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## I BUONI DI RIACE: A COMPLEMENTARY CURRENCY AS A STRATEGIC TOOL TO RESIST THE MAFIA AND TRANSFORM THE MIGRATION CRISIS INTO AN OPPORTUNITY

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### ABSTRACT

I Buoni di Riace (Riace Vouchers) was a community currency, a series of thirty-six colorful paper banknotes that circulated between 2011 and 2018 within the city of Riace in the south of Italy. In this paper, I consider the visual strategy Domenico Lucano employed, as mayor of Riace, with I Buoni di Riace, an initiative developed in response to two significant social issues in the city: depopulation due to mafia activity and massive increases in migratory fluxes. Lucano's tactic was to manipulate money to make it an instrument of social cohesion and inclusiveness within the small Calabrian city of Riace.

### KEYWORDS

Resistance, Community Currencies, depopulation, mafia crime, migration, Riace, Italy

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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

*(Saints Cosmas and Damian, please lend me your helping hands, as I am a foreigner and come from faraway!) - lyric from popular Calabrian song*

This article considers the visual strategies employed by Domenico Lucano as mayor of Riace, a small town in southern Italy, with I Buoni di Riace, a community currency developed, together with other initiatives, in response to two significant social issues in the city: its depopulation due, together with other causes, to mafia activity and the massive increase in migratory fluxes.

I Buoni di Riace (Riace Vouchers) is a complementary currency, a series of thirty-six paper banknotes (Fig. 1) circulated between 2011 and 2018 in the Calabrian city of Riace. Complementary currencies are used to pay for products or services within specific groups designated by geographical boundaries or common specific interests (E. H. Diniz, E. Siqueira, E. van Heck, 2018). These currencies are being adopted as a creative solution, especially after the 2008 global economic crisis, mainly by marginalized communities in order to keep their local economies moving.

Figure 1. Samples of notes



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

Domenico Lucano, now Riace's former mayor, was elected for three consecutive terms from 2004 to 2018. In 2010, he was ranked third in the competition organized by the City Mayors Foundation that classifies the best mayors in the world every two years. In the same year, he appeared at number 40 on a list of the most influential leaders in

Fortune magazine. Lucano has become famous for his approach in dealing with the continuous arrival of migrants and refugees on the coast of Riace, in the context of a European migration emergency, perhaps only perceived and conveyed as emergency by the media (R. Franco Greco, 2018).

On the Fortune website it reads: "For decades emigration drained life from Riace, a village of 2,000 on the Calabrian coast. When a boatload of Kurdish refugees reached its shores in 1998, Lucano, then a schoolteacher, saw an opportunity. He offered them Riace's abandoned apartments along with job training. Eighteen years on, Mayor Lucano is hailed for saving the town, whose population now includes migrants from 20-some nations, and rejuvenating its economy (Riace has hosted more than 6,000 asylum seekers in all). Though his pro-refugee stance has pitted him against the mafia and the state, Lucano's model is being studied and adopted as Europe's refugee crisis crests."

In fact, in the years when the project of Riace vouchers was introduced, Riace was the destination of continual migrant landings. When he was first elected, Lucano had the vision of a new Riace that he defined as a "global village", inhabited by the remaining Calabrian elderly and young migrants from Kurdistan, Nigeria, Iran and other countries.

In adopting the complementary currency, the mayor intended to use money as an instrument of social cohesion and inclusiveness to achieve what he has repeatedly called a "utopia of normality". Indeed, it was the famous German director Wim Wenders, author of the short film about the Calabrian country, *Il volo* (The flight), presented at the 2009 Berlin International Film Festival, who first used the term "utopia" in reference to the integration system conceived by the Mayor Lucano. A few years later, the mayor used this term to define his new Riace:

"Ours is the utopia of normality. Because [...] the migrant who arrives in Riace has the same rights as the mayor. It is a microcosm that declines a supportive Calabria, where the seeds of humanity have taken root. And this is above all a cultural process that I like to share with everyone".

## 2. FUNCTIONING OF RIACE COMPLEMENTARY CURRENCY

Lucano introduced *I Buoni di Riace* in 2011 to provide liquidity to migrants. In Italy there is a migrant reception system called SPRAR, for which each migrant is entitled to a contribution of 35 euros per day paid by the Italian State. The problem concerns the timing with which the state actually gets the money to the migrants. Sometimes bureaucratic procedures take up to six months to unlock the amount in favor of migrants. The latter therefore have to face periods of stay in an unknown country where, most of the time, they have neither a job nor a place to live, in addition to not knowing the language. To overcome this problem, Lucano organized a local reception system which provided for the distribution to migrants of Riace vouchers (fig. 1), real banknotes complementary to the Euro and corresponding to the amount due to migrants by law, but spendable only within the municipality of Riace. Once the notes were accepted, the local traders handed them over to the non-profit associations that were responsible for managing the Riace hospitality project and which, once the funds reached the Municipality of Riace from the central Italian state, returned the corresponding amount in euros. Tourists could also use the banknotes and get a 20% discount on the Euro price in local shops or keep the note as a souvenir.

In fact, *I Buoni di Riace* was part of a series of actions aimed at repopulating the abandoned Calabrian village: a public well, an educational farm, a clinic, a multi-ethnic nursery, an oil mill, several restaurants and local craft shops, a hotel and separate waste collection. Everything was managed by both citizens and migrants. In the context of these activities, Lucano also targeted organized crime (known as the Mafia) in southern Italy in an attempt to repopulate the city.

Riace had in fact become a ghost town due, not only to hydrogeological problems, but also to the oppression of the 'Ndrangheta, the Calabrian Mafia, and the subsequent lack of job opportunities for young people (G. Macchi Jánica & A. Palumbo, 2019). Like many other villages in Calabria, Riace is a place rich in cultural and artistic traditions linked to ancient Greek domination. Two of the oldest Greek sculptures of all time, the Riace Bronzes, were found right in the Ionian Sea, along the Riace coast. Yet the small town is also one of the most mafia-oppressed places in the entire country. A study, published in 2008, demonstrated the link between mafia oppression in the areas of southern Italy and the backwardness of the production sector of the same (M. Centorrino, F. Ofria, 2008). In fact, one of the prerogatives of Calabrian mafia is to obtain ever greater control over the territory, suffocating the local

economy. The same happened in Riace, which as anticipated, before the Lucanian revolution was in danger of disappearing due to the mass emigration of its inhabitants and the practically non-existent local economy.

This article intends to analyze in particular the visual aspect of the Riace vouchers, on which there are no scientific studies, as it is considered by the writer to be one of the main tools used by the mayor in his model of inclusion to rise up against mafia violence and create an anti-racist transnational solidarity through hospitality.

### 3. VISUAL ANALYSIS OF RIACE BANKNOTES

Firstly, to design the banknote, the mayor was inspired by various artistic productions that were made in the city by citizens and migrants in Riace, following its repopulation. The artistic productions included murals, sculptures and urban installations, even street signs, characterized by a chromatic range that recalled the flags of the migrants' countries of origin (mainly Kurdistan, Syria and Turkey), all located in public spaces of the city.

Secondly, the thirty-six banknotes made public the violence and injustice of the mafia by representing the faces of the victims of the Calabrian and Sicilian mafia. Finally, the local currency has portrayed other national and international personalities as symbols of peace, culture, anti-racism and inclusion, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks (fig.2), Rita Levi-Montalcini, Che Guevara and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Figure 2. *I Buoni di Riace €50 bank-note (Rosa Parks), 2019*



Source: Photo by the author

#### 3.1. Similarity with the official Euro

From a visual point of view, a crucial aspect of the banknotes was the similarity to the official European currency, the Euro. In fact, Riace Vouchers were also known as Riace Euros, as they repeatedly featured the Euro symbol “€” on the front and back of the banknote, next to the number corresponding to its value (fig. 3). In the design of the Euro banknotes, a vertical band is depicted on the right, below which the value of the banknote and the Euro symbol “€” appear (Fig. 4). On Riace banknotes, the word “€URO”, in capital letters, is found above two vertical bands (fig. 3). This element is reminiscent of official banknotes, where the value is written in Latin: “EURO”, in Greek: “ΕΥΡΩ” and also in Cyrillic: “ΕΒΡΟ”. The official currency design also includes the European Union flag on the left, with the signature of the president of the European Central Bank below it, and its acronym in nine languages.

Figure 3. *The front side of I Buoni di Riace €1 banknote, 2019*





*Photo by the author*

The repetition of the Euro symbol “€” on Riace Vouchers, as well as the complete word “€URO”, demonstrate a visual connection between the city’s alternative monetary system and the official one of the Italian country. By making recognizable visual elements of official money on the complementary currency, both Riace citizens and migrants were more open to trusting the new local economic system. Therefore, the emphasis on visual similarity to the Euro can be understood as part of Lucano’s strategy to accustom people to the new currency, and gain confidence in the new system. This tactic also allowed the mayor to circulate evocative images of specific values, based on his understanding of the needs of the community, through the notes.

*Figure 4. The front side of the official €20 banknote, 2019.*



*Photo by the author*

### **3.2. Reproduction of artworks situated in Riace produced by multi-ethnic citizens on banknotes**

Once the strategy to convince users of the local currency’s reliability was developed, the mayor’s second step was to exploit the banknote design for a broader visual narrative. As mentioned above, the European flag is present on the official banknote (fig. 4). On Riace vouchers, however, no official country flag is depicted, but instead there are triangular and colored paper cuttings that recall the shape of a flag. More precisely, these paper cuttings are scattered on the top of the front of each banknote and are chromatically very vivid, with details in red, yellow, orange, purple, blue and green (fig. 3). Not surprisingly, they have a strong pictorial profile.

In 2008, the artist Coco Cano, an immigrant from Uruguay, was commissioned by Lucano to create an installation for the central square of Riace. Cano produced a site-specific installation called *Mundos* (Worlds), consisting of a

half-moon mosaic surrounded by other individual pieces. The pictorial elements were painted on the fragments and included fantastic creatures (fig. 5). The drawing of *I Buoni di Riace*, in particular the crescent shape surrounded by mosaic fragments, is evidently inspired by the work of Cano (fig. 3). The colored triangles on Cano's artwork and Riace vouchers are reminiscent of the flags of the native countries of the migrants. The title of the work, *Mundos*, according to the painter, actually represents the union of different worlds that took place in Riace.

The town's welcome road sign also included flags and names of the countries where the immigrants came from (fig. 6). In nine different languages, the sign also featured the words "Welcome to Riace". Behind the word "Riace" was a rainbow, a symbol that was repeated throughout the city, even on the stairs of the central amphitheater (fig. 7).

Summarizing, Lucano used as visual references to develop the design of the banknotes: the official euro, the artistic work of the migrant painter Cano and various artistic elements installed in the public spaces of Riace, obtaining a complementary banknote in which anyone who knew the inclusive reality of Riace could recognize himself.

*Figure 5. Coco Cano, Mundos, 2008. Mixed media installation*



*Photo: Amedeo Petrocchi*



Figure 6. Welcome signs in Riace, 2019



Photo: Nicola Zolin

Figure 7. The amphitheater of Riace during Riace in Festival, a cultural event in 2018



Photo: Riace in Festival

### 3.3. Emphasis of mafia violence on banknotes

Since among the causes of the historical depopulation of Riace there was also mafia oppression, Lucano tried to avoid a new period of criminal oppression by showing mafia violence and injustices on his banknotes. Of the thirty-six banknotes, twelve show faces of Mafia victims. The most portrayed figure is Giuseppe Impastato. He appears on several banknotes, in particular on the 100 Euro banknote of the series.

Impastato was an Italian journalist, activist, and a member of the Proletarian Democratic Party. He is well known for his rebellion against the criminal activities of the Sicilian mafia Cosa Nostra. He was assassinated on May 9, 1978 for his resistance. Impastato is iconic because, despite being born into a mafia family, he decided to rebel and



fight through the founding of a radio station called AUT Contro-Information Radio Diffusa (AUT Counter-Information Diffused Radio). AUT's most ironic and effective radio program was entitled *Onda pazza a Mafiopoli* (Crazy wave in Mafiopoly), in which Impastato made caricatures of real mafia bosses of Palermo and made fun of them publicly.

In 2009 many Italian artists came to Riace to take part in Colors of Memory, an entire week dedicated to the production of murals and installations with the help of the city's residents and migrants. The logo of Impastato radio station, as well as his portrait, were painted on wooden panels and installed as a mural (fig. 8). On the work, Impastato's face is depicted as a black and yellow stencil on a background of colored lines. These lines, alternating between orange and blue, move from behind Impastato's head to the left as rays. On the right, the same rays, imprinted on a black background, take on different colors (red, yellow, orange, purple, white and blue) and are curved. Their sinuosity recalls sound waves, and in fact the rays culminate in the AUT Contro-Information Radio Diffusa logo. The word "AUT" is red and is inscribed on a yellow square with a headphone image painted next to it.

*Figure 8. Mural dedicated to Giuseppe Impastato, Riace, 2011*



*Photo: Natale Bianchi*

The image of the mural is partially transposed onto the €20 banknote of I Buoni di Riace (fig. 9). Reproduced here are the details of the mural with Impastato's face and the background of lines and rays. As in the other banknotes of the series, the image is inscribed in a half moon placed in the center of the front side. The upper curved edge of the crescent reads "LIBERTÈ, EGALITÈ, FRATERNITÈ" (FREEDOM, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY), the motto of the French Revolution. Under the image, the words "NO RAZZISMO" (NO RACISM) is repeated several times, and is larger in the center.

On the other banknotes, in the same crescent structure, characters who have played a fundamental role in the fight against organized crime in Italy and also in the fight against racism on an international level, are immortalized.

Some of those figures are the same ones to which Lucano named the streets of Riace which, before the mayor took office, did not have a road map.

Through this visual language conveyed by the banknotes, Lucano aimed for a radical revision of the culture of the city, promoting the social inclusion of migrants and criticism of the mafia. The vouchers have helped to make the phenomenon known as replacement immigration work, whereby the emigration of the inhabitants of a place, due to various reasons, is tempered by the immigration in those places by migrants from other countries (E. Steinbruck, 2012). In fact, the migrants who arrived in Riace, thanks to the support system created in the village, preferred to stay there rather than continue their journey to northern Italy or Europe. An exodus in which young and old Calabrians have been protagonists for years.

Figure 9. *I Buoni di Riace* €20 banknote (Giuseppe Impastato), 2019



Photo by the author

### 3.4. Visual, but also material strategy

The system introduced by the mayor was created through a visual strategy, but not only. Lucano has chosen to create a tangible currency, whose materiality has allowed it to circulate from hand to hand, humanizing the country's economic exchange relations. Unlike Riace, the financial crises, the social emergency in developing countries, and the increase in the possibility of accessing digital tools have stimulated the growth of the number of communities in the world that have decided to adopt a complementary digital currency (E. H. Diniz, E. Siqueira, E. van Heck, 2018).

Indeed, today it is no longer tangibility that characterizes this type of alternative monetary system. But, as highlighted by the aforementioned study, one of the critical issues related to the use of an entirely digital monetarization system is the automation and de-humanization of contemporary societies. In fact, the element of relational exchange is missing, which is the fulcrum of the development of a cohesive community, especially in multicultural contexts in which complementary currencies are often adopted.

From a material point of view, even if the dematerialization of society through digitalization had already begun in 2008, Riace's alternative currency went against the trend as there was only a paper version of it, without any kind of virtual payment. Their existence only in tangible form has thus allowed Riace banknotes to maintain an articulated visual profile which, in the opinion of the writer, has contributed to the development of a new identity of Riace community as a global and supportive community.

In fact, in order to use the vouchers in exchange for products and services, the migrants had to meet in person, face to face, the local traders of Riace. This meant social interactions, dialogue and direct contact. The only digital version available of *I Buoni di Riace* was created in recent years by the non-profit organization Chico Mendes as part of *Solidali con Riace* project, in the form of an online catalog (fig. 10) which will be discussed later.



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



*Photo by the author*

#### 4. POLITICAL AND LEGAL FACTS THAT CAUSED THE END OF I BUONI DI RIACE

According to Lucano, the money circulation system (from migrants to merchants, to the non-profit associations that managed the project, up to the municipality of Riace), in addition to guaranteeing liquidity for migrants and making the country's local economy run, made it possible to trace banknote movements. Furthermore, it fostered dialogue and discussion between the participants in Riace community.

However, since 2016, this aspect was considered as problematic in the reports carried out by the Prefecture of Reggio Calabria, following inspections carried out in Riace. Due to these same inspections, in 2018 funding for migrants in Riace was blocked. At that time, a conservative party, the Lega, had come to the Italian government, that had also tightened up national policies for welcoming migrants in Italian ports. The provision to block the funding in Riace was challenged by the Municipality of Riace at the Regional Administrative Court, that annulled it in 2019.

Despite this cancellation, from the end of 2016 to today, no financial disbursement has come to Riace for the reception of migrants, consequently the staff who rendered services and the suppliers of goods were not paid for almost two years. The aforementioned non-profit association Chico Mendes scanned the banknotes and shared them online to sell them and donate the profits to reimburse those who had lost their income in Riace. The solidarity project ended on February 17, 2019 and over 77,000 Euros were raised.

A criminal trial was also initiated, which was given the input by the same report from the prefecture of 2016, mentioned above. The Public Prosecutor's Office had hypothesized as many as 22 crimes against 31 people (all those who worked in the migrants' reception in Riace), but the Judge considered that there were only two criminal cases, for minor violations, against two defendants only. One of which was Lucano who, for these two crimes, was placed under house arrest on 2/10/2018. The Judge's provision was, in turn, halved by the Supreme Court of Cassation - the top body of the Italian judicial system - that reduced the evidence to a single episode, relating to an alleged attempt of an Ethiopian citizen to illegally enter Italy through a false marriage.



On 11 June 2019, to verify these accusations, the real trial began. The trial is still ongoing, but most of the charges against the former mayor have been dropped.

In this period of time, new elections were held in the municipality of Riace, in which Lucano, unsuccessfully, tried to run as city councilor. The trial against him caused the abandonment of the place by many migrants who were left without work and liquidity; social tensions in Riace inevitably escalated. Today however, a large number of migrants are remaining in Riace and continue to support the project.

In the 2019 elections, a mayor belonging to the Lega party was elected, then ousted because he was ineligible. However, during the Lega administration of Riace, Riace road signs were removed and replaced with new signs showing the faces of two Catholic saints, San Cosma and San Damiano, recognized as protectors of Riace. No trace remained of the migrants' native countries flags. Impastato's portrait on the wooden panels has also been removed. On this point however, Lucano wanted to emphasize that the two Catholic saints were famous for their activity as physicians who worked free of charge, even to foreigners.

Despite the disastrous epilogue of the initiative, caused by anti-migrant and conservative political forces, which caused Lucano to be confined to house arrest, and the cancellation of funding due to the migrants, Riace's project should not be neglected. Indeed, this has remained a reference model for other Calabrian villages in terms of hospitality policies and repopulating abandoned villages (Badolato, Caulonia, Stignano, Acquaformosa, Satriano are the villages that have taken the same path of Riace) and, internationally, Riace is a model for what concerns the policies of social inclusion and reception of migrants.

Before external forces caused a collapse of the socio-economic balance that the village had achieved, a process of personalization of the migrant's figure had taken place in Riace (R. Franco Greco, 2018). Migrants were no longer invisible people, unknown and dangerous intruders, but by possessing rights and duties, they had become active participants in city life and supporters of the local economy.

## 5. CONCLUSION

As Impastato suggested in choosing Mafiopoli as the title of his radio program, the capitalist system is intertwined with criminal organizations. Mafiopoli recalls the word Monopoli which derives from the Greek word *monopólion*, composed of *mónos*, "only, exclusive" and *pólion*, "sale". Thus, Mafiopoli suggests the domination of mafia over the economy of a place: the monopoly of the mafia. This clarifies the link between criminal organization and the capitalist system and, at the same time, clarifies why Lucano has chosen to manipulate money, the capitalist tool par excellence, to protest against it. Through both visual and material strategies, which led to the manipulation of money, Lucano criticized the capitalist system and its implications with the mafia.

The mayor developed an alternative monetary system that had three main objectives: to support migrants who became part of the new Riace community after its depopulation; to mitigate racist attitudes to make the new multicultural community grow; and to weaken the mafia and its economic control over the city. His strategy to carry out this project was mainly visual, but also material. In fact, the vouchers were only paper. In Riace, no online transactions or digital surrogates were possible, face-to-face interaction was required instead.

Lucano promoted the idea of Riace as a "global village", drawing both from the artistic imagery of the city and from the design of the official currency of the Euro, inserting iconic figures and anti-racist and anti-violence messages on the banknotes. Using banknotes, migrants were integrated into the social context of the city no longer being identified as foreigners or enemies, but as participants in the community.

In conclusion, the visual aspect of Riace vouchers was considered both by the Italian government and by many writers and journalists, including those who appreciated the inclusive project of Lucano, only from the propaganda point of view, as a quirk of a mayor with radical leftist ideas. Although this may be partly true, in doing so, this approach underestimates the narrative value of Riace banknotes and their contribution in building a new global identity of the village. Of that utopia of normality so desired by the mayor and included among those necessary utopias based on solidarity imagined by Stefano Rodotà in "Solidarity. A necessary utopia". On this point, Giovanni Cordova, in "Beyond the rancor. Riace's utopia for a community of feeling", replaces the word utopia with "heterotopia", recalling a Foucauldian concept (1966) used to indicate places full of mythical and real contestation of the ordinary space, in which everyday life unfolds. These are utopias well situated between the imaginary and the real, based on the social exchange between actors who recognize each other (Taylor, 1998).

The Riace banknotes have contributed to making visible the places of reality, full of artistic expressions matured in response to acts of threats and mafia attacks. The figures and places immortalized on the banknotes have contributed to creating a social imagery in which both immigrants and resident citizens could recognize themselves, based on the formation of a new cosmopolitan and global community.

Economic exchange, in which banknotes have played a fundamental role, is part of those everyday practices that constitute the unavoidable basis of coexistence in a multicultural context. Thus, Riace banknotes no longer represented the Italian banknote in the eyes of migrants, or the official state banknote in the eyes of citizens, rather they constituted the banknote of the global village of Riace in which characters of different nationalities coexisted not only on the banknotes, but especially along the colorful streets of the village.

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