, the widespread application of civil pragmatism does not entail that negative or anxious sentiments in relation to migration are absent among Lampedusa's inhabitants—on the contrary, a proportion of islanders do feel substantial insecurity concerning the continuing influx of migrants. However, such concerns are typically downplayed in public. As Don Mimmo, the former parish priest, put it:

> 'None of those that come stay on the island, which can be a source of fear. Sometimes, the island's population grows by a fifth [i.e. if 1200 migrants arrive]. If anything, this can certainly cause some anxiety, and many simply grin and bear it (*fanno buon viso a cattivo gioco*)'

'To grin and bear it' is a figure of speech that aptly captures how tension very rarely surfaces in public. In January 2018, for example, a large number of Tunisian migrants were stuck on Lampedusa for an extended period of time. With the assistance of the church and a group of locally based political activists, the Tunisians had arranged a quiet, yet rather tense, demonstration in front of the church: some were hunger striking and a few had sown their lips in protest against forced fingerprinting and their indefinite detainment within the Hotspot. However, beyond the small circle of involved activists, there was very little visible local support for the cause. But just as importantly, no indication to the contrary, either. Together with Giovanni, a local fisherman, I walked by the church where the Tunisians were occupying the front stairs in protest. Giovanni explained that their presence had caused some local concern, a sense I had gotten from other informants as well. For Giovanni, the uncertainty was partially related to the demonstrators' being Tunisian:

> 'The Sub-Saharans behave better. The Tunisians … I don't want to say that they're criminals (*delinquenti*), but, every now and then, there is one that is a hothead (*ha la testa calda*). Those coming from Nigeria, Eritrea, Senegal … they are calmer'

Giovanni's antipathy towards Tunisians is really quite common among the Lampedusans I have come to know, and this differentiation of Tunisians vis-a-vis Sub-Saharan Africans is, I believe, difficult to separate from geography and historical context. Tunisia is a mere 60 miles from Lampedusa, and this proximity has resulted in a long history of rivalry between Lampedusan and Tunisian fishermen. Specifically, Lampedusan fishermen often complain about how their Tunisian counterparts encroach on fishing zones in Italian territorial waters, so 'there has always been some tension there,' as Giovanni put it. But just as importantly, the chaotic situation that occurred on Lampedusa in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring, when thousands of Tunisians found themselves stranded on the island to the detriment of the local tourist industry, is very likely to also have played a role in establishing a negative atmosphere around the presence of Tunisians on Lampedusa (cf. Elbek 2020).

But if the presence of demonstrating Tunisians caused concern, this was hard to detect immediately. Giovanni was completely calm and composed as we passed by the church, his tone of voice did not give any apprehension away, and the elderly fishermen on the benches of the church piazza were not visibly worried about the demonstration either. They were chatting to each other as always, only occasionally casting a glance at the Tunisians. In this regard, it deserves mention that migrants have very rarely committed serious infractions outside the centre: there have reportedly been a few episodes of break-ins into empty holiday homes by migrants seeking shelter, and some local women have felt threatened by the presence of numerous unknown men—but *niente di grave*, nothing serious, according to Giovanni. 'Still, it's good that we have the soldiers here, you know, just in case.'

This final comment of Giovanni's deserves specific reflection. While it may appear to run against the grain of what I have previously described as a generally negative perception of state authorities, I will suggest a slightly different interpretation. 'If push comes to shove,' as it were—in situations of particular tension and conflict, such as those that occurred in the wake of the Arab Spring—grinning and bearing it will only take one so far, and so the Lampedusans really have no choice but to rely on state intervention.[15] Experience, however, shows that such intervention is not necessarily a given; indeed, the chaotic situation that arose on the island when thousands of Tunisians stranded after having left their revolution-torn home country in 2011, was construed by many locals as the result of 'abandonment by the state' and has become something of a local trauma (Elbek 2020). As Giovanni and I walked past the church piazza, a squad of four or five *Carabinieri* were busy smoking cigarettes and attending to their mobile phones on the pavement next to the pensioners' benches.

'Just a Coffee': Charity Within Limits

So far, my story has provided a tempering of how Lampedusa has often been mythologised in public discourse as a place of unconditional welcome and hospitality for migrants (e.g. Friese 2014). Notably, Matteo Salvini, the former deputy prime minister for *Lega*, a right-wing party with a strong anti-immigration agenda, described Lampedusa as 'a symbol of anti-Salvinism' in a recent interview (Fraschilla 2019). 'They think

we have welcoming committees on every beach,' as Grazia, a hotel owner, expressed it with an ironic smile. Such portrayals of the island and its population have often been made with reference to a peculiarly exoticising notion of a 'fisherman's ethos of hospitality and aid to the shipwrecked' (Friese 2012, 72). This idea holds that Lampedusans, due to their maritime lifestyle, are predisposed to offer unconditional help to those in distress at sea and be more open and hospitable towards migrants than their compatriots elsewhere. When I discussed these representations with Valentina, she provided the following reflections:

> You know, those theories about … That because the people of the island come from fishing families, they have this philosophy, if someone is in danger at sea … Which is true! It is true! But okay, so it means that if someone has an accident in a street somewhere in a European city, someone is calling out for help, you don't stop? You don't care? You don't mind? You don't call an ambulance? You don't give some water if you have some? If you see someone in distress, you help. If you don't, well, you're a criminal.

In many ways, Valentina was stating the obvious. On Lampedusa as well as everywhere else, one may find oneself faced with a non-negotiable 'ethical demand' to act for the benefit of other people (Løgstrup 1956, see also Zigon 2007). And undoubtedly, the traffic of unseaworthy migrant boats in Lampedusa's surrounding waters have made such situations more common than in many other places, and Lampedusan fishermen have indeed saved migrants' lives at sea. However, once on solid ground, when nobody is in life-threatening danger, the state of play seems to be a lot less clear-cut. As Giovanni, who has aided more migrants in distress than he cares to remember, put it: 'At sea, you help, no questions asked. When you're ashore, things are up for discussion'. Consider, for example the following scene which should provide a glimpse of the limited, although not to be dismissed entirely, charitable engagement between locals and migrants in Lampedusa's public space.

Three young African men entered one of the many bars on Lampedusa's main street, Via Roma. One was wearing flip-flops, the other two were in worn-out sneakers. They approached Carlo, the bartender, who, it turned out, spoke a few words of rudimentary English. It quickly became clear from their conversation that the migrants wanted to borrow money, a request that Carlo firmly refused. He was, however, accommodating. He addressed the migrants as 'my friends' and attempted to strike up a little small-talk: 'where are you from?' and 'first time on Lampedusa?'. 'Somalia' and 'yes.'

Carlo allowed the migrants to sit at one of the tables without buying anything—a perfectly standard practice during the tourist off-season when business is slow, and bars resume their 'traditional' function as meeting points for islanders. Carlo soon approached the group, carrying a tray with three *tazzine* of espresso and some leftover pastries from the morning. The minuscule but steaming cups of coffee seemed to confuse the Somalians somewhat, but after a few moments' hesitation, one ventured a sip with his teaspoon. Visibly surprised by the intensity of the coffee, he resolutely picked up the sugar dispenser from the table, and more or less emptied it into the cup, then proceeding to eat the mixture of sugar and espresso with the spoon. His

companions, clearly equally unfamiliar with the concept of espresso, followed suit. When they got up from their chairs a little while later, one of the regular customers reached across the counter and grabbed another pastry which he threw to one of the migrants who effortlessly caught it before leaving with an awkwardly pronounced 'grazie' and a little smile.

This scene, which I observed from the next table, highlights how local charity towards migrants is very much characterised by its limits. Particularly, the way in which engaging in the kind of mutuality that lending out money would represent was unnegotiably out of the question, whereas a coffee and some half-stale baked goods were not, is instructive: a coffee-sized token of accommodation was just within the bounds of appropriate sociality.

Now, the bartender's giving away of coffee may be specifically contextualised in terms of the bar's participation in the *Caffè Sospeso*-network. The *caffè sospeso* (literally 'suspended coffee') is a custom that supposedly originated in Naples and has now become popularised across the country.[16] In its simplicity, it revolves around a practice in which a customer orders and consumes one coffee but pays for two. The unserved coffee is then 'suspended'—*sospeso*—and reserved for an unknown future customer who, for one reason or another, finds himself unable to pay for a coffee. It is a completely anonymous transaction, insofar as the giver does not know when or to whom the 'suspended' coffee is served. In a fairly recent piece, Giovanni da Col reflects on the *caffè sospeso* as a 'free gift of enjoyment and not utility or value' and, importantly in this context, a 'gesture that should not be mistaken for a charitable act' (da Col 2016, i). This is so because it is literally 'just a coffee' which carries neither nutritional nor economic value but is instead 'a superfluous icon of well-being and revitalization' (ibid.). The donation of soon-to-be-discarded cake could be seen to follow a similar logic of gesture rather than substantiality.

Such small gestures of friendly helpfulness—a free coffee, a pastry, a cigarette, or perhaps allowing migrants to use a phone or tablet to let relatives know that they have made it across the Mediterranean Sea in one piece, and so on—are, I suggest, common examples of friendly practices that should not necessarily be understood as a grand humanitarian project but rather as expressions of an ethos of maintaining peaceful co-existence in public space (cf. Valentine 2008, Thrift 2005). As Leonardo, a church worker, put it: 'The most racist Lampedusan has, at one point in their life, given something to the migrants.'

Conclusion

Leonardo's observation about 'the most racist Lampedusan' is a suitable stepping-stone to summarising the article's central ethnographic focus; namely how, in the realm of everyday face-to-face interactions between Lampedusans and migrants, connection and separation do not stand in a mutually exclusive relationship. Specifically, I have suggested that in spite of local ambiguities and insecurities surrounding the presence of migrants, everyday encounters are often managed and made sense of through

pragmatic co-presence rather grand political imaginaries and discourses—what I termed acts of *civil pragmatism*. This implies that local feelings of hostility toward migrants are typically downplayed in public space where most interactions occur. Such a reliance on politeness and friendliness, I argued, was especially evident in relation to small economic transactions between locals and migrants—for example in shops and bars—where the presence of migrants constitutes a possibility for some Lampedusans to gain a profit, however limited. The notion of civil pragmatism thus highlights how 'the local response,' rather than mirroring polarised political discourses concerning immigration, may revolve around a different set of everyday concerns that tie in with specific social and economic interests on the local level. In this sense, the hole in the fence may be considered not only an empirical point of departure for analysis, but a kind of 'ethnographic theory' of civil pragmatism as well.

At the same time, I have highlighted how the application of civil pragmatism is often permeated by an experienced absence of competent state management. I drew particular attention to the perforated fence as a spectacle of enforcement that gives rise to a local experience of official migration management efforts as insufficient and indifferent. However, it may be argued that the authorities' acceptance of the hole in the fence may itself indicate a similarly pragmatic attitude. Indeed, the hole—the centre's ostensible 'safety valve'—could well be interpreted as a literal and figurative loophole that serves to ease the everyday within a facility that is often faced with problems of overcrowding and otherwise questionable humanitarian conditions. In this regard, the hole can be seen as part of a broader tendency towards everyday pragmatic rule-bending within Europe's Hotspot system (e.g. Rozakou 2019).

On a closing note, by attending to the everyday minutiae of civil pragmatism, I have sought to provide an ethnographically rooted alternative to representations of Lampedusa as a front-line of the so-called 'refugee crisis.' Indeed, I will argue that the very semantics of crisis are ill-adapted to frame the sort of dynamic that I have described: if the notion of crisis implies, as for example Henrik Vigh has suggested, 'an intermediary moment of chaos where social and societal processes collapse upon themselves only to come to life after the crisis is overcome' (2008, 8), my ethnography would suggest that Lampedusa is not simply a site of crisis. While this is in no way to suggest that the humanitarian conditions that migrants encounter on Lampedusa and in Europe's southern periphery would not qualify as 'critical,' it seems that it is precisely the *persistence* rather than the collapse of well-established social norms that drive how many Lampedusans relate and respond to the island's transformation into a border hub.

Notes

1. Ruben Andersson has recently reported having similar difficulties locating the whereabouts of the centre which, 'like most migrant "reception" or detention facilities in Europe today, [is] rather hard to find' (2019, 167).
2. The work of cultural mediators, such as Aziz, revolves generally around easing interaction between migrants and Italian/European authorities.

3. The practice of allowing migrants to leave the centre constitutes a curious historical parallel to the penal colony that operated on Lampedusa from the early 1870s until the Fall of Fascism. Here, 'inmates' were not kept behind bars during the day, but allowed to leave the colony's premises (Taranto 2016)
4. The introduction of the Hotspot was essentially a Europeanised 'rebranding' of the island's already existing *centro di primo soccorso e accoglienza* (CPSA, first aid and reception centre) which had been operating on Lampedusa (under changing appellations and in different locations) since the late 1990s.
5. Lampedusa, Trapani, Pozzallo, Messina, and Taranto in Italy; Kos, Leros, Samos, Chios, and Lesbos in Greece. The Hotspots at the external EU border have a cumulative capacity of approximately 2,000 migrants (European Parliamentary Research Service 2018).
6. If anything, it is Lampedusa's remote geography rather than the flimsy fence around the Hotspot that keeps migrants from reaching the mainland (cf. Elbek 2020).
7. Since 'time immemorial,' physical barriers such as fences, walls, barricades, and ramparts have been universally employed by rulers to materialise claims to territorial control. Prominent historical examples of course include the Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall, and the ramparts and stone walls surrounding Europe's medieval cities (e.g. Jones 2016).
8. This is not to say that similar logics of fencing cannot be observed on other scales. The emergence of so-called gated communities are illustrative cases in point where the addition of walls and gates to the urban landscape encode class distinctions into the physical environment (Low 2001, 47). Hedges or fences between adjacent gardens in suburban residential areas or the barbed wire that marks and enforces the boundary between Old McDonald's farmland and that of his neighbour are other, yet more mundane, examples (Harvey 2017).
9. The municipality *(Il Comune di Lampedusa e Linosa*) is constituted by Lampedusa and the smaller neighbouring island Linosa.
10. An important exception to this generally negative image is the *Guardia Costiera*, the coast guard who are commonly seen to serve an actual and important function by providing search and rescue services — for migrants and local fishermen alike.
11. By talking about *civility*, I intend neither to indicate a facile ontological distinction between 'the state' and 'civil society' (e.g. Mitchell 1991) nor to imply a particular urban bourgeois worldview (e.g. Holston 2011). Rather, my usage of the term denotes how many Lampedusans seem to rely on collective norms pertaining to what is considered appropriate public behaviour (e.g. Thiranagama et al. 2018).
12. From this perspective, my argument is located in the vicinity of other studies from the Italian context that have dealt with notions such as *civiltà* (Silverman 1975) or *la bella figura* (e.g. Pipyrou 2014) — norms that in different ways relate to understandings of proper public conduct and self-presentation in relation to others.
13. The question of enforcement is tricky for shopkeepers that need to balance considerations of running their businesses and following the instructions of the authorities. Note, for example, how Tunisian fishermen employed in the Sicilian fishing fleet routinely buy beer when they land temporarily on Lampedusa to ship their catch to the mainland (see also Ben-Yehoyada 2017).
14. For the uninitiated, *chakchouka* is a North-African/Middle Eastern dish consisting of tomatoes, peppers, onions, and boiled eggs, which is often served for breakfast.
15. See also Koch (2018) on the simultaneity of mistrust in and dependence on the state in marginal places.
16. The *Rete del Caffè Sospeso* (Suspended Coffee Network) is an international grassroots collaboration that revolves around this particular custom (see www.retedelcaffesospeso.com).

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