

CHAPTER 2

Spotlights in the Middle of Nowhere Everyday Marginality and 'the Border' on Lampedusa

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Abstract

A main entry point for boat migrants, the Italian island of Lampedusa is a strategically important and highly symbolic location on Europe's Mediterranean border, and, owing to heavy militarisation and political and media attention, the island has acquired a central place in national as well as European political imaginaries. Yet, for the island's population of 6,000, things look rather different. Rather than a fixation point for political attention, Lampedusa is experienced by its inhabitants as a deeply marginal place with weak ties to the mainland and, by extension, the border, which is described by locals as 'not our business'. Drawing inspiration from Doreen Massey, the chapter argues that Lampedusa's simultaneous centrality and marginality should not be understood as a kind of paradox to be 'solved' but as the outcome of different, yet overlapping, political histories that go well beyond the island itself. Lampedusa thus testifies to 'location' as a potentially multiple concept that never stands on its own but is inherently constituted in relation

How to cite this book chapter:

Elbek, Laust Lund. 2022. 'Spotlights in the Middle of Nowhere Everyday Marginality and "the Border" on Lampedusa'. In *Locating the Mediterranean: Connections and Separations across Space and Time*, edited by Carl Rommel and Joseph John Viscomi, 31–52. Helsinki: Helsinki University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-18-2>.

to other locations across time and space. By approaching the Mediterranean as both a periphery and politically important border zone, the chapter draws together two ethnographically well-known ‘Mediterraneans’ that are typically studied in separate contexts.

Introduction

In the winter of 2011, a group of local fishermen gathered on the harbour of the Italian island of Lampedusa to demonstrate against the increasing unaffordability of boat fuel. The fishermen’s primary working method is motorised trawling (*pesca a strascico*), and, owing to the island’s isolated location in the middle of the Central Mediterranean, fuel is an expensive and often scarce resource. Each year, the higher cost of fuel will set a Lampedusan fisherman back thousands of euros more than his Sicilian competitors. ‘We are being punished,’ Paolo, one of the fishermen, told me when we met some six years later, describing the persisting inequality brought about by Lampedusa’s geographical remoteness.

The demonstration itself was unremarkable. It took place quietly, and none of the participants seriously expected anyone beyond the island’s perimeter to take much notice, as is usually the case regarding such local affairs. But, this time around, the fishermen’s predicament did in fact make national headlines. Within a few weeks, media outlets from across the country began reporting on the demonstration with a well-developed sense of sensationalist creativity: allegedly, the demonstration had concerned boat migrants occupying the pier and thus obstructing the fishermen’s work and disturbing the public order. A portrayal that, in Paolo’s words, amounted to ‘crazy stuff’.

If anything, such media representations underline how Lampedusa has become synonymous with irregular boat migration across the Mediterranean Sea in the past few decades. Situated halfway between Malta and Tunisia, the tiny island is Italy’s southernmost piece of territory and a notorious first destination for boat migrants attempting to enter Europe via the deadly ‘Central Mediterranean Route’. In addition to the boat migrants who land here, a patchwork of military corps, national and international NGOs, European agencies, and other border workers have become a more or less permanent presence. By adding a sense of location to the images of overcrowded migrant boats and notions of migrant crisis that haunt political and popular imaginaries,

Lampedusa has acquired a symbolic potency that greatly exceeds the island's 20 square kilometres.

Put differently, Lampedusa testifies to how the Schengen Agreement in no way resulted in the *removal* of Europe's borders; they were simply moved to other locations. At the 'local' level, however, the fishermen's demonstration simultaneously exemplified how Lampedusa remains – despite the enormity of outside attention – a deeply remote location where a profound lack of reliable infrastructure, health services, and recurring scarcity of basic commodities are pressing everyday concerns. Literally and metaphorically out of sight beyond the Mediterranean horizon, too far south to be represented on many maps of the national territory, the island and its 6,000 inhabitants who predominantly live off fishing and seasonal tourism seem very much cut off from any political centre of gravity. 'We are closer to Africa than Europe' is a commonly heard phrase on the island, and this is not merely a neutral cartographic observation but a statement that implicitly evokes a long history of marginalisation on Lampedusa in particular and southern Italy in general.

Drawing on approximately a year's fieldwork¹ on Lampedusa, this chapter takes a closer ethnographic look at these two very different 'Lampedusas', as it were: by foregrounding how Lampedusa has evolved into a political focal point as a border while remaining 'out of sight' from a local perspective, the chapter is essentially concerned with how the island constitutes a political centre and margin at the same time. A key point here is how the local experience of detachment is accompanied by a high degree of non-identification with Lampedusa's role as a border, as migration – and particularly migration management – is commonly experienced as external to the community. Operated almost entirely by people from elsewhere, 'the border' on Lampedusa seems to exist largely separate from, or perhaps rather in parallel with, the everyday lives of many islanders.

The theoretical hinge of the chapter, which I elaborate in the following section, is to conceptualise the marginal and the central not as contradictory configurations per se but rather as different 'relative locations' that, over time, have come to coexist within the same geographical space (see Green 2005; Viscomi and Rommel, [Chapter 1](#) in this volume). Inspired especially by Doreen Massey's theorisation of space as the accumulation of heterogeneous historical trajectories (2005), the chapter makes the case that Lampedusa testifies to 'loca-

tion' as inherently relational and potentially multiple, and hence that Lampedusa never stands on its own but is continuously constituted in relation to other locations across time and space. Thus, by drawing questions of migration and borders as well as the experience of inhabiting marginal locations into the same ethnographic space, the chapter weaves together two empirically well-established Mediterranean constellations that are, however, usually studied in separate realms (see also Ben-Yehoyada 2014).

Locating Multiplicity

The notion that 'centres' and 'margins' may overlap in spatial terms is not new. In *We, the People of Europe?*, for example, Étienne Balibar noted that, while borders are typically located 'at the edge of the territory', they simultaneously occupy 'the middle of political space' (2004, 109). Balibar's formulation alluded specifically to how growing political concerns over migration have rendered borders defining institutions in Western politics. A related perspective is found in Veena Das and Deborah Poole's now canonical volume, *Anthropology in the Margins of the State* (2004), in which 'margins' are conceptualised in an Agambenian fashion as spaces of exception that, owing to their lack of full legibility, are constitutive of mainstream politics through a logic of negative mirroring. The 'margins', from this angle, need not even be located at the geographical edges of a polity but may also be found in places such as refugee camps or urban 'ghettos' (e.g. Asad 2004). The overall point to be made here is that neither centres nor margins/edges/peripheries are constituted simply in geographical terms (see also Ardener 1987) – rather, they are the outcomes of particular relations between people, power, and place.

But if the central and the marginal may in some instances become 'one', as suggested above, this chapter takes a slightly different approach by treating the central and the marginal as distinct 'relative locations' that coexist within the same geographical space (see Green 2005). Indeed, if Lampedusa has moved to the 'centre' of national and European politics as a border, this has not rendered its inhabitants' experiences of self-location any less marginal. In developing this argument, I am particularly inspired by Doreen Massey's thinking about the 'liveness' of space (2005). In her view, space should not be understood as fixed but as constituted through variable and multiple contemporane-

ous relations (2005, 9–12). This means that places are rarely defined by singular identities and should not be thought of as self-contained enclosures with clearly discernible insides and outsides. Rather, they come into being as the product of heterogeneous (power) relations across space and time. And, while Massey's view of space-as-relations resonates well with, for example, Balibar's and Das and Poole's ideas, she adds the crucial point that these cannot be the relations of a closed system where 'everything is (already) related to everything else' (2005, 10). This implies an understanding of 'relationality' as an open-ended and potentially multi-temporal process, and so Massey invites us to understand space as 'a *simultaneity* of stories-so-far', i.e. a sphere in which 'distinct trajectories *coexist*' (Massey 2005, 9, my emphasis).

It is Massey's notion of space as composed of contemporaneous 'trajectories' or 'stories' in the plural that I find particularly insightful here. Indeed, 'border' and 'remote island', respectively, would seem to correspond to distinct relations in both space and time: if Lampedusa is at the same time central and marginal, this seems the result of a 'layering' of various political histories that have taken the island as its object in rather different ways (see also Elbek 2020). However, as Matei Candea has pointed out, such contrasting formulations of place may constitute a challenge to a 'traditional' anthropological imagination (2010; see also Gupta and Ferguson 1992). This is the case, Candea argues, because the lack of a coherent identity makes places 'seem messy, disintegrated, or difficult to study not because they are, but because of the assumptions we have about what they *should* be like' (2010, 25; see also Otto and Bubandt 2010). In line with Candea, I am not suggesting that Lampedusa's simultaneous centrality and marginality constitute a paradox to be 'solved' by looking for coherence where there may, in fact, be none. Instead, with Massey in mind, I propose to understand such multiple place-identities as relationships that, at different points in time, have fashioned Lampedusa as a particular kind of place. To pursue this argument ethnographically, the following sections provide a series of reflections on Lampedusa's recent transformation into a border hub 'par excellence'. The final parts of the chapter will, in turn, deal in historical and ethnographic detail with Lampedusa's marginality and isolation.

Placing ‘the Border’

Falcone e Borsellino Airport, Palermo. The small turboprop airplane that connects Sicily and Lampedusa leaves from an underground section of the airport. If the slightly run-down boarding area – equipped with benches and a small bar – comes across as entirely ordinary, many of the people present constitute a stark contrast to the inconspicuousness of the place. The briefest glance at the boarding queue confirms that Lampedusa has long ceased to be simply a distant outpost of the Republic: in addition to islanders returning home from Sicily, the passengers boarding for Lampedusa constitute a motley crew of people connected only by a professional interest in the island’s function as a border. There are NGO workers, military representatives, ecclesiastics, reporters, and at least one anthropologist. Some of the more conspicuous travellers are a group of journalists with large cameras, microphones, and press card lanyards around their necks – not to mention a squad of uniformed and quite gruff-looking Carabinieri, who, without any kind of questioning, carry their firearms and batons aboard the plane.

Although technically not on Lampedusa, the boarding area is a perfect site for gauging the island’s unusually high degree of ‘borderness’ (see Cuttitta 2012). Here, it is visible how a patchwork of actors concerned with border management has set up shop on Lampedusa in recent years: the people in the queue – from armed soldiers to aid workers – provide a window into how the politics of humanitarianism and securitisation intertwine, and occasionally collide,² at the EU’s external borders (see e.g. Andersson 2017; Cuttitta 2018; Dines, Montagna, and Ruggiero 2014). To recall Étienne Balibar’s formulation, such scenes leave no doubt that Lampedusa has indeed moved to the ‘centre of political space’ on both the national and European levels. More specifically, the boarding queue reflected how Lampedusa has become home to a host of military, paramilitary, and police corps and an equally long list of humanitarian NGOs, all with varying levels of involvement, authority, and responsibility. Their tasks include, for example, search-and-rescue operations, sea and air patrolling, identification, transfers, legal assistance for migrants, and the daily operation of Lampedusa’s migrant reception centre (Cuttitta 2014). As geographer Paolo Cuttitta has accurately observed on the matter,

Lampedusa has effectively attracted all that makes a ‘place’ a ‘border’: from migrants to smugglers, from law enforcement to humanitarian workers, from Italian military vessels to the patrols of the EU agency Frontex, from the police officers of emigration and transit countries to those of the United Nations, from inspectors of EU institutions to journalists and researchers from across the world. (2012, 12, my translation)

In addition to being an operational hub for all the border related activities described above, Lampedusa has – perhaps more than any other place – become a symbol of the Mediterranean ‘migration crisis’. Not least due to extensive media coverage and political attention, the island has become synonymous with undocumented migrant flows, deadly shipwrecks, and maritime border controls (Friese 2014). In this manner, Lampedusa arguably constitutes ‘the very incarnation of the concept of border’ for politicians, migrants, and a wider public alike (Cuttitta 2012, 11, my translation).

Two events arguably stand out regarding Lampedusa’s rise to public notoriety. Although the island had already attracted significant attention as a site of irregular border-crossings into Europe for some years, Lampedusa became the object of a national and European discourse on ‘migrant emergency’ when thousands of Tunisians fled to the island in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 (Elbek 2020). The second event occurred on 3 October 2013, when a cataclysmic shipwreck took place just off the island. Three hundred and sixty-eight passengers, most of whom came from Eritrea, lost their lives in this tragedy. Photographs of hundreds of coffins, each adorned with a single rose and lined up in an airport hangar – among them several children-sized ones, each with a smiling teddy bear on top – travelled across the globe. Such occasions made it clear that Lampedusa has become the stage for a veritable ‘border spectacle’ (De Genova 2002): a key node in the ‘visual economy of clandestine migration’ (Andersson 2014).

Yet, such spectacular imagery is hardly unambiguous, and to invoke an anthropological classic, the island certainly carries a good amount of symbolic ‘multivocality’ (Firth 1973). As the simultaneous presence of humanitarian and military actors indicates, Lampedusa seems to lend itself well to appropriation by the entire political spectrum: Pope Francis’s very first official visit outside the Vatican was, of all places, to Lampedusa, and all imaginable kinds of politicians, artists, and other public figures have travelled to the island to claim their share of the

spotlight – including actress Angelina Jolie in the capacity of ‘goodwill ambassador’ for the UNHCR, as well as Marine Le Pen, leader of the French anti-immigration party Front National.³ As Heidrun Friese has noted,

Lampedusa stands for the imagination, and especially fear, of the black masses, invasions, loss of control and national cultural identity and, simultaneously, humanitarian participation, compassion, philanthropy, vulnerability and help for the victims, solidarity and such notions. ... Lampedusa provides a place for the fear of strangers and images of victims and ties friend and foe together. (Friese 2014, 31, my translation)

Friese clearly hits the nail on the head in pointing to Lampedusa’s capacity to *provide a place*. Covering large stretches of national as well as international waters and extending well beyond the perimeter of Europe into the offices of sub-Saharan authorities (Andersson 2014; Lucht 2013), the Euro-African border is hardly a fixed location; on the contrary, it is a highly mobile and deterritorialised phenomenon with a largely liquid material form (see also Chambers 2008). In such an institutionally complex, ever-changing, and spatially heterogeneous border constellation, Lampedusa provides exactly what appears to be missing: fixity and location. In the following section, I will provide an ethnographic snapshot of the multifaceted border machinery that I have just described.

A Migrant Landing

On a December afternoon in 2015, at the peak of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, I had gone for a walk with a journalist working for a small-time migration-oriented NGO. Around L’isola dei Conigli, a picturesque natural reservation some five kilometres west of Lampedusa town, we bumped into Marco, a fingerprint specialist employed at the island’s migrant reception centre. I had not met Marco before but my journalist companion knew him peripherally through work. We exchanged a few niceties and Marco told us that he had just been notified that a *sbarco* – a migrant landing – would take place in the small hours of the following morning.

This information was of particular interest to the NGO that the journalist worked for. In a setting otherwise dominated by uniforms

and military equipment, one of their primary activities is to be physically present during landings to ‘show the migrants a human face’ and ‘break the militarised monopoly on reception’, as one of the managers, a Roman in his thirties, explained. At landings, the NGO hands out snacks, a cup of hot tea, and a friendly greeting for the exhausted newcomers. Under normal circumstances, civilians not employed within official border management procedures are not allowed to attend landings; however, the then-parish priest of Lampedusa had managed to negotiate an exception for this particular NGO. But it was rarely without complaints and insults from the Finanza or the Carabinieri that they would enter Molo Favalaro, the restricted military quay where landings are usually carried out. Later that day, I asked for permission to join the NGO at the next morning’s *sbarco*, and so, before sunrise, three or four NGO workers and I loaded the boot of a Fiat Doblo with freshly brewed tea, juice, snacks, and isothermal blankets to observe and play an active, however minimal, role in the very sort of event that had placed Lampedusa on the political map of Europe.

When we arrived at Molo Favalaro around 6am, the quay was empty and quiet, so we decided to go to a nearby bar to wait and have some breakfast. The bar was already full of other early birds, mainly fishermen and police officers. Soon, however, Giorgio, a local Red Cross volunteer, joined us at our table and told us that he had heard from the Coast Guard that the *sbarco* would begin around 8 o’clock. Estimating the arrival time of migrants in this way was possible because landings are typically coordinated by Italian authorities: rather than migrants arriving of their own accord, their boats are typically intercepted on the high seas and the passengers are subsequently transferred to a migrant reception centre, for example on Lampedusa.⁴

When we returned to the quay an hour’s time later, a diverse gathering of border workers – armed and unarmed – had arrived. The following list of actors present at Molo Favalaro should give a sense of the range of interests involved:

- Azienda Sanitaria Palermo (a regional health service provider)
- Carabinieri (the Italian military police)
- Guardia Costiera (the Coast Guard)
- Croce Siciliana (a privately run ambulance service)
- EASO (the European Asylum Support Office)
- Frontex (the European Border Management Agency)

- Guardia di Finanza (Italian military police dealing with, e.g., smuggling)
- IOM (the International Organization for Migration)
- Misericordia (a private Catholic community service organisation operating the migrant reception centre)
- Marina Militare (the navy)
- Polizia statale (the Italian police)
- The Red Cross (the local Lampedusan division, volunteering at the migrant reception centre)
- Save the Children
- Various church representatives.

After half an hour or so, the *sbarco* began. The first boat to approach Molo Favalaro was one of the Guardia Costiera's search-and-rescue vessels: the characteristic *Classe 300 Ammiraglio Francese* high-speed boat with an inflated orange fender all the way around the hull. The deck was jam-packed with mainly African men and a smaller number of women and children. The boat docked at the far end of the quay and, one by one, the migrants were helped ashore by the Misericordia, the Red Cross and the Guardia Costiera. The latter were sporting white full-body protection suits, while the Red Cross and Misericordia were wearing rubber gloves and face masks to protect them from potential infections that the migrants might have contracted en route to Europe.

Once on solid ground, visibly ill and pregnant migrants were taken directly to an ambulance that, in the meantime, had arrived at the other end of the quay. The rest were instructed to wait before being allowed to walk in single file to a bus that would take them to the migrant reception centre a ten-minute drive from Molo Favalaro. Most of the newcomers looked tired, but in good condition, all things considered. A small group of men were instructed to wait behind; I was told that they had scabies.

As these events unfolded, most migration management professionals did little more than observe the scene with an air of routine about them. A few made encouraging comments in broken English about the football jerseys that some of the migrant children were wearing, but most were simply standing there quietly, some smoking cigarettes or distracting themselves with their phones. The group of NGO workers that I had latched onto, however, were all smiles, handing out plastic cups of warm tea, isothermal blankets, and crackers to the migrants that

were now walking towards the bus. The tea and snacks were accompanied by an enthusiastic ‘welcome to Italy!’ or a ‘where are you from?’

Once the bus was full, it left the harbour and headed towards the reception centre. The remaining refugees were told to line up and wait for the bus to return. While they were waiting, the NGO workers served more snacks and water. A total of about 400 refugees landed on Molo Favalaro that morning, representing a wide range of nationalities. Based on the answers to ‘where are you from?’, Syrians, Moroccans, Somalis, Sudanese, and Iraqis landed on Lampedusa in what seemed to be a well-rehearsed, almost choreographed, fashion on the authorities’ part.

One aspect of this glimpse of ‘the border’ deserves to be explicitly highlighted: save for a couple of Red Cross volunteers, like Giorgio, everyone present on Molo Favalaro – from Carabinieri to humanitarian workers – came from elsewhere (mainland Italy, elsewhere in Europe, North Africa), and they were solely present on the island for migration management purposes. It was only those ‘in the loop’ that knew that the *sbarco* was taking place at all; I myself only found out when I incidentally met Marco. Most islanders would have had little or no knowledge of what was going on at the quay. Indeed, the events of that morning underlined that, if Lampedusa has come to constitute a political ‘centre’, as it were, this development has remained largely cut off from local lives.

Not Our Border, Not Our Wars

Via Roma, Lampedusa town’s main street, ends in a small plateau with a panoramic view of the port. This is a popular spot among locals to hang out and observe the quiet traffic of fishing boats and indulge in the colours of the Mediterranean sunsets. It is, however, also a perfect spot for watching something rather less meditative: migrant landings. Molo Favalaro is located just across the port basin from here.

But few Lampedusans seem to devote much attention to the politically potent events taking place literally next to their moored fishing boats. On occasion, a few elderly islanders may be seen half-observing a landing from the plateau at the end of the street for a few minutes before turning to other business. But, by and large, the landings are of no observable interest to the majority of the local population, as many locals appear to perceive the border as something fundamen-

tally external to the community – as if the island has merely become a strategic node in a system to which it does not quite belong, or at least only marginally so. Fabrizio, a civil servant, put it this way: ‘It is not our border and not our wars. If we see something at sea, we will notify the coast guard. But dealing with migration is not our business.’

In a completely mundane way, Fabrizio’s statement is reflected in the practically non-existing interaction between Lampedusans and the armed forces whose presence serves as a constant reminder of the island’s geopolitical importance.⁵ Many islanders display a downright scornful attitude towards those wearing uniforms, accusing them of laziness and indifference (see also Elbek 2021): ‘They are not exactly busy catching criminals, eh?’ Fabrizio said one day we were walking on the main street, nodding towards a squad of Carabinieri who were finishing what appeared to be their second round of coffee and pastries at an outside café table. Valentina, a teacher who had moved to Lampedusa from Sicily to work some 30 years ago and had stayed on since, expressed a similarly dismissive sentiment when telling me about ‘the primary tasks’ of the migration management officials: ‘having coffee in winter and going swimming in summer. Such a hard life!’

But local lives and migrant reception were not always this disjoined (see also Quagliariello 2021). When migrants began to arrive on Lampedusa in the wake of the Schengen Agreement in the early 1990s, the local population would care for and accommodate migrants on an ad hoc basis, providing food and temporary shelter (see also Elbek 2020; Friese 2012). In 1998, however, a state-subsidised reception centre was established, replacing such local hospitality initiatives. This marked the beginnings of a process of professionalisation of migrant reception on Lampedusa, and hence a fundamental reconfiguration of the relationship between Lampedusans and migrants, but also between Lampedusans and ‘the border’ more generally. As the migrant landing previously described illustrated, the jobs went almost entirely to non-local actors when migration management was professionalised. Unsurprisingly, this caused some local consternation over what was perceived as lost opportunities for work.

But, even though migration is no longer ‘our business’ and the local community has been effectively placed on the sideline of border management, ‘our business’ is literally feared to be at stake. Since the early 1990s, the local tourist industry has overtaken fishing as the island’s primary economic sector, and locals frequently worry that this source

of livelihood could suffer permanent damage from the media attention that the border attracts.⁶ This has especially been the case since the so-called Arab Spring, when thousands of Tunisians were stranded on Lampedusa, and the images of distress and despair that circulated in worldwide media led to a dramatic, if temporary, decrease in the earnings of the tourist industry, and it is commonly feared that something similar could happen in the future (Elbek 2020).

Yet, the experience of being ‘sidelined’ is in no way new on Lampedusa – on the contrary, the notion that ‘we’ are profoundly disconnected from the country’s political centre of gravity has deep historical roots that long precedes the island’s becoming a border – a ‘trajectory’ of its own, as Massey would have it. Looking more closely at Lampedusa’s geographical and political marginality, the following section provides some further ethnographic and historical subtext to Fabrizio’s description of the border as ‘not ours’.

Disconnections

The A4-sized sign at the closed petrol station on the pier was laconically precise: *gasolio e benzina esaurita*. We are out of diesel and petrol. The ferry that connects Lampedusa and Porto Empedocle in Sicily had been unable to land for several days in a row because of what the operator referred to as ‘adverse weather conditions’. The ferry carries both passengers and cargo, but its primary importance is located below the passenger deck. Owing to Lampedusa’s geographical remoteness and low degree of self-sufficiency, practically all commodities must be shipped to the island – including necessities such as fuel, clean drinking water, and flour.

The importance of the ferry should be measured against the economic landscape of the island. Although Lampedusa was originally populated to establish an agricultural colony in the 1840s, farming efforts were undermined by rapid erosion of the soil and uncontrolled deforestation related to charcoal production – a resource that had to be produced locally because of the island’s geographical circumstances (Li Causi 1987). Today, no agriculture remains on the island except for some private vegetable gardens. And, unlike the neighbouring island of Linosa, there is no livestock on Lampedusa except for a few herds of sheep that sustain a very limited local production of ricotta and milk.

With fishing and tourism being the primary means of local subsistence, the ferry is really the community's lifeline.

In principle, the ferry should arrive and depart daily, providing a stable supply of goods and a reliable means of transportation for Lampedusa's inhabitants. Too often, however, reality falls short of the ideal, and the ferry is continuously cancelled, particularly in autumn and winter (the off-season both in fishing and tourism), when weather conditions at sea often render the passage from Sicily impossible. The ferry may be absent for days, occasionally weeks, on end, and even on clear days the ferry may be unable to land on Lampedusa if conditions are windy. This means that even the most basic commodities can be in scarce supply. Consequently, the ferry is always a topic of conversation among Lampedusans, many of whom frantically follow weather forecasts to assess the probability of the ferry's possible arrival ('It might come on Thursday or Friday; they say that the wind will be down to four knots'). Edwin Ardener's observation that 'remote areas are obsessed with communications: the one road, the one ferry' (1987, 46) springs to mind here.

On a windy February afternoon, I was having coffee with Valentina, the teacher, at her meeting point of choice: the portside bar where the NGO workers and I had waited for the migrant landing to take place. When we met, the ferry had been absent for the better part of a week, which was nothing out of the ordinary for this time of year. Valentina recalled one particularly rough winter that had, nevertheless, made the potential consequences of Lampedusa's isolation clear to her. After a series of the 'typical' seasonal cancellations, the ferry's engine had broken, and the repairs had taken several weeks to complete. The island had been completely disconnected from the rest of the country for so long that flour and other indispensable foodstuffs had to be rationed: 'I had never heard about anything like that before – apart from what my grandmother had told me about the war!'

Such infrastructural disconnections are a challenge in relation not only to importing goods to Lampedusa but also to getting them away. The unreliability of the ferry constitutes a recurrent economic threat to the island's fishermen, whose livelihoods mainly revolve around the export of squid and oily fish (slightly less so in summer, when tourists consume large amounts of locally caught fish and seafood). Most of the year, the primary markets for the Lampedusan fishermen are in Sicily (Catania and Palermo) – and, with a transfer time to southern Sicily of

approximately ten hours, delivering freshly caught fish to the island's urban centres is already a battle against time. 'The fish is thrown away too often,' Paolo (the fisherman to whom I referred in the beginning) said, explaining how just a few days' delay will result in a spoiled catch and labour and money wasted for the fishermen.

But there are even graver implications to isolation than a limited selection of fresh produce, a spoiled catch every now and then, and the occasional shutdown due to fuel shortages. For many islanders, the lack of health services constitutes the single biggest everyday challenge to living on Lampedusa. Take Giuseppe, for example, a retired sailor probably in his late fifties. One morning, I bumped into him *per caso* in Via Roma after not having seen him for a few weeks. We shook hands, and I asked him how he was doing. 'You know about my illness?' he asked. I said that I did not, and he explained that he had been hospitalised in Sicily to receive surgical cancer treatment some years ago, and that the result was never really followed up on. I asked him how that was possible, and he simply replied that 'the system doesn't work'. For Giuseppe, the apparent dysfunction of 'the system' was inseparable from Lampedusa's remote geography: 'I pay the same taxes as those in Rome and Milan, but I don't get the same out of it.' He continued: 'You know, Lampedusa is far away from everything, so you just need to take care of yourself.' Giuseppe passed away a few months after our conversation.⁷

While there is a helicopter service available for immediate transfer to Sicily in case of acutely life-threatening incidents, the only medical clinic on Lampedusa is a minor *poliambulatorio* without possibilities for actual hospitalisation, let alone treatment of complicated illnesses. Such cases require that Lampedusans bear the significant expenses of moving temporarily to Sicily to seek long-term medical attention. In the case of childbirth, mothers-to-be must leave Lampedusa approximately a month before giving birth due to air-travel restrictions and the ferry's unreliability. Additionally, it is rare that medical professionals stay on Lampedusa for very long – instead, doctors from the mainland are stationed for shorter periods of time only to be replaced by others, unable to build rapport with locals and acquire knowledge of individual needs and situations. 'They [the health system] simply let them die,' according to a woman engaged in community work with the elderly.

An Island with a Capital ‘I’

As the previous section illustrated, infrastructure can reveal difficult relations between people, materiality, and the realm of the political (see also Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2015; Larkin 2013). This seems to be the case not least due to the link between infrastructural connections and notions of territorial integrity and cohesion (Harvey and Knox 2015; Reeves 2017). Indeed, on Lampedusa, the relative lack of functioning infrastructure is a recurring source of frustration and insecurities, but, just as importantly, it serves as an ever-present confirmation of the island’s marginality and the immobility of its people. In broader terms, I consider all of the ‘infrastructural anecdotes’ recounted in this chapter to be indicative of a more general experience of being somewhat cut off from the rest of the polity – i.e. physical and symbolic disconnections that produce a sense of apartness, of inhabiting a deeply marginal place. This experience revolves particularly around the necessity of self-sufficiency, what Giuseppe described as the need ‘to take care of yourself’. To reverse James Scott’s observation that infrastructural connections can be ‘distance-demolishing technologies’ (Scott 2009, xxi), malfunctioning ones may be ‘distance-producing’.

Now, in the age of the internet and social media – a sort of infrastructure that does, in fact, work reasonably well when power cuts do not occur – marginality has a rather different face than, say, in the 1950s and 1960s, when Giuseppe was growing up and Lampedusa had neither electricity nor sewers. Back then, the almost complete absence of public investment combined with a lack of economic reward in the fishing industry resulted in ‘third-world living conditions’ (Taranto 2016, 41). Donkeys and mules were perfectly common means of transportation around the time that car manufacture and road construction in the country’s northern provinces placed Italy at the forefront of Western Europe’s post-war industrial boom (Ginsborg 1990, 212–14). One very rarely encounters this kind of destitution on Lampedusa today. Even though Gianfranco Rosi’s film *Fuocoammare* (*Fire at Sea*) – winner of the Golden Bear at the 2016 Berlinale and one of a great many recent cultural productions that testify to Lampedusa’s political importance as a border – may have given its audience the impression that the island’s children only play with sticks, stones, and slingshots, modern technology and social media have become an integral part of life on Lampedusa as much as everywhere else. Virtual connections

seem especially important when physical ones are hard to come by. ‘We, too, have iPads, you know,’ as a friend put it rather sourly after having watched the film. Yet, if Third World conditions have been relegated to the (quite recent) past, this is almost entirely due to the advent of the island’s tourist industry, which attracts as many as 60,000 paying visitors each summer. In the past 25 years or so, mass tourism has brought a certain level of affluence to Lampedusa – including, not least, iPads.

But a sense of isolation and difference does remain deep-seated. Several of my interlocutors described the ‘special sensation’ of remoteness as one of Lampedusa’s primary tourist attractions – in addition, of course, to seafood and splendid beaches. And, while tourism has arguably brought Lampedusa ‘closer’ to the mainland, it has also become a new arena for explicit articulations of difference vis-à-vis the national mainstream. The local tourist industry largely brands itself on the island’s ‘Oriental’ nature: tourists are often reminded how Lampedusa is ‘closer to Africa than Sicily’, and local restaurants carry names such as *Il Saraceno* (the Saracen) and *Le Mille e Una Notte* (The Thousand and One Nights). Inside these establishments, the island’s geological attachment to the African continent rather than the European one is sure to come up in many a conversation over plates of fish *couscous*, a local signature dish.⁸ Only half-jokingly, if at all, did my interlocutors refer to tourists arriving from ‘up there in Italy’.

Such ‘self-Orientalisation’ may well be understood as a plain and benign case of authenticity branding in the tourism business, but it is also superimposed on the semantics of the historical marginalisation of Italy’s south. Since national unification in the mid-19th century, associations with Africa have functioned as a ‘governing metaphor’ in placing the country’s southern provinces on the sideline of the national community (Pugliese 2009, 665). Within the new unified Kingdom of Italy, which was largely a Piedmontese (i.e. northern) project, the southern provinces became increasingly marginalised politically and economically. Throughout the 19th century, an image of the historically poorer south as culturally ‘backward’ and fundamentally inferior to its northern counterpart became deeply ingrained in the country’s symbolic geography⁹ (Dickie 1999; Moe 2002; Riall 1994). Suffice it to note here that the undifferentiated ‘south’ in many ways emerged as the negative pole of a north–south axis, a ‘margin’ against which the new nation, ostensibly committed to ‘progress’ and ‘civilization,’ defined

itself (Forgacs 2014). This tenacious north–south binarism, which is commonly referred to as ‘the southern question’ (*la questione meridionale*), has been construed as a form of intra-national ‘neo-Orientalism’ (Schneider 1998).

Against this backdrop, it is not an insignificant detail that Lampedusa is literally the south of the south. In Italy, ‘south’ is not just a marker of location or direction but also a signifier of marginalisation and cultural, political, and economic subordination. Lampedusa is, in addition to its cartographic ‘southernness,’ materially disconnected from the already marginalised south. Valentina, the teacher, described Lampedusa’s state of being doubly marginal in this way: ‘Lampedusa ... it is definitely an island with a capital “I”’

Conclusion

‘The Mediterranean,’ as Fernand Braudel noted many years ago, ‘speaks with many voices’ (1972, 13). This seems a fitting closing note for this chapter, insofar as the two ‘Lampedusas’ that I have described – the border hub and the remote island, respectively – point to how ‘the Mediterranean’ may be construed as a (conceptual and physical) space that is simultaneously out of sight and at the centre of attention. While Lampedusa’s recent role as a symbolic and strategic border is tightly linked to the post-Schengen fashioning of the Mediterranean as the contentious threshold between the European Union and its exterior, the tenacious local experience of being on the fringes of the national and European communities evokes much older Mediterranean ‘voices’ that speak of political and economic peripherality (see also Ben-Yehoyada, Cabot, and Silverstein 2020; Viscomi and Rommel, [Chapter 1](#) in this volume). By foregrounding such multiplicity, the chapter has gone against the grain of what could be called a ‘palimpsestic’ understanding of Lampedusa’s becoming a border: even if the island has moved to the centre of political and media attention, this has not overwritten other and quite different senses of location.

Inspired especially by Massey’s theorisation of space as a heterogeneous accumulation of ‘stories-so-far,’ I have thus portrayed Lampedusa as a condensed setting for observing the interface between two quite different Mediterranean constellations that exist in parallel and tension with one another within the same limited geographical space. The border is understood by locals as ‘not our business’ – a description

that refers to how migration is managed almost entirely by non-local actors, but also more broadly evokes an understanding of the border as related to political processes to which ‘we’ do not quite belong. This points to how, from a local perspective, the border is commonly made sense of through the prism of Lampedusa’s marginality. To borrow another phrase from Doreen Massey, the border in this way appears to be experienced by locals as a sort of “‘outside” that can be found within’ (2007, 193): while physically close, it is experienced as an external force that has made its way ‘in’, as it were. Indeed, from the perspective of my Lampedusan interlocutors, locating oneself and locating the border appear to be two quite different things: the border has certainly acquired a physiognomy on Lampedusa, but the logics that dictate it appear to be historically and experientially located elsewhere.

Notes

- 1 Fieldwork was carried out during my doctoral studies at Aarhus University (2015–2020).
- 2 This was certainly evidenced when Italian then-minister of the interior, Matteo Salvini, ordered the closure of the country’s ports for vessels carrying migrants, which resulted in the impounding of *The Aquarius* and *The Sea Watch 3*, search-and-rescue vessels belonging to Médecins Sans Frontières and the aid organisation Sea Watch, respectively (Morosi 2019; Ziniti 2018).
- 3 Now Rassemblement National.
- 4 This dynamic has changed somewhat in recent years as search-and-rescue efforts have been lessened. This has led to an increase in so-called *sbarchi fantasma* – ‘ghost landings’ – where migrants arrive on their own.
- 5 Minimal interaction is generally the rule, but there is a noteworthy exception: a minor portion of Lampedusans have come to benefit from a small-scale ‘border economy’, most importantly grocers, restaurateurs, and hotel owners. Like everybody else, border workers need to sleep and eat (see Elbek 2021).
- 6 This points to a significant comparative perspective: beyond Lampedusa, the ‘migrant crisis’ has repercussions across the entire Mediterranean space, and the Greek islands especially seem to be caught in a similar tension between economic reliance on a fragile ‘hospitality industry’ and negotiations of the ‘limits of hospitality’ (see also Friese 2010).
- 7 See Greco (2016) for further reflections on regional health inequalities in Italy.
- 8 Originating in North Africa, couscous is a common staple across the south of Italy. On the one hand, such culinary connections bear obvious testament to how the Mediterranean has always been a space of interaction and exchange. But, on the other hand, they also implicitly invoke the sea’s symbolic role as a space of separation between ‘the West and the Rest’. In fact, the dish was used actively in an anti-southern political campaign by the northern chauvinist party Lega Nord some years ago: ‘Si alla polenta, no al cous cous’ was one of many

controversial slogans employed by the party. The overall message seemed to be that ‘real’ Italians do not eat ‘African’ food (cf. Woods 2009).

- 9 In his famous autobiographical novel *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ stopped at Eboli), Carlo Levi made a noteworthy observation on the relationship between infrastructure and the marginality of the South: in Levi’s narrative, Eboli represented the southernmost outpost of ‘civilisation’, in part because the roads and the train tracks did not go any further south (1970, ix).

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