

The economic backstage of the landings of emigrants on the island of Lampedusa. An exemplary case of migration industry

by *Andrea Calabretta** and *Francesco Della Puppa***

Abstract: This article focuses on Lampedusa as an exemplary case study of economic transformation brought about by migration, as well as the creation of a ‘migration industry’.

On the basis of interviews with key informants and a reconstruction of the secondary literature, it shows how migration has given international visibility to the island, starting from the first arrivals of emigrants in the 1990s, through the increase in landings during the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, and up to the present. This has fed various processes of conversion from an economy based on fishing towards an economy built around relatively recent tourism. Furthermore, it highlights how the national, European and international policies of migration governance have contributed to creating an industry based on consumption by the military, police, volunteers, health and humanitarian personnel present on the island and the impact this has had on the local service sector.

Keywords: migration industry; migration satellite activities; Lampedusa; tourism; refugees and asylum seekers.

Il retroscena economico degli sbarchi degli emigranti sull’isola di Lampedusa. Un caso esemplare di indotto migratorio

Riassunto: L’articolo si focalizza su Lampedusa come caso studio esemplare di trasformazione economica agita dall’immigrazione e di creazione di un vero e proprio ‘indotto migratorio’.

Sulla base di interviste a testimoni privilegiati e ricostruzione della letteratura specializzata, si mostrerà come – a partire dai primi arrivi di emigranti sull’isola negli anni ’90, fino all’intensificazione degli sbarchi durante le così dette ‘Primavere arabe’ e negli anni recenti – l’immigrazione abbia dato visibilità internazionale all’isola, alimentando, così, processi di conversione di un’economia basata sulla

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pesca, a favore di un'economia costruita attorno a una relativamente recente vocazione turistica. Inoltre, verrà messo in luce come le politiche, nazionali e internazionali, di governo dell'immigrazione abbiano contribuito a creare un indotto economico, costituito dai consumi e dall'impulso che il personale militare, delle forze dell'ordine, sanitario e umanitario, presente sull'isola, ha dato al terziario locale.

Parole-chiave: industria migratoria; indotto migratorio; Lampedusa; turismo; rifugiati e richiedenti asilo.

First Submission: 04 December 2023

Accepted: 20 May 2024

«The real challenge starts now»¹

Dear passengers, welcome back on board Inflight, the magazine of DAT Volidisicilia, a company that believes in the tourist development (and other types of development) of the Sicilian islands. These small islands experienced the positive side of the pandemic. Unprecedented flows of tourists, especially of domestic tourists, converged on them, raising their level of attractiveness to tourists. But the real challenge starts now. The time has come to look at making those connections more stable and at engaging in serious planning to establish [the islands] in the context of international tourism now that the pandemic emergency is over.

Thus opens the June and July 2022 editorial of the in-flight magazine of the Danish airline that for years has been given the contract to manage one of the only air links between the airports of Palermo and Catania and the island of Lampedusa. This route has proved economically advantageous, especially in the last fifteen years. Every summer the largest and most famous of the Pelagic Islands is converged on by vast numbers of tourists from Italy and abroad, transforming its economy to centre around this relatively recent tourism.

In this article we will analyse how the socio-economic transformations of Lampedusa, and in particular its touristification, have intertwined with (and are partially fuelled by) migrant landings on the island. We will also highlight how national and international immigration policies have

1. The paper is the joint work of the authors. For academic evaluation purposes only, paragraphs 3, 4, and 5 should be attributed to Andrea Calabretta, paragraphs 1, 2, Conclusion and the introductory paragraph to Francesco Della Puppa.

contributed to the creation of an industry based on consumption by military, law enforcement, volunteers, health, and humanitarian personnel.

1. Lampedusa in research

For at least fifteen years, Lampedusa has had a prominent place in the scientific literature on migration. Considered a “border par excellence” (Cuttitta, 2015a), “a fundamental hub of the border spectacle of irregular migrations” (Gilberti and Queirolo Palmas, 2022), “synonymous with the European migratory crisis” (Khrebtan-Hörhager, 2015) and “a prime observatory of major processes” (Aime, 2018), the island has risen to become one of the main research sites for the analysis of migrations in the Mediterranean (Aime, 2018; Anderlini and Fravega, 2023; Montagna, 2023) and is seen as a synecdoche for the current “age of migrations”.

Of particular interest is the construction of the border itself and of its material and symbolic apparatus (Bassi, 2018). This process, initiated in the 1990s (Cuttitta, 2015b) and intensified in 2011 (Campesi, 2011), followed the usual pattern of the spectacularisation of the border (Cuttitta, 2012), its political instrumentalisation (Ambrosini, 2017; Schmoll, 2018), and its representation as a territory in “crisis” (Mazzara, 2016). Other studies have focused on the materiality of border practices, starting with the construction of the hotspot (Tassin, 2016), and the relations between the latter and the social fabric of the island (Orsini, 2016; Elbek, 2021), investigating the practices of managing migrants (Gatta, 2011; 2012) and the legal assumptions associated with that (Natale, 2014; Masera, 2014). Alongside this strand is the analysis of death at the border, using both socio-anthropological (Aime, 2018; Ritaine, 2016; Corso, 2023) and medical knowledge (Bertoglio *et al.*, 2020).

Other studies have investigated the processes of racialisation and subordination that are created at the Lampedusa border and then projected throughout the emigrants’ onward journeys (Orsini, 2014; Dines *et al.*, 2015; Giuliani, 2017). There have also been numerous specific research studies on the action of solidarity networks on the island (Filippi *et al.*, 2021), the artistic practices of some emigrants (Mazzara, 2015), and the changing relationship between the local population and the newcomers (Franceschelli, 2019; Tassin, 2014; Orsini, 2015) that includes the relationship between Lampedusians and the Italian state (Puggioni, 2015; Franceschelli, 2020) and the relationship between migration and the tourism sector (Di Matteo, 2017; Vietti, 2019). Another central theme is the islanders’ narratives of migration, caught between the desire to forget the migrants passing through the island

(Triulzi, 2016) and the need to pay attention to them (Mazzara, 2017), also through practices of musealisation (Gatta and Muzzopappa, 2012; Melotti *et al.*, 2017). But even more dominant is the analysis of media narratives about Lampedusa and its “crises”, such as that in 2011 (Ieracitano, 2014) and after the shipwreck on 3 October 2013 (Giubilaro, 2017), leading various researchers to observe differences in the media coverage of the migration phenomenon in Europe (De Swert *et al.*, 2015; Zerback, 2020), including developments and changes in the ways it was framed (Bruno, 2014; Benert and Beier, 2016).

However, despite the variety and breadth of attention given to the island, the research does not seem to have addressed the economic impacts of the border and its management. This is the issue of the so-called “migration industry”, a term coined by Cohen (1997) to define the economic value of activities facilitating (legal and illegal) migration. The term’s scope has since broadened to include “the set of non-state actors providing services that facilitate, limit or aid international migration” (Nyberg Sorensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013:7), meaning it also now encompasses migration control and rescue. On closer inspection it becomes clear that the “migration industry” contributes to shaping migratory mobilities before, during and after migration (Alpes, 2012; Cranston, 2016; Glick-Schiller, 2009; Spaan and Hillmann, 2013) and a vast literature has recently been created on the topic (Cranston *et al.*, 2018) to the point of making it a veritable research field (Nyberg Sorensen and Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2013). Further extensions of this field of study can be observed in research that – focusing more on the post-migratory phases of migrant reception – developed the concept of “reception industry” (Bartolini *et al.*, 2020). The specific context of Lampedusa allows us to apply the “migration industry” perspective in a particular way, centred not so much on the emergence of services facilitating movement, but on the industry developed as a result of the presence of actors linked to the “management” of emigrants and migratory movements – whether that be institutional management aimed at governing and controlling migrants or third sector and NGO management driven by solidarity or humanitarian concerns. The Lampedusan context also allows us to focus on the economic effects of migration, in terms of the growth in tourist numbers due to the increased visibility of the island following the increase in emigrant arrivals.

Based on these considerations, the article seeks to answer several research questions: How has the economy of Lampedusa changed in recent decades? What has been the impact of migratory movements on the most important economic sectors, such as tourism? What is the economic impact of the presence of military, volunteers and humanitarian personnel dedicated to the

reception and control of migrants? And what is the intertwining between these presences and tourism?

After a methodological paragraph, the article goes on to illustrate the growth of the tourist sector in Lampedusa (par. 3) and then analyses the relationships between tourist and migratory movements and their representations (par. 4). Finally, it examines how the presence of military, volunteers and humanitarian personnel (including volunteers) affects the island's economic structure (par. 5). A conclusion section closes the article.

2. Methodological note

This work began when one of us made a number of visits to Lampedusa between 2021 and 2023, both during the tourist season and “out of season”, during which the research question on the economic impacts that migration and its management system had on Lampedusa began to take form. This *in loco* experience allowed us to develop some ethnographic observations and conduct some exploratory interviews with inhabitants and practitioners active on the island, and, in the following months, it has been complemented by other qualitative and, in part, quantitative data collection.

There was firstly a careful and in-depth analysis of the literature which, especially in the last decade, has heavily focused on Lampedusa and its “borderisation”. This allowed us to better frame the research question and gather further insights. Our analysis of the scientific literature was accompanied by research on the grey literature and in the databases of the institutions involved in migration management. The aim was to extrapolate useful data for understanding the dimensions of the migration management system on Lampedusa and the economy it creates.

Finally, in 2023 we carried out 13 in-depth interviews with permanent and temporary inhabitants of the island – specifically, tourism workers, NGO practitioners, third sector workers, and activists. Beginning from the personal experience of each interviewee, we analysed the transformations undergone by the island over the last two decades, the relationship between (the management of) migration and the local socio-economic fabric, and the impact – economic and otherwise – of the presence of the armed forces, the police and the voluntary and humanitarian sector.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically. The central issues which emerged were the touristification of Lampedusa, its media representation, the complex relationship between migratory and tourist mobility, and the gradual exclusion of the islanders from the management of migration. By combining data from the interviews with

insights from the literature and *in loco* observation, we were able to develop a response to the initial research question.

3. From fishing to tourism

3.1. *The historical coordinates of the change*

Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of the socio-economic impacts that migration and its management has had on Lampedusa, it would be opportune to briefly mention their context. As Giuseppe Surico (2020) writes, the Bourbon colonisation of Lampedusa began in 1843 with attempts to exploit the island for agriculture, a project which soon failed due to its harsh terrain and water scarcity. In the last two decades of the 19th century the fishing sector and the processing and marketing of fish and sponges took off, improving the islanders' material conditions. Despite this, Lampedusa remained on the fringes of national attention and even in the 1960s still had no sewage system, tarmacked roads, telephone connections or sanitary facilities, all of which would only arrive at the onset of the 1970s. The construction of the airport in that period was central to the island's future, but in the early 1980s tourism was still limited:

this was a small community of fishermen who lived with dignity from their work – there was very little tourism, there were a few hundred tourists, mainly foreigners (Antonino Taranto, Historical Archives of Lampedusa)².

Local inhabitants and Lampedusan historians place the moment of transition from elite to mass tourism in 1986 following “the publicity given to these beautiful islands by the launching of two missiles by the Libyans” (Rizzo, 1998: 285). In the spring of 1986, in response to the US bombing of Tripoli, Gaddafi launched two Scud missiles against the NATO outpost on the island. Although the missiles fell into the water, causing no damage, the attack undoubtedly changed the fate of Lampedusa:

You start to see this gorgeous sea, these still uncontaminated beaches and [...] this huge tourist boom is created, thousands and thousands of people start to arrive (Antonino Taranto, Historical Archives of Lampedusa).

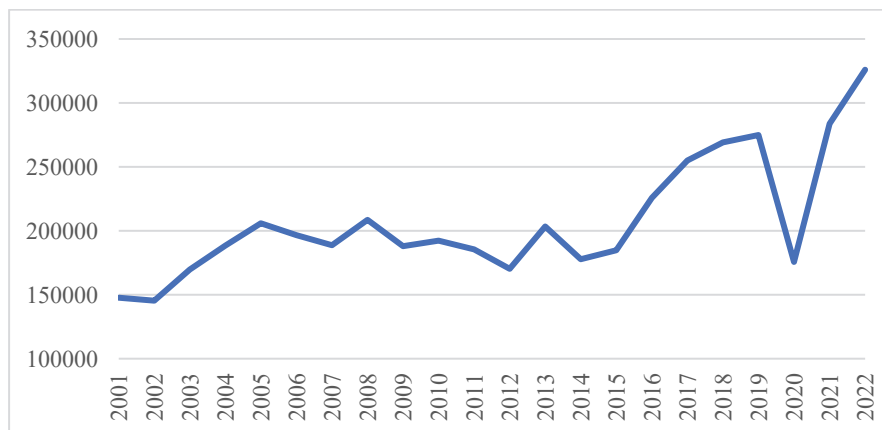
2. Antonino Taranto was president of the Historical Archive of Lampedusa (Archivio Storico di Lampedusa) through which he had a huge impact on the study and memorialisation of local history. He also carried out many civic engagement initiatives. His testimony, gathered shortly before his death, was central to the development of this article.

From that moment on, and even more so in the 1990s, when seasonal flights began to connect the island with the cities of central and northern Italy, Lampedusa changed, filling up with restaurants and shops for the ever more numerous tourists. Not long afterwards, the more laborious and less profitable business of fishing was thrown into crisis: «today, it is all hoteliers, restaurateurs, rentals, and small traders displaying their wares to thousands of tourists, and pensioners» (Surico, 2020: 227).

3.2. Tourist “monoculture” and its effects

As was enthusiastically celebrated in the editorial of the on-board magazine cited at the beginning, during the pandemic, in a few months there was a shift from a block on all tourist movements to a surge in numbers, completely ignoring the lesson, taught by the pandemic itself, of the risks of a tourist monoculture (Giuzio, 2023). In this sense too, Lampedusa is emblematic.

Fig. 1 - Passengers using Lampedusa airport



Source: Enac (2022: 168)

As mentioned above, access to cheap and flexible transport undoubtedly drives mass arrivals, until filling up the island as Fabio states:

Mah, you know the place is full, it's not full, it's definitely not determined by the migration situation, but maybe by expensive flights. Years when prices became affordable for everyone, and years when prices, because of what was happening in the world, rose (Fabio, tourism worker)³.

The increase in flights to Lampedusa⁴ has been accompanied by a growth in tourist numbers (Fig. 1), estimated to be at less than 60,000 a year in the mid-1990s (Rizzo, 1998), five times lower than the current figures. In recent decades, the conversion of Lampedusa to a tourist economy therefore appears complete:

we now have almost the entire population involved in tourism or related activities either directly or indirectly. Anyway, tourism dominates. [...] At a certain point, you didn't understand a thing because everyone, from dawn to dusk, was doing a job like a firefighter, for example, and the next morning they were tourist entrepreneurs with flats, houses, cars, rentals... (Vincenzo, hotelier).

This exponential growth has been accompanied by a gradual lengthening of the tourist season, which now extends from May to October and resulted in a multiplication of what is on offer to tourists. According to the research participants, the development of this tourist "monoculture" seems to have left deep marks on the local social fabric. They refer above all to the feeling of having reached the limit of the island's possible exploitation, but also to the undermining of social ties between local people who were now engaged in a race for individual enrichment through the tourist industry, which some said even led to young people dropping out from education, as they were sure they would get well-paying jobs. Another crucial element seems to be the persistent problems that affect the island's population in their daily lives (waste management, the absence of hospital facilities, and discontinuity in schooling), difficulties that are not affected by economic development from tourism. Thus, the tourist masses seem to weigh on the island's infrastructure (e.g. in terms of waste production, road use etc.). If this negative impact

3. Apart from Antonino Taranto, all of the other interviewees are given a pseudonym.

4. Even though, up to a few years ago, some low-cost airlines did not fly to the island because according to their feasibility studies at least 20,000 places for tourists would have been required, and the island had many less. It took them a few years to understand that in Lampedusa there were at least twice those places, but they couldn't be easily counted because most were off the books (Aime, 2018).

affects all the island's inhabitants, on the contrary, the benefits linked to the tourist presence, as seen, are privately distributed among the tourism workers. Finally, it is precisely the mobile and temporary nature of the tourist presence that makes it possible to postpone long-term interventions for the benefit of the inhabitants, as in the case of the shortage of medical specialists on the island.

4. Between tourism and immigration

As has already been outlined, Lampedusa is home to the figures par excellence of modern mobility (Bauman, 1998): on the one hand, those who come from the Global South making it an “emblematic place” of migration in the Mediterranean (Di Matteo, 2021); and, on the other hand, those who come from the Global North and – through tourism – constitute the main source of wealth for the local population. Understanding the complex relationships between these two mobilities (Williams and Hall, 2000; Choe and Lugosi, 2022) thus seems necessary in order to identify the economic impacts of migration on the island.

4.1. Fuelling the fame

If the celebrity achieved by Lampedusa due to the 1986 missile launches appears to have marked a turning point in its tourist economy, the media focus on migration seems to have played a more ambivalent but certainly useful role in maintaining the island's fame. The events of the so-called Arab Spring were particularly important in bringing the island to the centre of media attention and political discourse (Aime, 2018).

During 2011, almost 52,000 people came to Lampedusa, first from Tunisia and then from Libya (Di Matteo, 2023). The period came to be seen as a key moment in the island's collective memory that is not only linked to the internal difficulties of managing the sudden arrival of such a large influx of migrants but also in the hetero-definition of Lampedusa itself. Since 2011, two different ways of narrating Lampedusa seem to have developed in the opposing representations continuously fed by the media: the tourist paradise alongside the migratory hell. As might be imagined, workers in the tourist sector are particularly sensitive to the kind of media attention given to the island, as they are worried that the representation of Lampedusa as a chaotic and out-of-control border will have negative repercussions on the arrival of holidaymakers. However, although the link between the “migration

emergency” and tourist numbers is difficult to clearly identify, the fact that the media narrative periodically focuses on Lampedusa seems to keep the island at the centre of the public imagination, meaning that there is a continuous circulation of images and discourses that go beyond migration:

Without wanting to oversimplify, the fact that there was so much talk about Lampedusa definitely led to a lot of people saying, “Ah, look... there’s this island in the Mediterranean that we’ve never seen” (Arianna, researcher).

Thus Lampedusa continues to be the focus of attention because of what reaches it from the south: in 1986 it was the Libyan Scud missiles, in 2011 migrants travelling across the Mediterranean:

Arrivals [of tourists] increase each year because people are always curious... I believe that migration was the element that incentivised tourism in Lampedusa (Salvatore, local historian).

Despite the apprehension over a narrative centred on the island’s emergency aspect, the spectacularisation of the Lampedusian border seems to increase its national and international fame, also having a positive impact on the tourism sector.

4.2. Migratory seasons and tourist seasons

So, whereas migration, especially in the last fifteen years, has ensured that the strong focus on Lampedusa has been maintained, the way these events are represented has become central to the symbolic struggle to establish a certain image of the island. Particularly interesting here is a letter written by the Lampedusa Hoteliers’ Consortium in 2015 to the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella, in which the controversial intertwining of immigration and tourism vividly emerges, with the former drawing attention to the island but also acting as a potential disincentive:

The migrant landings have meant we have become known to the world for more than just our beauty [...] we pay the consequences in people cancelling, believing they are going to run into who knows what [...] Even the illegal immigrants who are unwittingly responsible for our misfortunes receive more attention than we do⁵.

5. Parts of the letter, reproduced in various newspapers, can be found here: <https://www.confesercenti.it/blog/albergatori-lampedusa/>.

Several islanders fear that they will remain imprisoned in an emergency media narrative that does not reflect the island's reality. In this context, the gradual closure of the hotspot and the absence of migrants in the city and tourist areas (Di Matteo, 2020) seems to be particularly appreciated by tourist operators:

As soon as you go to interview the first person you meet on the street, they will tell you: "No, no, there's no emergency, everything's fine, everything's great, we don't even see them, they stay in the hotspot and they don't cause any bother". Because they don't want to feed this representation and they are very happy they don't see them about. In fact, as soon as they see migrants out and about, they are scared... the authorities are scared. The other day three or four guys came out and chased them (Luca, NGO operator).

At stake in this struggle of positioning and representation seems to be the definition of Lampedusa, whether as a chaotic frontier *due to* migration or as a pleasant tourist destination *despite* migration (Aime, 2018). It is thus no surprise that the events that took place on Lampedusa in 2011 led the Berlusconi government to declare a "North African emergency" (Prime Ministerial Decree of 12 February 2011), an act that marked a watershed in Italian migration policies, which, for the following decade, would be centred on the management of asylum seekers, preventing any possibility of regular migration. In the words of Antonino Taranto:

Here, following the Arab Spring, in 2011, we had a real invasion of thousands of Tunisians, they were more than the total population of Lampedusans: there was talk of 8,000 or 9,000 Tunisians present on the island at the same time. The Tunisians understood that the only way to leave Lampedusa – because they had not left to settle in Lampedusa, Lampedusa was the first stop – was to create disturbances: they burned the reception centre, they barricaded themselves down here where there is the petrol pump, with gas cylinders in hand, threatening to blow everything up. Then "our savior" Berlusconi arrived, with Maroni, with six cruise ships and the largest transfer of migrants from Lampedusa took place, not in Tunisia eh... but in Italy, in the Italian centers, from where they then took these kids out who all found themselves in Ventimiglia, when France then closed its borders (Antonino Taranto, Historical Archives of Lampedusa).

Returning to the data on tourists arriving in Lampedusa (Fig.1), we can see that the drop in arrivals that had already begun in 2008 increased further between 2011 and 2012. Immediately afterwards, however, there is a break in 2013 and an uninterrupted growth in tourist arrivals from 2015:

Lampedusa, I don't know, in the minds of those watching us has changed... I don't want to say things that aren't true, but the impression I had... but there must be statistics and numbers that can show that since that year, since the Pope came, the perception they had of us must have changed, the fact is that Lampedusa has become an important tourist centre again, there has been a constant escalation right up to today (Vincenzo, hotelier).

A change in narrative in those years created the image of a welcoming and hospitable Lampedusa, the protagonist in documentaries and ceremonies which fuelled its visibility. However, after a few years, a new political phase and new migration policies seemed to take root, fuelling the gradual closure of the Lampedusa hotspot, dynamics that seemed to have become independent of the still-growing tourist economy:

I believe that the management of the hotspot and the tight control afterwards tended to be completely independent of tourism. It's a politics that I see managed at the European level, then also at the national level, and it has repercussions on, but you can also see it at other borders, Lesbos... then with increasingly right-wing governments the consequences have been very severe (Arianna, researcher).

It should be underlined that tourism in general has undergone through a stratospheric growth in recent decades, that the Mediterranean area is currently the most tourist area in the world (in terms of international flows), and that islands, regardless of whether or not they are migratory landing places, have benefited enormously from this increase in tourist flows. In the same years, there has been a significant increase in flows to the Sicilian islands – as just remembered –, even in those that do not have the same migratory flows.

Today, the welcoming Lampedusa and the emergency Lampedusa seem to coexist and overlap in a dynamic that has partially disconnected the management of migration, which is increasingly automated and separated from island life, from the issue of tourism, which seems to be self-sustaining. As evidence of this dual representation, we can look at mid-September 2023 when, over the course of a few days, about 7,000 migrants arrived on the island, creating a situation of confusion and tension. The narration of those days continued to intertwine tones of emergency – “Lampedusa has become

hell”, a headline in *Panorama*⁶ – with tales of the innate solidarity characterising the island and its inhabitants with “big hearts”.⁷

4.3. *Welcome as a brand*

In the last decade, Lampedusa has thus been represented not only as a border in perpetual crisis but also as a model of a spontaneous and open welcoming and hospitality of the other. It would be interesting to use our research to understand the material impacts of this representation on the life of the island and in particular on its driving sector, tourism. The first relevant aspect seems to be solidarity tourism, which has been added to ordinary tourism:

There are also agencies that do so-called solidarity trips, who come especially to do a kind of... they visit, say, the historical archive, the children’s and young people’s library in Lampedusa, which is another mainstay of the island, they are on another kind of trip, not only for the sea (Valeria, worker in the third sector).

In parallel with this tourist niche, a network of “volunteer tourism” has also developed, especially during the period of 2011-2013, which is linked to the migration issue but is not indifferent to the charm of Lampedusa as a holiday destination (Di Matteo, 2023). According to some researchers’ estimates, about a hundred people go to the island annually to volunteer, with the expectation, often frustrated by the current impenetrability of the hotspot, of working in close contact with the migrants passing through: “‘attracted’ to the island because of its being a borderscape; on the other hand, they in turn become co-constructors, confirming Lampedusa’s role as the ‘Gateway to Europe’” (Di Matteo, 2020: 522).

As can be seen from these experiences, the border spectacle, understood as putting ordinary tourism at risk, proves to be a source of attraction for the individual and collective subjectivities most sensitive to the issue, triggering new movements and arrivals. One example of this is ASGI’s decision to organise its annual training, *Operare in frontiera (Working at the border)*, which involves an average of fifty people each year, in Lampedusa. Although these numbers are relatively minor compared to the scale of “ordinary” tourism, mobility attracted by the issue of migration is nourished by

6. Cfr. <https://www.panorama.it/news/lampedusa-migranti-hotspot-polizia/>.

7. Cfr. <https://www.unita.it/2023/09/16/il-grande-cuore-di-lampedusa-la-solidarieta-che-e-una-lezione-alla-politica-piccola-e-cinica/>.

numerous initiatives whose aggregate value is not insignificant, consisting of school trips, university exchanges, scout camps, and the like. Thus, the representation of Lampedusa as a welcoming island, on the one hand, averted the risk of a tourism crisis in the years immediately following the “North African emergency”, and on the other, activated a number of further networks who also consume on the island. A representation that ended up being branded:

Via Roma, a souvenir shop, openly anti-migrant owner selling a magnetic nativity scene made with the gate of Europe instead of a stable, a black Mary and Joseph, the baby who is black is in a little boat and instead of an ox and a donkey a seagull and a turtle (Jessica, local activist).

Ultimately, migratory events seem far from being a simple deterrent to the tourist economy, but are intertwined with it in a complex and not always predictable manner, in fact ensuring its fame persists and leading to further mobilities.

5. Military and militants: Border management and its local impacts

5.1. The presence of the armed forces and their economic impact

The border management system in Lampedusa revolves around the hotspot structure, which in 2015 took the place of the former Centro di Soccorso e Prima Accoglienza (migrant reception centre). As recounted by a number of observers, it is a highly militarised system that creates deep borders within the island (Di Matteo, 2020). The armed forces and the police are key figures in the mechanism of migration management and in the control of migration flows. They accompany the boats to port, preside over the landings, and perform surveillance, also in relation to the hotspot. In addition to the units of the state police, the *carabinieri* and financial police, army units patrol Lampedusa (as part of the *Strade Sicure* (safe streets) operation), while the Navy and Air Force are also a fixed presence. The current system of migration management has therefore brought a substantial number of military and police forces to Lampedusa – some estimate one police member or military member for every 12 residents (Aime, 2018) – who according to some of those interviewed, and as a result of the shift system, seem to be organised into about 1,000 units although, given their constantly changing nature, they are extremely difficult to quantify:

Consider that Lampedusa in the 1990s had seven Carabinieri and four or five financial police. Then there was the Air Force base and then the Navy... we already had our little outpost. With the management of immigration, of course many more units had to come [...] They first did one month shifts, now 14 days. They are battalions arriving from cities, for example, from Palermo, that battalion leaves, then another one arrives from Trapani, then it leaves, and another one arrives from Messina... (Vincenzo, hotelier).

Several of our interviewees thought these numbers went beyond the needs of migration management, especially at certain times of the year. These considerable numbers, which change according to demand, has led institutions to turn to the hotel and catering sector to provide food and accommodation for their personnel:

Many economic activities, i.e. hotels and restaurants, have more and more contracts with the military, which is more and more present in Lampedusa. More and more. I don't know the numbers, but they're very high. So, in winter the island is practically a barracks and the economic activities, restaurants, bars, hotels, support the needs of the military, especially in winter... which has also been a strategy by the various governments to ensure that the discontent that had begun to be created in the population... (Gregorio, Askavusa collective).

The seasonal adjustment effects on tourism of the military and police presence are clearly illustrated by Vincenzo, who owns a hotel:

Whereas at the end of the 1990s you could find one bar open in Lampedusa in winter because the only patrons were islanders, today seven or eight bars are open in winter because you have, say, an extra thousand military personnel, that extra thousand people working with immigration that also allows you to have a certain number of people at winter that keeps the economy turning [...] In the last agreement we entered into, all year round we have about 14 military personnel a day [half of the hotel's capacity]. In winter even a few more, because the tourists don't come, we can even get, say, up to 20 soldiers. But rather than keeping it closed... anyway, even when it's closed, a hotel has significant expenses... So, to try to... because they don't even pay that much, you don't do it for economic reasons, you do it to give continuity to the establishment. You keep the establishment open; you give continuity and in addition to outgoings you also have some income... it doesn't allow you to do who knows what, but you stay a level, in the sense that the winter doesn't weigh you down as much as it did before.
So, the price you agreed is lower than what you charge tourists?

Less than half almost. Because whereas a financial police officer pays around 40 euros per person per day, the tourist pays 70, 80 or even 90 or 100, depending on the type of room.

[...] today there is a continuity that didn't exist before, now they know that they need a certain number of military personnel to be present even in winter and so they organise this and say to you, keep 10 rooms, 15 rooms for me all year round so I'm sure I can always find a place.

So, even in summer, you have rooms reserved for the military with this agreement or do you leave it only to tourists in the summer?

No, we keep them even in the summer more as a matter of fairness than of economic convenience, because we lose a lot. But then you create a relationship where you can't tell them: "In winter yes, because there's no-one here, then in summer I have tourists and I'll throw you out (Vincenzo, hotelier).

Identifying the extent of state investments in migration control in Lampedusa is extremely complex due to the fragmentary nature of the tenders, the large number of actors involved, the fact that many documents are not available on official websites, and the apparent interruption of tender procedures in the pandemic period⁸. However, some of the data does give us an idea of the expenditure and industry on the island. For example, in 2022, the Prefecture of Agrigento published a *public notice* to enter into agreements with private actors capable of accommodating members of the police force during 2023, setting the cost of a single room at €45 per day per head and €40 per head for a room shared with another person (excluding VAT)⁹. It is interesting that a similar notice published in 2020 reported different figures: 35€ for a single room and 28€ for a shared room, thus testifying to general increases in prices and to the greater difficulty in getting private sector entities to provide these services. A similar notice concerns the provision of meals for police forces in 2023 in catering establishments, setting the cost of each individual meal at €25 (excluding VAT). Whereas for the first service, the Prefecture estimated an expenditure of three million euros per year, for the second the figure is set at two million (again excluding VAT), but as this involves the entire province, it is impossible to know how much of this figure is allocated to Lampedusa. More specific data can be

8. To verify this we could cite the open letter from the *Askavusa* collective that is active in Lampedusa to the institutions in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic in which they ask for transparency with respect to the expenses and presence of military personnel on the island and greater investment in health services: <https://askavusa.wordpress.com/2020/04/16/richiesta-informazioni-su-spese-dello-stato-a-lampedusa/>.

9. The Prefecture's documents can be found online: https://www.Prefettura.it/agrigento/contenuti/Avvisi_bandi_ed_inviti-819970.htm/.

retrieved in relation to the Italian Army units, which for the whole of 2023 entered into a contract with AEQUOR3 Srl, which owns several hotels and catering facilities on Lampedusa. They were entrusted with providing accommodation for the mechanised brigade *Aosta*, who are deployed on the island as part of the *Strade Sicure* programme. For 38 bed and breakfasts, the army planned to spend 732,336 euros in 2023, excluding VAT¹⁰.

Although the expenditure for the board and lodging of the armed forces and police already appears substantial, in the complex and wide-ranging mechanism of border management many other expenses are also managed by the Prefecture: from ordinary management expenses (relating to fuel for example) to those for the sea and land transport tasked with moving “non-EU migrants”, to the supply of meals for newly disembarked migrants (in this case at €5.50 per meal). Other expenses are involved in managing the hotspot: in January 2023, a call for tenders was published for the management and operation of the facility worth about five million euros per year, to which were added about ten million euros in other security costs not subject to rebate. However, Legislative Decree 20 of 2023 (converted into Law 50 of 2023) mandated the Ministry of the Interior to directly entrust the management of the hotspot to the Red Cross until the end of 2025. It should be noted that, in previous years, the hotspot had also provided a range of job opportunities for islanders, which gradually disappeared under subsequent managements:

Then when the management changed, the employees also changed, so for a certain time there was also a sort of split in the community, because those who worked in the centre were also viewed in a bit of a bad light by some Lampedusians, because it was as if they were favouring this phenomenon [...] In fact, when these jobs disappeared, there was also a sort of protest, because in a small community between 30 and 40 jobs have an impact and many people found themselves in difficulty (Vincenzo, hotelier).

Maintaining the apparatus of border management and control therefore requires numerous investments by state bodies, investments that do not necessarily impact on the economy of Lampedusa given that many services are provided by companies based in Sicily or on the mainland, such as the management of the hotspot, on which many doubts have been cast in the

10. The documents related to these tenders can be found online: <https://www.esercito.difesa.it/comunicazione/Bandi-di-gara-Esercito/Brigata-Meccanizzata-Aosta/Pagine/PROCEDURA-NEGOZIATA-EX-ART.63-STRADE-SICURE-2023.aspx/>.

past¹¹. Among the various items of expenditure, the one that seems to have the clearest impact on the island is that relating to military and police accommodation, which supports, at least in part, the “deseasonalisation” of the hospitality sector:

All it takes is for the sea to rise and it’s 15 or 20 days of rough seas and the conditions are not suitable for these journeys. That’s why I’m telling you its fake... A mission? I could understand... even when these things happen it’s not like everyone is working. So, I don’t understand this mission, this double salary that is taken out of our pockets, from those of us who work normally, to be given to people to sunbathe, to go to the gym, to go to the restaurant every night, their board and lodging paid for... it’s a waste like so many others that there are here on the island (Fabio, tourist sector worker).

As can be seen in Fabio’s words, the massive expense of housing the military and police forces also raise questions about the actual need for such investments.

5.2. Other visitors: Volunteers, NGO partners, and activism

Although the military and police apparatus plays a central role in managing the border on Lampedusa, it is also accompanied by numerous other people whose work relates to migration, belonging to international organisations, associations, voluntary bodies, and activist networks. People who travel, live and consume in Lampedusa:

Everything that we call “business” related to the so-called migration industry is something that exists in Lampedusa 24 hours a day 365 days a year. This means that obviously, although there are not many of them... the number of so-called partners are a fixture in Lampedusa, which in summer increases but even in winter I assure you that there are a lot of people working for UNHCR, Frontex, EUA, Save the Children, Red Cross, the hotspot... it’s a huge machine. All these people have to rent a house, all these people occasionally go to restaurants, all these people have a series of needs: rental cars, mopeds, bikes, whatever a normal person needs in their daily life... here we are! (Jessica, local activist).

11. On a number of occasions, inefficiencies and shortcomings in the previous management of the hotspot have been raised (ASGI, 2022), issues on which it seems an investigation is underway by the public prosecutor in Agrigento and by the Sicilian court of auditors.

The accommodation for the practitioners in the international organisations on the island also seems to be organised through signing agreements with certain hotel facilities, not unlike what happens for the police. Within this group, the staff in the hotspot, whose management is currently entrusted to the Red Cross, play a key role. The organisation seems to have some characteristics typically associated with NGO partners, such as significant means at its disposal, a structured organisation, and symbols and uniforms with a strong visual impact, with other characteristics more properly linked to the world of volunteering, such as the tendency to let the practitioners organise their own accommodation on the island, who often end up, at least during the summer period, in the local campsite.

While the Red Cross and international organisations are part of the mechanism of the institutional management of the border, in the last ten years Lampedusa has also become a space of action for activist networks and associations. Among them, Mediterranean Hope stands out as the first non-Lampedusan association to set up a base permanently on the island in 2014, followed by other organisations, such as the association Maldusa. These organisations have permanently rented a space in which to house their members and, as in the case of Mediterranean Hope, organise some events, thus entering into a daily relationship with the local population.

Whereas, by virtue of their stability on the island, these associations seem to have placed themselves outside of the logic of tourism, for shorter-term volunteers, potential accommodation often ends up being in the hospitality sector:

For the library I think they have always left it up to self-management: find your own accommodation, organise yourselves and see what happens. With the volunteer camps for this vegetable garden in Lampedusa they were using the campsite at the expense of the volunteers, so we're not talking about that kind of volunteering where I give you the whole package: you come, you pay X, and we give you the whole week. But they [the volunteers] all organised together at the campsite, the only one on the island. Mediterranean Hope on the other hand provides accommodation because they have one or two houses on the island. So, there you go, very varied situations. *In Limine*, the ASGI project, when they had volunteers, they rented a house for them... (Arianna, researcher).

Although limited in number, the presence of practitioners, activists and volunteers, not to mention researchers, journalists and others drawn to Lampedusa by migration, also generates revenue for the island's businesses, such as hotels, restaurants, food shops, and so on.

Conclusion

The study of the economic impacts of migration on the Lampedusian population allowed us to develop a partly original and innovative application of the concept of “migration industry”. That is, we started by describing the socio-economic context of the island, observing the way the tourism sector established itself in the local economy and its complex and not necessarily conflictual interaction with migration, and then focused on the economic movements generated by the military, activist and humanitarian presence on Lampedusa.

We have analysed the industry generated by the migration control system, and by the activist networks dedicated to the rescue and support of emigrants. In fact, over the last decade – also due to the increasing Europeanisation of the management of the Lampedusa border, a process in which the creation of the hotspot is also part – both the military presence and that of humanitarian workers and volunteers have increased. Although with significant differences in scope, both of these groups feed the island’s hospitality and tertiary sector, allowing for the partial deseasonalisation of the tourism sector and for some establishments to continue operating even in winter. Nonetheless, the words of the islanders also reveal the negative implications of this presence and these investments, in terms of a feeling of encirclement and militarisation and the expropriation of their prerogative to manage the local socio-territorial context.

Although the *direct* effects of migration – or rather, of its management system – on the border economy are understood (although little studied) in the literature, the case of Lampedusa allows us to also focus on the *indirect* effects of migration on the local economy. Migration is a vector for the mediatisation of the border, which, in the specific case of Lampedusa, which is already a tourist resort, promotes and amplifies its constant visibility, thus supporting the influx of holidaymakers, especially when the island is represented as a welcoming and hospitable place. Although it is probably impossible to measure this phenomenon, in addition to “volunteer” tourism, migration seems to promote a visibility that supports “ordinary” tourism. In this sense, Lampedusa shows how the politicisation of migration can have mixed effects on life at the border, paving the way for original reinterpretations of the concept of the migration industry.

In conclusion, the migration industry perspective is useful for analysing not only the monetary impact, but also the broader social impacts of human mobility and its support and control. The case of Lampedusa, which is simultaneously a border and a tourist resort and which, in the recent past, has lived through a variety of historical phases linked to migration, allows us to

bring to light effects of the migration industry that usually remain in the shadows, testifying to this perspective's heuristic validity and potential for enlargement.

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