



Thinking Lampedusa: border construction, the spectacle of bare life and the productivity of migrants

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Abstract

This article interrogates the relationship between the Italian island of Lampedusa and trans-Mediterranean migration. It explores how the construction of Lampedusa as a border zone has been implicated in the rise and fall in numbers of migrants reaching the island's shores over the last two decades. It proceeds to consider the appropriateness of interpreting death and detention on Lampedusa in terms of 'bare life'. While acknowledging how Giorgio Agamben's formulation of bare life has been problematized in relation to irregular migration and taking into account the frequent acts of migrants' political agency on the island itself, it is argued that the transformation of Lampedusa by the media and political establishment into a *spectacle* of bare life is not only instrumental to the functioning of migration management at Europe's southern border but is also constitutive of the subordinate position of migrants in Italian society and its labour market.

Keywords: Mediterranean migration, borders, Giorgio Agamben, bare life, political agency, migrant labour.

1. Lampedusa 3 October 2013

On the early morning of 3 October 2013 a boat carrying approximately 500 Eritreans, Somalians and Ghanaians sunk a few hundred metres off the coast of the small southern Italian island of Lampedusa leading to the deaths of 366 people. It was the worst maritime disaster in the Mediterranean Sea since the Second World War. Passengers had set fire to a blanket to attract attention, which had caused the boat to burn and rapidly sink. While the dead were given honorary Italian citizenship, the survivors were automatically charged with the criminal offence of illegal entry, despite their eligibility to apply for asylum, and were detained in the island's holding centre. From the testimonies of survivors it transpired that their plight had begun long before embarkation on the North African coast: following dangerous journeys across the Sahara Desert, many had experienced detention in Libya where some had been subject to rape and beatings. Meanwhile, the Tunisian captain of the boat who also survived was arrested and charged with manslaughter. A week later another boat plying the same route sunk in Italian territorial waters killing over two hundred mainly Syrian nationals.

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3 During the last decade Lampedusa, Italy's most southerly piece of territory, 205km off the
4 coast of Sicily, has come to be associated with migrant deaths and irregular landings and, in turn,
5 with the competing yet complimentary political discourses of humanitarianism and securitization.
6 The scale of the disaster on 3 October 2013 temporarily propelled Lampedusa to the centre of
7 global media attention and European political debate. As customarily occurs in the wake of such
8 events, much of the blame was placed on the trafficking organizations that were seen to exploit the
9 desperation of people seeking to enter Europe. On 14 October 2013, the government launched
10 'Mare Nostrum', a military patrol operation in the Mediterranean with the claimed goal of
11 preventing further tragedies, although it was clear from the outset that this also served to improve
12 the detection of illegal migrants and hence further safeguard Europe's borders.
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19 Two months later a national television report showing migrants (including survivors of
20 October's shipwreck) stripped naked and being sprayed for scabies in the detention centre of
21 Lampedusa resurrected public consternation. While members of the government duly expressed
22 their disgust at the images and the European Union threatened to withdraw financial support for
23 Italy's migration management, the secretary of the Northern League, Matteo Salvini, exclaimed
24 unapologetically: "nobody invited them: if they don't like it here, they can go home" (*la Repubblica*
25 19 December 2013). However, irrespective of the disparate responses to 3 October shipwreck and
26 the anti-scabies scandal, few within institutional politics or the mainstream media went as far as to
27 interrogate the policies that lay at the root of crossings and detention.
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34 This article explores the representation of inhumane conditions typically associated with
35 Lampedusa. Over the last decade events on the island have played a fundamental role in shaping
36 public discourses about migration, in contrast to the 1990s and early 2000s when, against a
37 backdrop of legislative changes, political and media attention was primarily focused on the growing
38 presence of migrants in Italy's major cities and the irregular crossings between Albania and Puglia
39 (Dal Lago 2009). Drawing on recent research on Lampedusa (Andrijasevic 2006, 2010; Campesi
40 2011; Cuttitta 2012), we examine how the island over the last twenty years has been transformed
41 into a border zone and, in doing so, we challenge the common image of a remote outpost that by
42 geographical accident has become a 'natural' destination for irregular migrants arriving from
43 Africa. Rather, Lampedusa needs to be understood as a strategic node in the national and
44 supranational governance of migration that has produced the circumstances under which crossings,
45 landings and deaths take place. We proceed to consider the conditions facing migrants on and
46 around Lampedusa in terms of 'bare life'. In doing so, we acknowledge the ways in which Giorgio
47 Agamben's formulation of the term (Agamben 1998) has been problematized in relation to irregular
48 migration (Walters 2008; Owens 2009; Lee 2010) and take into account the frequent acts of
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migrants' political agency on the island itself. While it might capture the ways in which border regimes strip certain individuals of their political and legal identity, bare life is not proposed as a conceptual foil to critique the relationship between migrants and Lampedusa. Rather, we suggest it is more useful to understand how the semblance of a naked human existence on the island is strategically evoked by the media and political establishment. The transformation of Lampedusa into a *spectacle* of bare life is not only instrumental to the functioning of migration management at Europe's southern border but is also constitutive of the subordinate position of migrants in Italian society and its labour market. Indeed, the very fact that many migrants *get through* Lampedusa, albeit after periods of detention and finding themselves without documents or, increasingly, with a precarious legal status, urges us to question whether the deadly and degrading conditions on Lampedusa reflect a state of exception replicated in border zones and detention centres across Europe or whether they might actually signal the antechamber to a more generalized 'European apartheid' (Balibar 2004).

2. The construction of Lampedusa as a border zone

Any analysis of the relationship between Lampedusa and migration needs to begin with the recognition that only a small proportion of irregular migrants enter Italy via its maritime borders, while the majority enter the country regularly but overstay their visa or permit.ⁱ However, it is those who arrive by sea who receive the most political and public attention. The metamorphosis of Lampedusa into a destination for irregular migrants during the 1990s was a corollary of the progressive tightening of policies that have reduced legal channels of migration (Andrijasevic 2006).ⁱⁱ The root cause is to be found in the 1990 Martelli Law: before this law introduced visas for North Africans and sanctions for airlines and ferry companies carrying passengers without correct entry documents there were no 'illegal' crossings of the Mediterranean Sea. Nevertheless, during the 1990s there were relatively few crossings of the Straits of Sicily. The principal sea route until 2002 was in fact across the southern Adriatic Sea. The few crossings to Lampedusa in the early 1990s were mostly self-organized and migrants rarely stayed on the island for more than a day before being transported, often at the expense of the island's public administration, to Sicily (Cuttitta 2012).

With a steady increase in landings and due to the lack of suitable accommodation on the island, a reception centre was opened in 1996 inside the island's airport with a capacity for 186 individuals.ⁱⁱⁱ Following the introduction of administrative detention with the 1998 Turco-Napolitano Law, the centre would effectively be turned into a detention centre where people arriving on the island could be detained up to thirty days. Over the next fifteen years the official

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3 status of the facility would waver between ‘detention’ and ‘reception’ depending on circumstances
4 (such as the number and origin of arrivals), thus it will be referred to here as ‘reception/detention
5 centre’. Overcrowding in the centre would worsen with the passing of the 2002 Bossi-Fini Law
6 which extended the maximum length of detention to sixty days and often resulted in between 600
7 and 700 individuals being detained at the same time (Cuttitta 2012, 81). Moreover, the Berlusconi
8 government replaced the volunteer-run structure of the centre with a management regime of paid
9 officials. Migration on the island now literally meant business: public funds flowed to sustain the
10 infrastructure which in turn spawned a number of local satellite economies as well as a drastic rise
11 in military and police personnel on the island (Sanfilippo and Scialoja 2010).
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18 Concentrating the development of detention facilities on Lampedusa sealed the island’s
19 function and reputation. It is important to understand that the majority of migrants disembarking on
20 Lampedusa after 2002 did not arrive on their own accord or by chance but were *made to disembark*
21 on the island. Naval patrols now intercepted migrants’ boats up to 100 nautical miles from
22 Lampedusa and diverted them towards the island, thus purposely preventing them from reaching the
23 coast of Sicily, which was less equipped with detention and reception facilities and where it was
24 possible to evade controls (Cuttitta 2012). Moreover, during the same period Lampedusa became an
25 operational base for deportations to North Africa as well as a regional hub for supranational
26 organizations such as UNHCR, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and Frontex,
27 the European Union agency responsible for external border security (Andrijasevic 2006). In other
28 words, it would be more accurate to view Lampedusa at the centre of a growing web of controls
29 rather than as Italy’s southerly outpost that had ‘inevitably’ become exposed to irregular migration
30 from Africa.
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39 Between 2003 and 2008 Lampedusa accounted for seventy-five per cent of all migrants
40 stopped at Italy’s maritime borders and during the peak year of 2008 30,659 people found
41 themselves reaching the island’s shores (Cuttitta 2012, 26). However, the number of arrivals fell
42 abruptly to less than 3,000 in the following year and to under 500 in 2010 (ibid.). The fluctuation in
43 numbers was in part determined by Italy’s diplomatic relations with Tunisia and Libya, which
44 during the period were reshaped around the issue of irregular migration. Until the early 2000s the
45 majority of migrants arrived from Tunisia and were largely of North African origin. At the request
46 of the Italian government and in exchange for financial support, the Tunisian government first
47 agreed in 1998 to readmit deported Tunisians and other African nationals and then in 2004
48 introduced stringent controls along its coastline, which compelled would-be migrants to shift their
49 focus to Libya. During the same period, bilateral agreements were reached with Libya but with
50 different results due to Colonel Gaddafi’s decision to exploit the issue of illegal migration (by
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3 intermittently increasing and decreasing border controls) as a means to extract greater concessions
4 from Italy and, through Italian pressure, also Europe. So while the 2004 readmission agreement,
5 which coincided with the lifting of the EU embargo on Libya, did not lead to any marked drop in
6 embarkations, after Italy agreed in 2008 to pay reparations for the devastation caused during its
7 colonial period, there was a notable fall in arrivals on Lampedusa.
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11 After 2008, Lampedusa also became the operational base for Italy's 'push-back' policy
12 whereby potential refugees were intercepted at sea and immediately returned to Libya before any
13 application for asylum could be made, thus breaking the principle of non-refoulement (Bialasiewicz
14 2012).^{iv} A government proposal to turn Lampedusa into an asylum process centre for those who
15 managed to reach the island was instead shelved due to practical difficulties and protests from
16 NGOs, migrant detainees and the local population. This was but one extreme example of what was
17 already a reality: for migrants Lampedusa had essentially become detached from the rest of Italy.
18 The island was no longer the most southerly point of the country but a border zone where detained
19 migrants were considered to be outside Italian territory. As a result of the marked drop in arrivals
20 and with migrants now detainable for a maximum of eighteen months, the Berlusconi government
21 politically exploited the relative calm on Lampedusa in 2009 and 2010 to transmit the image of
22 effective border controls and 'zero immigration' (Cuttitta 2012, 104–5)
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31 The Tunisian Revolution and the Libyan Civil War in 2011 and the subsequent suspension
32 of the collaboration of these countries in border patrols in the Mediterranean led to a sharp rise in
33 landings on Lampedusa and precipitated a crisis of the EU and Italian border regime.^v The arrival of
34 Tunisians during the spring of 2011 led the Italian government to issue emergency permits on the
35 proviso that Tunisian authorities resumed coastal patrols but also on the premise that these migrants
36 would inevitably migrate to France. This in turn provoked a showdown with the Sarkozy
37 government which threatened to suspend Schengen agreements regarding free travel within the EU.
38 In other words, events in Lampedusa in the wake of the Arab Spring exposed the precarious
39 foundations of a coordinated European migration policy (Campesi 2011) and underlined, as Etienne
40 Balibar has noted, that during moments of international crisis, responses inevitably tend to be acted
41 out at a national level (Balibar 2013).
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49 In February 2011, following the resumption of crossings and the rapid overcrowding on
50 Lampedusa, the Berlusconi government declared a 'North Africa Emergency' which delegated
51 extraordinary powers to the Civil Protection to manage the situation. During the emergency's two-
52 year duration over 1.5 billion euros were allocated to fund makeshift reception centres and hotel
53 accommodation distributed across Italy for 21,000 asylum seekers who had passed through
54 Lampedusa as well as three temporary detention facilities on the southern mainland (Sasso and
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3 Sironi 2012). As in the past, a state of emergency was used on Lampedusa as an ad-hoc measure to
4 bypass ordinary political procedures and release public money (a sizeable proportion of which was
5 squandered by third sector organizations overcharging for their services).^{vi} On this occasion
6 Lampedusa exposed serious inadequacies in asylum policy and services at a national level, to the
7 extent that in late 2011 German courts overruled the 2003 Dublin Regulation to deny the
8 deportation of asylum seekers back to Italy. In fact, with the official end of the emergency in
9 February 2013 and the immediate closure of accommodation across Italy, many homeless ex-
10 Lampedusans have since moved to cities in Germany, where on finding themselves in legal limbo,
11 have publicly campaigned for the right to access local services. Groups naming themselves
12 ‘Lampedusa in Hamburg’ and ‘Lampedusa in Berlin’ provide a vivid sign of how migrants have
13 taken a stand against the EU migration regime, but also about how the border of Lampedusa
14 reverberates across Europe.^{vii}

25 **3. Lampedusa and bare life: an appropriate analogy?**

26 The production of Lampedusa as a border zone is directly implicated in the dehumanized conditions
27 that face undocumented migrants attempting to enter Italy and Europe by sea and their subsequent
28 detention on land. Over the past decade, numerous critical scholars have drawn on Giorgio
29 Agamben’s conceptualization of bare life (Agamben 1998) to interpret the political dynamics of
30 irregular migration (Rajaram and Grundy-Warr 2004; Schinkel 2009). According to Agamben, it is
31 the separation between bare life and political existence, rather than the Schmittian categories of
32 friend and foe, which lies at the foundation of Western politics. Bare life is personified by the
33 ancient figure of *homo sacer* who, by being excluded from the sacred realm and the protection of
34 law, could be killed with impunity. The originary activity of sovereign power is the ban: the
35 capacity to suspend law in the state of exception. The state of exception *captures* bare life outside
36 the juridical order, excluding it from the category of citizen while subjecting it to biopolitical
37 intervention. As such, bare life illuminates the paradoxical structure of sovereign power: for what
38 ‘seems to be located at the very margin of politics, turns out to be the solid basis of a political body
39 that decides not simply over the life and death of human beings, but who will be recognized as a
40 human being at all’ (Lemke 2005, 5). In particular, Agamben’s discussion of refugees and the space
41 of the camp, which draws heavily on the work of Hannah Arendt, has caught the imagination of
42 critical migrant scholars. During the twentieth century it was the refugee who revealed bare life to
43 be ‘the secret presupposition of the political domain’ by ‘bringing to light the difference between
44 birth and nation’ (Agamben 1998, 131) while ‘the camp’ today represents the biopolitical paradigm
45 of the West where the state of exception has become the rule (ibid., 168–69).

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3 According to a cursory reading of Agamben, it follows that migrants who perish during
4 border crossings are reduced to bare life insofar as the liminal legal space through which they move
5 – be it the sea or the desert – provides ‘a moral alibi’ that allows authorities to deny responsibility
6 for any casualties (Doty 2011). In fact, the 3 October shipwreck was typically blamed on the
7 criminal operations of the traffickers, even if the boat’s captain narrowly escaped drowning.
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9 Meanwhile, the hosing down of naked bodies during the anti-scabies incident provided a
10 momentary glimpse inside the otherwise concealed and impregnable reception/detention centre.
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12 Death and survival in Lampedusa thus overlap: the ‘lucky’ arrivals cannot expect more than bare
13 life. Lampedusa also appears to configure a multidimensional space of exception: it is both a border
14 zone that straddles Europe and Africa as well as the setting for administrative detention facilities.
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16 Moreover, the specific geography of a remote island compounds the sense of extraordinary
17 confinement and minimized life, and as such Lampedusa recalls the symbolic and actual roles
18 played by Nauru, Manus and Christmas Island in Australia’s ‘border enforcement archipelago’
19 (Mountz 2011).^{viii}

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26 However, a perfunctory application of Agamben’s philosophical discussion of sovereign
27 power and bare life to interpret the relationship between migration and Lampedusa raises some
28 immediate problems. First and foremost, a preoccupation with processes of exclusion and
29 dehumanization risks constructing migrants as ‘passive, almost helpless beings’ (Walters 2008,
30 188). Roxanne Lynn Doty, for instance, argues that migrants who succeed in crossing the dangerous
31 US-Mexico border are at the same time refusing to be captured in the state of exception of the
32 desert and to be consequently relegated to bare life. ‘Spaces of exception – she suggests – are
33 always incomplete with numerous fissures and cracks that hold the possibility of letting in some
34 light, however dim and wavering that light may be’ (Doty 2011, 610). Even in the case of death, as
35 in the 3 October disaster, discourses about inhumanity tend to cancel out the autonomous decisions
36 taken by people when embarking on a migratory project and their calculation of potential perils.
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38 Many critics have also identified instances of political resistance even in the most degrading of
39 conditions, such as the act of lip sewing by migrants in detention (Edkins and Pin-Fat 2005; Isin
40 and Rygiel 2007; Owens 2009). Various terms have been devised, such as ‘abject cosmopolitanism’
41 (Nyers 2003), ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008) and ‘illegal citizens’ (Rigo 2010), to
42 recognize the active ways in which irregular migrants shape the political order despite their position
43 outside the formal realm of law. The reception/detention centre on Lampedusa has been the setting
44 for a number of protests against prolonged detention and deportation which have resulted in the
45 transfer of detainees to the Italian mainland and, following a fire in September 2011, to the
46 facility’s temporary closure. It is also important to note that the anti-scabies scandal only emerged
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3 after a Syrian detainee secretly filmed the hose downs on his mobile phone.

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5 Other scholars have argued for the need to move beyond the binary scheme between bare
6 life and political resistance to draw attention to more mundane instances of recalcitrance that,
7 according to Charles T. Lee (2010) who discusses insubordinate practices of undocumented
8 domestic workers in private households, can potentially rewrite the hegemonic cultural script of
9 liberal citizenship. Again, one could point to examples on Lampedusa such as the moments of
10 socialization with locals in bars during the intermittent periods when migrants have been able to
11 exit or escape from the reception/detention centre. The anthropologist Gianluca Gatta describes an
12 encounter with two Eritreans in 2005 who not only had returned to Lampedusa after receiving their
13 documents but had gone to greet compatriots disembarking at the port with packets of cigarettes
14 (2012, 35). Their transgressive presence on the same jetty where they first came ashore rebuts the
15 state of submission that is typically projected onto migrant bodies when they first arrive on the
16 island.
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19 Arguably, any subversive moment is easily contained and neutralized on Lampedusa. In
20 January 2009 Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi belittled the demonstrations by migrants who had
21 taken flight onto the island's streets to protest severe overcrowding, retorting that the migrants were
22 perfectly entitled to go out for a beer given that they were not being held in a concentration camp
23 (*La Repubblica*, 24 January 2009). Patricia Owens argues that an act of defiance such as lip-sewing
24 can form a basis for a new politics but only 'if it is acted upon and talked about over and over again;
25 if, in other words, *bare life* is repudiated and a new worldly community is formed around resistance
26 to injustice: that is, when individuals *begin to create a public space* in-between them' (2009, 577–
27 78, original emphasis). In response to Owens, initiatives such as the drawing up of the Charter of
28 Lampedusa by migrant rights activists on the island in February 2014^{ix} and the campaigns of former
29 Lampedusa detainees in Germany offer the glimpse of emergent public spaces that intentionally
30 challenge the idea of bare life on Lampedusa.
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33 Besides the question of migrants' agency, criticisms have also been leveled at the way in
34 which Agamben's reading of the camp as a state of exception has been mechanically adopted to
35 interpret border politics and administrative detention. First, it needs to be reiterated that the
36 transformation of Lampedusa into a border zone is not the work of a single sovereign state power
37 but the upshot of a complex assemblage of governmental (Italian, European and third country) and
38 non-governmental actors engaged in migration management. Second, Lampedusa must be
39 considered not an isolated point on the edge of Europe but integral to an ever-widening migration
40 regime that has reorganized European space and citizenship (Andrijasevic 2010). As already noted,
41 what happens in Lampedusa can have repercussions in a neighbourhood of a northern German city.
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3 Finally, the detention facility on Lampedusa cannot be understood as an apparatus of power that
4 permanently captures migrants on the outside of the polity, but a node in a complex system of
5 borders that possesses a fundamental temporal function. In other words, together these borders can
6 slow down or accelerate mobility, filtering migrants into society and onto the labour market through
7 a process of ‘differential inclusion’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 148–50, 157–66).
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11 The issues of agency and the governmentality of borders raise important caveats when
12 attempting to make sense of cataclysmic events such as the 3 October shipwreck. However, there is
13 also a tendency to dismiss outright the idea of bare life as devoid of analytical acumen. Agamben’s
14 formulation is more nuanced than many critics appear to make out. It does not exist as the polar
15 opposite to the political but is something that ‘modern democracy...shatters [and]
16 disseminates...into every individual body, making it into what is at stake in political conflict’
17 (Agamben 1998, 124). Thus, to identify the *homo sacer* in any one figure, be it the refugee or the
18 incarcerated enemy combatant, amounts to reification because, ultimately, we all ‘appear virtually
19 as *homines sacri*’ (ibid., 111). Nicholas De Genova (2012), who has written extensively on migrant
20 ‘illegality’ and deportation, has recently proposed bare life as a foundational concept for a radical
21 anthropological inquiry. According to De Genova, bare life is never true of human existence but a
22 political fiction because the ‘human animal is inextricably a social animal’ (ibid., 133). What is
23 crucial to appreciate in Agamben’s account, De Genova argues, is that ‘state power requires and
24 conjures into being precisely this fictive human beast...as a necessary premise for the authorization
25 of its own sovereignty...[T]he matter in hand is not to go hunting for convincing exemplars of an
26 “authentic” bare life, but rather to recognize [it] as the defining horizon toward which we are
27 always-already unrelentingly driven, albeit unevenly and unequally in each particular instance’
28 (ibid.). In other words, bare life signals a potentiality that is continually summoned by political
29 powers in the pursuit of partisan goals.
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45 **4. *The Drowned and the Saved: bare life and the representation of migrant bodies***

46 In this essay, bare life is understood as a *public spectacle* that is functional to the management of
47 Italy’s southernmost border and which shadows migrants throughout their stay in Italy. This is not
48 to deny the appalling conditions that migrants face both en route to and on Lampedusa: rather it is
49 to underline how these conditions are exploited by governmental and non-governmental actors to
50 affirm a less than human existence. Lampedusa operates as the ideal stage to naturalize the
51 distinction between the taken-for-granted, politically qualified life of the citizen and the debased
52 and desperate existence of the migrant. The spectacularization of bare life legitimizes the
53 complimentary approaches of securitization and humanitarian intervention that are closely allied in
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3 the policing of borders. The former implies that migrants must be restricted from accessing political
4 space through their interception and push-back at sea or their detention on Lampedusa. The latter
5 implies that migrants must be saved and accompanied to the border otherwise they risk a death for
6 which no one can be held responsible. As we will show, the harnessing of bare life to produce a
7 Janus-faced image of the migrant as both a threat and a victim has effects that extend far beyond
8 Lampedusa.
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13 Following the 3 October shipwreck, the Italian and international media was dominated for a
14 number of days by accounts and images of African migrants reduced to a pure biological state.
15 Video footage showed the ‘drowned’ as bodies floating on the sea’s surface, being hauled out of
16 the water or lined up on the jetty. The consideration and piety usually reserved to victims of a
17 disaster vanished in the case of those who had failed to reach Lampedusa.
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21 The ‘saved’ were instead portrayed grabbing at life jackets through the slicks of fuel,
22 disembarking the coast guard launch, queuing for food or simply staring at the sea. A clear
23 hierarchical distinction was established between rescuers and survivors. In his statement to the
24 Italian parliament, Interior Minister Angelo Alfano duly expressed his horror at the tragedy before
25 commending the “kind-hearted Italians” who had spent hours saving castaways, thanking local
26 administrations in Sicily for the offer of plots in their cemeteries and proposing, as others had done
27 in the past, Lampedusa for the Nobel Peace Prize.^x The ‘saved’ had no clear status: they were not
28 immediately recognizable as either economic migrants or asylum seekers. Instead they found
29 themselves suspended in limbo on a small island which Alfano in the same speech defined,
30 somewhat tactlessly, as “the new Checkpoint Charlie between the North and South”.
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39 The process of dehumanization resumed a month later when Italian newspapers reported the
40 judicial inquiry into the shipwreck. It was revealed that many survivors had been raped and tortured
41 during detention in Libya before commencing their crossing to Lampedusa. Italian prosecuting
42 judge Maurizio Scalia stated that ‘migrants were seized in the desert and taken to what might be
43 termed a holding centre but what I would call a concentration camp because what took place there
44 conjures up painful memories from the past’ (Sky TG24, 8 November 2013). Although it was
45 already common knowledge that European-bound migrants were often subject to violence in Libya,
46 the 3 October disaster served to generate a more uninterrupted vision of brutality.
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52 Reports about the anti-scabies incident on 17 December followed in the same vein. Little
53 was made of the act of insubordination committed by the Syrian who filmed the scene: attention
54 instead focused, perhaps unsurprisingly, on the brutalization of migrants. While the centre-left
55 newspaper *La Repubblica* made a point of interviewing the video’s author the following day, its
56 initial reports were more concerned to stress how the ‘images recall[ed] the dramatic situations
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3 endured in Nazi concentration camps' (*La Repubblica*, 17 December 2013). Thus, in terms of the
4 media's own representation, Lampedusa and the Libyan Desert were not geopolitically partitioned
5 but embroiled in the same symbolic space. The point is not that references may eventually be made
6 to migrants' resistance but that bare life functions here as the 'primary definition' (Hall et al. 1978)
7 that frames public and political narratives of the migratory experience.
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11 This evocation of bare life contrasts markedly to the dominant media representation of
12 migration during the 1990s and early 2000s. In his influential book *Non-persone*, Alessandro Dal
13 Lago (1999) demonstrated how the Italian press typically constructed migrants as public enemies
14 through tautological claims about fear and marginalization that invariably rested upon the assertions
15 of 'moral entrepreneurs', such as members of neighbourhood associations, who sought to rouse an
16 otherwise passive and ignorant public opinion. The circumstances in which Dal Lago wrote his
17 study have, however, notably changed. First, Dal Lago identified the criminalization of migrants as
18 a key interpretative frame that reflected broader contemporary debates about public security.
19 Second, representations of migrants were understood to be targeted exclusively at an Italian public
20 caught up in ongoing debates over the reform of immigration legislation. Third, and perhaps most
21 significantly, despite regular concerns about illegal crossings across the southern Adriatic Sea, the
22 constant focus of media attention was on the presence of migrants in Italian cities.
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26 In the wake of the successful implementation of restrictive migration policies, public
27 attention has increasingly shifted away from Italy's metropolitan centres to its external borders.
28 Migratory flows continue to be interpreted as an invasion and a potential threat to public order but
29 these representations have become interwoven, often very tactically, with discourses about
30 victimization and humanitarian relief that were certainly less prominent during the 1990s. For
31 example, Paolo Cuttitta has meticulously charted how successive Italian governments over the last
32 decade have used Lampedusa as a stage to promote tough-but-humane approaches to migration
33 management, even when then this risked backfiring after an unexpected increase in arrivals (2012,
34 91–111). The power of this twenty-square-kilometre rock in the southern Mediterranean lies
35 precisely in its ability to *contain* and *shape* much of the national news about migration.
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39 The increasing currency of humanitarian rhetoric was starkly apparent during the crisis
40 triggered by the Arab Spring. On declaring the 'North Africa Emergency' in February 2011, former
41 Interior Minister, Roberto Maroni – who was normally in the habit of talking tough on illegal
42 migration – spoke of a humanitarian crisis and pleaded for a European 'Marshall Plan' to support
43 Italy. Two months later, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi likened the migrants arriving from
44 Tunisia and Libya to a 'human tsunami'. The evocation of natural cataclysms in relation to
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3 migration was nothing new but this was now used by the Italian government to justify exceptional
4 measures on both humanitarian and security grounds (McMahon 2012).
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6 The spectacle of bare life on Lampedusa does not simply transmit to the Italian public
7 simultaneous messages of humanitarianism and security. It is also aimed at a migrant audience.
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Cuttitta makes a similar point in relation to the representation of Lampedusa as a border zone:
'migrants in Italy...are also observers of the spectacle. They are primarily targeted with the various
securitarian messages that serve as warnings about what could happen to them' (2012, 92). The
dramatic events on and around Lampedusa constitute a permanent threat for the 'saved'. At the very
most, for those who manage to leave the island and acquire legal status (usually in the form of
temporary humanitarian protection), the spectacle of bare life reassures them of what they no longer
are. But even for those who never set foot on the island, Lampedusa serves as a mnemonic of a
collective past and a premonition that what takes place within its distant boundaries (i.e. detention
and deportation) could still befall any migrant.

5. The shadow of bare life and the productivity of migrants

28 The spectacle of bare life is therefore understood as functional beyond the immediate confines of
29 Lampedusa and the specificities of border policing. If borders are to be understood not simply as
30 lines of exclusion but as productive of labour power through processes of filtering and
31 differentiation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 19), how might the mobilization of bare life on the
32 border of Lampedusa contribute to shaping the trajectory of migrants on the labour market?
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36 The notion that conditions on Lampedusa represent the antechamber for migrants'
37 subordinate position in Italian society has become somewhat of a commonplace, not only among
38 radical scholars and activists but also among mainstream journalists. Clearly the reasons for making
39 such a connection can be very different. So, for example, on the eve of the drawing up of the
40 Charter for Lampedusa, Sandro Mezzadra (2014) commented in the independent communist daily *il*
41 *manifesto*: 'The rituals of degradation...to which migrants are subjected in the island's 'reception
42 centre' tell us of the daily conditions in the innumerable detention facilities in Europe and on its
43 borders. These rituals of degradation also prepare migrants for the degradations and discriminations
44 that constitute 'normality' in Italy and in Europe, both in work and in society'. Meanwhile, the
45 journalist Aldo Cazzullo (2013), writing in the wake of 3 October shipwreck for the conservative
46 daily *Corriere della Sera*, exclaims: 'the traffic of human flesh across the Straits of Sicily has to be
47 absolutely stopped...The flow of desperate individuals ready for anything is a drop in the sea of
48 African poverty, but is precious fuel for the illegal and criminal economy and the mafias who
49 control vast chunks of territories in Italy'.
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3 On the one hand, Mezzadra sees Lampedusa as a crucial node in a border regime that is
4 replicated not only in detention centres but also in workplaces across Europe. On the other hand,
5 Cazzullo laments that the traffic of bare life to Lampedusa provides fodder for the black economy,
6 something that can only be resolved by stemming the flow of migrants. At their core exist two
7 antithetical ideas about Lampedusa as a border: on the one hand the productive role of Lampedusa
8 with respect to the governance of migration and the multiplication of labour, on the other
9 Lampedusa as an inevitable bastion in migration control, albeit one that requires a more
10 humanitarian approach.
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13 Our argument here is that bare life is neither the natural consequence of a state's prerogative
14 to police borders, as Cazzullo would have it, nor should it simply be rejected as an ontological issue
15 that is irrelevant to the border's capacity to produce and reproduce labour power, as Mezzadra has
16 argued elsewhere (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 148). On the contrary, the mobilization of bare life
17 needs to be understood as an active component in the very productivity of borders.
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20 First of all, it is commonly argued in public discourse that Italy needs and wants migrant
21 *work* but not migrant *workers* (Ambrosini 2010). In other words, the country is ready to reap the
22 benefits of a marginal labour force willing to do the jobs that Italians are no longer prepared to do
23 while divesting itself of its social cost in terms of housing, welfare and education.^{xi} The
24 spectacularization of events on Lampedusa raises the spectre of a reserve army of migrant labour.
25 Recurrent images and discourses such as the 'tsunami' arriving from the southern edge of the
26 Mediterranean Sea demonstrates that pressure on the labour market has become global and that the
27 modernization or dislocation of production to lower the labour costs is no longer necessary. This is
28 exemplified in the agricultural sector in Southern Italy where the employment of migrants in the
29 tomato harvest is more economically advantageous than mechanized collection. This is not to deny
30 that labour struggles do indeed occur in agriculture and have actually involved many who have
31 passed through Lampedusa, as exemplified in the case of the strike in Nardò in August 2011 (Nigro
32 et al. 2012). The point is that the public imaginary of desperate migrants on Lampedusa feed into
33 presumptions about a compliant and willing workforce.
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36 Second, and drawing on Cuttitta's idea of Lampedusa operating as a warning, the spectacle
37 of bare life serves to lower the expectations of migrants and, in doing so, produce labour power as a
38 cheap commodity that is adaptable to different conditions. Recent data indicates that migrant
39 workers have been the section of the Italian population most penalized by the economic crisis: their
40 unemployment rates have grown more rapidly and that they lose their jobs first and stay
41 unemployed longer than Italians (Bonifazi and Marini 2011). One option for those laid off from
42 industrial jobs in northern Italy, particularly in the case of African migrants, is to move back South
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3 to work in the ethnically segmented agricultural sector, which for many means a return to the first
4 job they did after ‘getting off the boat’.

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6 Third, until recently ‘illegal’ migrants have been publicly viewed in Italy as those who, due
7 to their social, political and economic marginalization, set the lower limits to wages. Recent
8 transformations on Lampedusa indicate an increasingly complex situation. As noted, Lampedusa no
9 longer simply produces irregular migrants. On the contrary, the majority passing through the island
10 and onward to detention and reception centres on the mainland apply for asylum and most receive
11 some sort of precarious legal status (Open Doors 2013). Following the transposition of EU
12 recommendations on asylum policy into Italian law in 2007, such individuals have been formally
13 entitled to work which has ultimately deflected attention and alleviated pressure from Italy’s grossly
14 inadequate asylum support structure. According to recent fieldwork conducted by one of this
15 essay’s authors, the majority of migrant workers in the tomato fields of southern Italy have some
16 form of legal document. The many who arrived in Lampedusa were moved to the detention centre
17 in Crotone in Calabria or the refugee holding centre outside Rome, which meant they obtained
18 official residency in these cities. This further restricted their ability to access local services in
19 agricultural regions, forcing them to live in substandard accommodation (such as abandoned farm
20 buildings and self-built ‘ghettos’) and making them dependent on gangmasters for employment.
21 Humanitarian discourses about saving victims of trafficking were reproduced in media reports
22 about ‘slavery’ in the tomato fields but said little about the inadequacies of Italy’s asylum system or
23 the crude reality of the globalized food supply chain.
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38 **6. Conclusion**

39 In this article we explore the representation of bare life on Lampedusa and challenge the common
40 image of the island as a remote outpost that by mere geographical accident has become ‘naturally’
41 exposed to irregular migration from Africa. The transformation of Lampedusa into a strategic
42 Mediterranean border and the spectacle of bare life are not only functional to the island’s role in the
43 national and supranational governance of migration but are also productive of the persistent
44 subordinate position of migrants in the workplace and in society at large.
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49 We acknowledge that the category of ‘bare life’ is problematic. First, it clearly does not
50 solely determine migrant trajectories. There are many factors: restrictive and ineffective migration
51 policies, institutional racism and the current economic crisis are but three major influences. Second,
52 it does not capture the migratory experience in its entirety. Migrants who succeed in crossing
53 borders, those who riot against detention centres or organize themselves to claim labour and
54 citizenship rights break exactly that state of exception configured by the idea of ‘bare life’. We are
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also well aware that the relationship between bare life and Lampedusa cannot be presumed to be fixed and clear but is protean and contradictory. For example, the fifteen Eritrean survivors of the 3 October disaster who were willing to testify against the traffickers paid for their ‘act of citizenship’ by being detained on Lampedusa for two months longer than the other survivors (in order, it was claimed, to ensure their presence at the trial) and hence found themselves subject to the weekly anti-scabies showers. However, we also think that the category of bare life usefully explains not so much the goal of regulating flows as that of governing migratory processes in their complexity and multidimensionality.

The article has indicated how borders are continually reconfigured. This implies that Lampedusa cannot remain a border zone indefinitely but, in light of shifting flows, will one day return to being just an island. In the immediate term Lampedusa is destined to maintain its leading role in migration management and as the focus of the spectacle of bare life. How this evolves ultimately depends upon those on the other side of the Mediterranean who make the decision to leave.

Notes

ⁱ Between 2000 and 2006, an average of twelve per cent of irregular migrants entered Italy via its maritime borders, while between fifty and seventy-five per cent were overstayers (Cuttitta 2012, 27).

ⁱⁱ To date there have been three significant pieces of immigration legislation in Italy: the 1990 Martelli Law, the 1998 Turco-Napolitano Law and the 2002 Bossi-Fini Law. Irrespective of their differing ideological tones, all these laws were primarily focused on restricting entry and combating irregular migration in order to comply with European Union directives on migration management and the Schengen Aquis. For an overview of immigration policy in Italy, see Zincone 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ In 2007 the centre was moved from the airport to a former barracks at Contrada Imbriacola in the centre of the island.

^{iv} Andrijasevic argues that it would be more correct to talk of the ‘retraction’ of Italy’s asylum system rather than its ‘externalisation’ because Libya had no legal processing centres or any refugee policy (Andrijasevic 2010, 154–55). Italy’s push-back policy was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights’ 2012 Hirsi Jamaa judgement.

^v From the 459 arrivals registered in 2010, the lowest figure since 2000, the number of migrants landing or brought ashore on Lampedusa rose to 51,753 in 2011 (Cuttitta 2012, 26).

^{vi} Furthermore, in September 2011 interior minister Roberto Maroni declared Lampedusa a ‘port unsafe for sea rescue’ following a riot and fire in the island’s reception/detention centre. The upshot was the dismantlement of the island’s reception system including legal and health services. Those intercepted at sea were now taken to Sicilian ports while the few who reached Lampedusa were held in tourist accommodation with no chance of applying for asylum. The ‘unsafe port’ status was maintained until the centre at Contrada Imbriacola was reopened in March 2013.

^{vii} For information about these campaigns see <http://lampedusa-hamburg.info/en> and <http://asylstrikeberlin.wordpress.com/2013/05/02/lampedusa-in-berlin/>

^{viii} It is no coincidence that Lampedusa, like other minor Italian islands, served as a penal colony during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

^{ix} The Charter of Lampedusa is a declaration of migrant rights that was collectively written by mainly Italian migrant rights activists and local residents in response to the 3 October disaster. An English summary can be viewed here: <http://www.meltingpot.org/Lampedusa-Charter-a-new-pact-for-a-new-European-citizenship.html>

^x The full speech in Italian can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WmUXwGLpuKc>.

^{xi} Such a perspective dominated Italian sociology until the late 1990s. For a critical history of sociological approaches to migrant labour in Italy, see Sacchetto 2013.

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33
34 NICK DINES is Research Fellow in the Department of Criminology and Sociology at Middlesex
35 University.
36

37 ADDRESS: The Burroughs, London NW4 4BT.

38 Email: n.dines@mdx.ac.uk
39
40
41

42 NICOLA MONTAGNA is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Criminology and Sociology at
43 Middlesex University.
44

45 ADDRESS: The Burroughs, London NW4 4BT.

46 Email: n.montagna@mdx.ac.uk
47
48
49

50 VINCENZO RUGGIERO is Professor in the Department of Criminology and Sociology at
51 Middlesex University.
52

53 ADDRESS: The Burroughs, London NW4 4BT.

54 Email: v.ruggiero@mdx.ac.uk
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