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## *Fascism's Return to Italy*



*Mural in Riace, Italy.*

*The arrest of Domenico Lucano, the revolutionary Italian mayor of Riace, Calabria noted for welcoming immigrants with a utopian vision for human dignity and peaceful coexistence.*

Riace (pronounced Riach with a long A at the end) is a small Calabrian town in the south of Italy on the Ionian Sea. This area of Calabria is known for its spectacular coastline, white sand beaches and beautiful aquamarine waters. It is also known for its powerful

mafia, l'ndrangheta, that dominates the territory with its clan-controlled corruption that infiltrates most aspects of the political and economic reality, while orchestrating the global heroin trade through the region's massive industrial ports. But Calabria is also renowned for its utopian visionaries and struggle for a better human condition.

Like many Calabrian towns, the old historic village of Riace sits up in the hills, where it would be protected from invasions by pirates and invaders during medieval times. There is a more modern sea side development down below that is geared to summer tourism and beach goers. The area around Riace is arid and desert like with white colored earth dotted with olive groves and fruit trees that seem struggling to survive. Also, like many southern Italian towns, by the 1990s, Riace itself was largely a ghost town struggling to survive. Its narrow winding streets and charming stone buildings were largely abandoned when a major tomato canning facility shut down and its citizens went looking for work in the industrialized north.

By 1998 the old agrarian way of life that was far more sustainable and locally based around food production and artisanal shops had disappeared with the onset of "Americanization," mass production and mass consumerism. Riace's abandoned economy could not even support a local bar/café or restaurant due to its shrinking population, and its local schools were at risk of shutting down. Like many southern Italian towns, it was on the verge of becoming uninhabited altogether.

It was in 1998 that a boatload of 200 Kurdish refugees escaping political persecution in Iraq, Syria and Turkey came ashore on a beach near Riace. As many well know, for decades there has been a flood of migrants struggling to reach the mainland of Europe. They come from the exploited, poverty starved and war-ravaged regions of Africa and the Middle East. Thousands of these refugees haven't made it and have died at sea during their perilous journey. They come from countries like Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Libya, Burkina Faso, Somalia and Rwanda, to name a few that are more commonly known for their strife, famine and war.

As a young leftist activist at the time, the future and current mayor, Domenico Lucano, had a vision. He proposed to house these refugees in the abandoned and crumbling hillside town of Riace instead of having these people endure the months long stays in the migrant detention camps around the south of Italy. From there his vision grew. In 1999 Domenico Lucano, known as Mimmo, created an association called the Future Cities project and embarked on a plan to repopulate his town of Riace with migrants from all over the world. Challenging the racism and fear of strangers that fueled anti-immigrant trends, Lucano

envisioned the creation of an integrated community with local residents and migrants from all around Africa and the Middle East working side by side to revive the town and rejuvenate the local economy. His vision steadily became a reality and has been heralded as a model of human dignity, solidarity and integration by the United Nations and human rights organizations, activists and leaders from all over the world.

With funding from the European Union geared toward supporting the subsistence needs of the migrant population, Mimmo Lucano thought outside the box and invested in the creation of artisanal shops, restaurants and social centers that employed and empowered the migrant population while rejuvenating the local economy. Local citizens worked side by side with migrants and a harmonious model of integration was created that became known as the world's foremost model of welcoming immigrants while rejuvenating the local economy. In 2012 Lucano created a local currency that was able to be used by residents in the shops, restaurants and local cafes. The town of Riace was reborn with a resilient and beautiful celebration of human dignity and respect for diversity. By 2014 there were residents representing over twenty countries and the schools were thriving with local and migrant children growing side by side and many citizens that had abandoned the town returned home from the north to participate in this Future Cities model for humanity. Contrasting the eco-mafia run garbage collection system in the Ionian region of Calabria, Mimmo Lucano created a door to door recycling system using 13 donkeys and run by two local cooperatives employing locals and migrants working side by side. The town of Riace reduced its garbage output by 50 percent using this model and was planning on a production of donkey milk as well. The donkeys were also part of therapy sessions that are proven to improve the social and psychological condition of children and adults suffering from PTSD, related to the traumas that many of these migrants have endured, autism and other such ailments. Human and animal interaction has proven effective in alleviating some of the negative symptoms associated with these conditions.

Despite its amazing successes, Riace's Future Cities project has not been welcomed with open arms by the local mafia and is now under a full fledged attack by the xenophobic and racist Italian government led by interior minister Matteo Salvini. The mafia in Calabria is brutal and has seen Riace's model of integration and dignity as a threat. In Calabria there are documented cases of present day slavery where migrant workers are exploited to harvest crops and clean streets and often are only provided tents to sleep and one meal a day as compensation. In 2010 there was an actual slave revolt in the nearby town of

Rosarno against the local mafia, and slavery continues until this day, now being fueled by the xenophobia, racism and neofacism of the state.

Beginning in 2017 the funding provided to Riace to support its migrant population was cut off and the mayor was indicted for the misuse of funds, aiding illegal immigration and illegally contracting garbage removal. These indictments by the state just so happened to coincide with the impending release of a TV series based on the model of Riace called “Tutto il mondo e’ un Paese,” (All the World Is One Country) produced by RAI, the Italian state television. This series depicts Riace as a beautiful model of human solidarity that runs completely counter to the racist and neofascist politics of the coalition government between the populist 5 Star Movement and the historically xenophobic Lega Nord. On the pretext of these indictments this series, featuring some of the biggest stars of Italian cinema was blocked from the airwaves. In the late spring of this year Domenico Lucano began a hunger strike to protest the State’s attack on Riace. This summer people converged on Riace from all over the world to demonstrate their support and solidarity for the project.

Two weeks ago I was able to go to Riace and witness the situation on the ground firsthand and meet briefly with the mayor. The situation is terrible. All the shops and initiatives have been shut down. The mayor was extremely distressed and frantic. Some of the migrant residents were leaving to try and find work elsewhere. An online collection of 300,000 euros was not enough to keep the Future Cities project operational and there were forces working to have the association evicted from its headquarters.

After years of economic crisis and government stagnation after Berlusconi and the abysmal failure of the Italian Democratic Party created in the guise of the US Democratic party, a tide of neofascism is sweeping the country. The populist 5 star Movement founded by comic turned politician Beppe Grillo has taken a sharp right turn and formed a coalition with the xenophobic, blatantly racist and anti-immigrant Lega Nord. Matteo Salvini, the interior minister has become the de-facto leader of the country and has singled out the mayor of Riace with derogatory slurs and insults. Just last week Salvini announced anti-immigrant legislation that would slash funding to the immigrant community. This comes after months of the closed border polices and severe restrictions being placed on search and rescue missions by human rights organizations. Close to 2,000 migrants are known to have died at sea trying to cross the Mediterranean so far this year, but many fear that this number is a low estimate as it is difficult to determine what is happening as the ports are on lockdown.

Now, this Tuesday, Mimmo Lucano, the mayor of Riace was put under house arrest for aiding illegal immigration into the country. It is truly a travesty of justice and a frightening moment as fascism has returned to Italy with state sponsored persecution of political dissidents happening again. As I write a mass mobilization is underway with a major demonstration of solidarity being organized in Riace this Saturday and in major cities across the country. There is a resistance on the rise but it is facing an emboldened racist and fascist police state that has been empowered bilaterally by the Trump administration. Italians are comparing this situation to the persecution under Hitler in Nazi Germany. And just this week the US Ambassador to Italy, Goldman Sachs operative, Republican financier and Trump stooge Lewis Eisenberg stated that Italy is the quintessential model of democracy in the world. *Tutto il Mondo e' Un Paese*, All the World is One Country. Time to rise together.