

CASE STUDY

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# Hosting spatial justice: Riace model and rhetorics of recognition

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** The paper investigates the relation between spatial justice and recognition. With this respect, it focuses on *rhetorics of recognition*, namely discourses, narratives and slogans put in place by actors who produce a territorial identity in order to be recognized in their peculiar and different characters.

**Case description:** The case-study employed is the Riace model, a worldwide known example of refugees and asylum seekers hosting and welcoming practice in Italy. Fieldnotes, public statements and newspaper articles were used to investigate both narratives through which Riace's identity was produced and how this identity shaped Riace's rhetorics of recognition within the context of a conflict between the local administration and the national government.

**Discussion and evaluation:** The paper shows how claims for recognition may drive towards negative outputs. Specifically, in the case of Riace, claims for diversity re-affirmed path-dependency and conditions of marginalization as a result of a depersonalised place-based approach and logics of exception.

**Conclusions:** Finally, the paper suggests that researchers should avoid considering diversity as a value per se in order to address spatial justice issues. Moreover, it suggests that rhetorics of recognition may help both in case of conflicting rationalities and to formulate situated ethical judgments.

**Keywords:** Spatial justice, Recognition, Immigration, Inner areas, Marginalization

## Background

### Spatial justice and recognition

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the debate on spatial justice. Specifically, the paper outlines some suggestions on the tricky relation between spatial justice and recognition.

In the past decade, researchers had highlighted that recognition may not be a necessarily positive element in the pursuit of spatial justice. For instance, Yiftachel et al. (2009) reflected on the impact of hostile recognition in planning, showing how the process of recognition may work against specific groups of people in terms of marginalization, indifference and exclusive hostility, especially with respect to how territorial issues may be framed and handled. From this perspective, recognition is analysed through the lenses of a claim for diversity

made by specific groups that have to face the complicated nature of mutuality: the aforementioned authors investigate recognition mainly as an inherently unstable process that implies a reciprocity of interaction and understanding (Justice 2010), and that produces a multitude of possibilities between positive affirmation and hostility. In other words, the process of being recognized as *others* (namely, a different group of people who share specific characteristics in a likewise specific territorial context) is not always a way to be positively legitimized as such.

However, if the claim for diversity must be included in any consideration of spatial justice (Young 1990; Fainstein 2005), and if we need to critically reflect on recognition paying attention to the effects on territories (Sandercock 1998; Watson 2006; Roy 2007), the purpose of this paper is to bring light to another possible “dark side” of recognition, as such bearing controversial social and political consequences with effects in terms of spatial justice. For this reason, in the context of this paper the relation between spatial justice and recognition is not

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analysed taking into account the mutuality of the process (namely, how recognition happens), but rather focusing just on one side of this process: the way local actors, by a claim for diversity, shape an idea of their territory based on the uniqueness of the social, political and spatial features of that very territory.<sup>1</sup>

To investigate the relation between spatial justice and recognition from this perspective, the paper will focus on what can be referred to as *rhetorics of recognition*. In this frame, this expression indicates discourses, narratives and slogans put in place by actors (social, political, economic, etc.) who stress (and sometimes create and produce) identity in order to be recognized in their peculiar characters (specific needs, issues, ways of life, social relations, etc.). In the past years, researchers have successfully attempted to take account of territorial peculiarities, dealing with context-related diversity, regional differences, socio-cultural considerations which govern everyday life, and the production of context-dependent knowledge (Sandercock 2000; Arce and Long 2000; Flyvbjerg 2001; Robins 2003; Massey 2006; Bollen 2007). In this respect, they highlighted how distinctiveness and heterogeneity can become fundamental values in planning theory and practice, especially to cope with cultural, institutional and economic systems embedded in specific material conditions.

Building on this fundamental lesson, the main questions of this paper are: can a claim for diversity and the revendication for a territorial-embedded identity drive towards negative outputs? Can the need for recognition develop into something very far from justice; something that, rather than subverting mechanisms of economic, social and political marginalization, re-affirms them?

The paper suggests that drawing attention on rhetorics of recognition, especially when focused on territory and territorial issues, could represent an effective viewpoint to answer these questions in order to uncover another dark side of the relation between spatial justice and recognition. Indeed, in the frame of those rhetorics, something very heterogeneous like moral values, political stances, local resources etc. may be trapped into definitions supposed to be pre-determined (if not

*essentialised*), e.g. by the very peculiarity of a territory: proper (and extreme) spatial variables.

For this reason, through a case-study approach, the paper will focus on discourses, narratives and slogans which bring together topics stressing the specific characteristics of a territory, trying to understand how claims for difference, recognition and territorial identity are fostered, and whether and how these claims can exacerbate a condition of marginalization.

#### Methodological note

Before presenting the case-study, it might be useful to clarify what is meant by rhetorics of recognition, and how the case-study's data were treated to focus on them.

To recognize is literally affirming the existence of a subject through the very act of recognition. In a way, it might be said that the process of recognition is something very close to a process of subjectivation (Foucault 1992), taking into account the twofold meaning of this expression: becoming a subject both for being *subject to* someone and being *a subject*. Each of these meanings can have positive or negative nuances, normally coexisting with each other and often inextricable: someone can be subject to power and authority; can be legitimized as a subject who fits with some categories which makes him/her acceptable in human society; can be recognized as a specific subject because of his/her unique characteristics, etc. In consequence of these different nuances, Youdell (2010) argues that a subject is the result of discursive productions of identities always in conflict with each other. Here again, the challenge of mutuality emerges: given that a subject is not something that can be assumed as pre-existing, it becomes the field of an unstable process of reciprocal (and different) understandings.

However, as stated above, the paper does not focus on mutuality, but just on one side of this process. For this reason, rhetorics of recognition are not conceived as processes of subjectivation, but rather as processes of cultural objectivation (Handler 1988; Palumbo 2011): processes of embodiment of human things (like nation, society, group, culture, institutional relations, and territory) through which people invents, over and over again, objects which are taken to be natural entities in the real world. The focus of the paper is both on how these objects are invented to claim for a recognition based on territorial identity, and on the effects in terms of spatial justice.

In order to analyse these aspects, the case-study employed is the Riace model, a worldwide known example of refugees and asylum seekers hosting and welcoming practice in Riace, a small municipality in Ionico-Serre inner area (Calabria, south of Italy), partner of the national Protection System for Asylum Seekers and

<sup>1</sup> Affirming that the paper focuses on one side of the process does not mean not taking into account the intrinsic relational nature of this process. The way a claim for diversity is shaped, the main themes employed, the channels of communication, all these aspects certainly depend on who is the interlocutor, the different scales involved, and on the power relations at work. The aim of this paper is not to exclude those relational elements pretending they do not matter in the production of claims for diversity and recognition, but rather trying to circumscribe, and in so doing bring more light on, both the everyday choices made by local actors to produce these claims and the resulting effects in terms of spatial justice.

Refugees (*Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati*, henceforth referred to as Sprar).

The research approach is qualitative: interviews, conversations and observations were conducted among Riace's dwellers (native and non-native) over the period of a year spent in Riace (January–December 2017) and in different places like hosting centres' headquarters, local schools, public spaces, meeting places (bars, markets, private houses). The observation was external, without any engagement in hosting and welcoming practice. Nonetheless, during interviews and conversations, the emotional involvement was not avoided a priori (as a general rule of research behaviour) and, in some cases, relationships became quite deep. The only proper interviewee was the mayor of Riace: in that occasion, the goal of the semi-structured interview was to understand the operational aspects of hosting and welcoming practice and, specifically, of Riace model. After that interview, meetings with the mayor were based on conversation and sharing thoughts about the life in Riace and its history, his political visions and ideas, the events the model was facing, his interpretations about those events. After every conversation and observation, data were collected in a research diary (no recording device was employed and no fieldnotes were taken during meetings<sup>2</sup>).

The main goal of the fieldwork was not exploring claims for recognition in the first place. However, local and national events during 2017 set the stage for this very issue to emerge, as claims for recognition by the local administration gained prominence for defending the model from what was perceived as an unfair attack from national authorities. In order to better understand these circumstances, the first part of the case description will be devoted to the Riace model's overall context: namely, features of both Sprar and Italy's inner areas.

These events had a strong impact both on the very existence of the model and the every-day life of dwellers, to such extent that recognition became the main issue of local actors: in some way, national authorities and public opinion had to understand that Riace model was something "other than", e.g. it was incomparable to other refugees and asylum seekers hosting practices around Italy. This was due primarily to the specific characteristics of Riace's territory.

In order to investigate rhetorics of recognition, different sources of data were used: the diary, the mayor's public statements, newspaper articles, on-line community groups. The process of analysis was to understand

whether claims for diversity and recognition noted down in diary were used in public or not, and whether they changed or not. This process made possible to highlight how the local administration of Riace (along with activists) was creating publicly the "natural" identity of that model, and what kind of topics were in place in order to stress diversity and recognition. Again, the territory was an important theme: an object invented as a natural entity in the real world.

A very interesting aspect was not only to see diary quotes becoming newspaper quotes (in a way, actual slogans), but to see some of them became the main reasoning used by that part of public opinion stood for Riace model. In other words, specific claims were legitimized as public discourses: for example, this happened in some local and national newspapers, and in on-line community groups. In the context of this paper, the analysis focused on those specific claims.

## Case description

### Sprar and Italy's inner areas: the overall context

Sprar was established in Italy in 2002 providing a framework for a multi-level governance for the management of immigration policies based on widespread hosting centres for refugees and asylum seekers. The term *widespread* meant both the distribution of hosting centres throughout the national territory and the use of family housing units. This approach was adopted to make integration potentially more effective: each local institution would have managed relatively small numbers of refugees and asylum seekers so as to limit segregation phenomena and provide housing solutions as close as possible to criteria of autonomy.

Furthermore, from the standpoint of a multi-level governance, local institutions would have acquired room for manoeuvre to implement inclusion practices able to dialogue with the social, cultural and economic context in which the centres were placed. Thanks to this approach, Sprar fully represented a concrete example of decentralized and multi-level governance in Italy (CeSPI 2004) enabling the leading role of local administrations, which were formally put in conditions where they could envisage and realize policy strategies able to enhance the specific peculiarities of each territory in the frame of immigration policies.

As member of Sprar, Riace became a model thanks to the ability of local administration to use immigration hosting and welcoming practice as a trigger for transformative processes in a deeply marginalized territory. Its experience was so remarkable that inspired other municipalities in same marginalized conditions. In fact, since 2014, because of both the second Libyan civil war and the consequent increase in illegal immigration flows

<sup>2</sup> Dwellers were uncomfortable with recording devices, and they get nervous or puzzled with fieldnotes. For example, they tended not to speak local dialect even if they were used to.

by sea along the Central Mediterranean Route, a noteworthy number of small towns located in Italy's inner areas joined Sprar, to the point that about half of local institutions belonging to its network were small municipalities (under 5000 residents) in marginalized areas. Inner areas are defined as territories in conditions of social, economic and environmental disadvantage, suffering both persistent regional disparities and depopulation processes mainly due to a not adequate offer of and/or access to essential services (i.e. school and healthcare system). This condition is strictly interrelated to the complexity of Italian territories in their physical characters, shaped over the centuries by diverse natural phenomena and human settlement processes. As a matter of fact, the marginalization of inner areas is due to both their socio-spatial characteristics, which barely allow to empower citizen's rights (i.e. rights to education and health), and to inadequate policy approaches, which hardly acknowledged the peculiarity of territorial capitals and place-based assets within the frame of local development programmes (Barca 2009).

Confronted with this condition of marginalization and thanks to Riace's example, local administrations in Italy's inner areas saw an opportunity in immigration hosting and welcoming practice (Membretti 2017): a job source for locals, a vehicle for improving services (i.e. re-opening of schools and small hospital units for emergency), and, thanks to national and European immigration funds, local administrations could assess small-scale development projects for their communities.

### **The Riace model: a restored identity**

Riace is a small town in Ionico-Serre inner area, Calabria, Italy (Fig. 1). Like other towns in Calabria, Riace is split into two settlements: Borgo Superiore, the historic town located among The Serre mountains, and Marina, a former informal settlement built on the Ionian coast during the late '70 s, generally considered as the area whose inhabitants have emancipated themselves from rural conditions (Fig. 2). As many other towns in inner areas and southern Italy, Riace had been experiencing a considerable process of depopulation, particularly since the second half of the twentieth century. Corruption and mafia influence have brought economy and social fabric to a near standstill, and a massive lack in public services and infrastructure, as well as hydraulic and geological risks, are the main causes of a deep marginalization process. During 2017 Riace counted about 2000 inhabitants and, among them, 500 were refugees and asylum seekers equally distributed between the two settlements. In comparison with other towns belonging to Sprar and having similar demographic characteristics, the number of refugees and asylum seekers in Riace was 1000% higher.

The municipality was an early member of Sprar, and since 2002 the main feature of the Riace model was to carry out immigration hosting and welcoming practice through an utterly innovative perspective for that time: namely, as a strategy of local development. This approach was led by a principle of redistribution of benefits deriving from this practice, efficaciously summarized by the mayor according to whom the model was able to show concretely how and how much immigration could be "advantageous" for local community. Mainly financed by national and European funds for immigration policy, this advantage produced several outcomes for the benefit both of migrants and native residents. Indeed, immigration hosting and welcoming practice was put in place in Riace with an integrated approach, that is to say applying the motto "taking more pigeons with one stone" in order to ensure, in the frame of integration projects for migrants, the improvement of local community life on more levels: the restoration and creation of local services such as the elementary school, the nursery school and the door-to-door waste collection service; the restructuring of the housing stock of the historic town (Borgo Superiore); job opportunities for a territory heavily conditioned by unemployment and undocumented work. These improvements, which shed a new light on immigration hosting practice, were feasible thanks to the legal framework of Sprar and, specifically, the decentralization of decision-making processes that enabled the management autonomy of local institutions on immigration policies.

Relating to the aforementioned improvements, Riace's local administration leveraged not only on both subsidiarity promoted by the governance model of Sprar and benefits related to the re-population process, but also on a narrative focused on the re-construction of Riace's identity. In this respect, the leading role of the mayor should be acknowledged. This can easily be verified through books and newspaper articles about Riace model: especially since 2009, when the model came into the spotlight of public opinion, the mayor was represented as the main protagonist of this narrative, as there was an inevitable overlapping between him and the model. This overlapping was actually confirmed through research fieldwork. The major part of dwellers tended to answer in a very similar way when they were asked to go deep about the main transformations experienced by Riace and to express, as long as they were concerned, the reasons why Riace had become famous at national and international level: "you should talk to the mayor, this is his idea, his creation... he knows better than me what is right to say and how to say it". As a privileged informant stated, this answer was the way to give credit to the mayor, to pay respect to someone who had changed every-day life



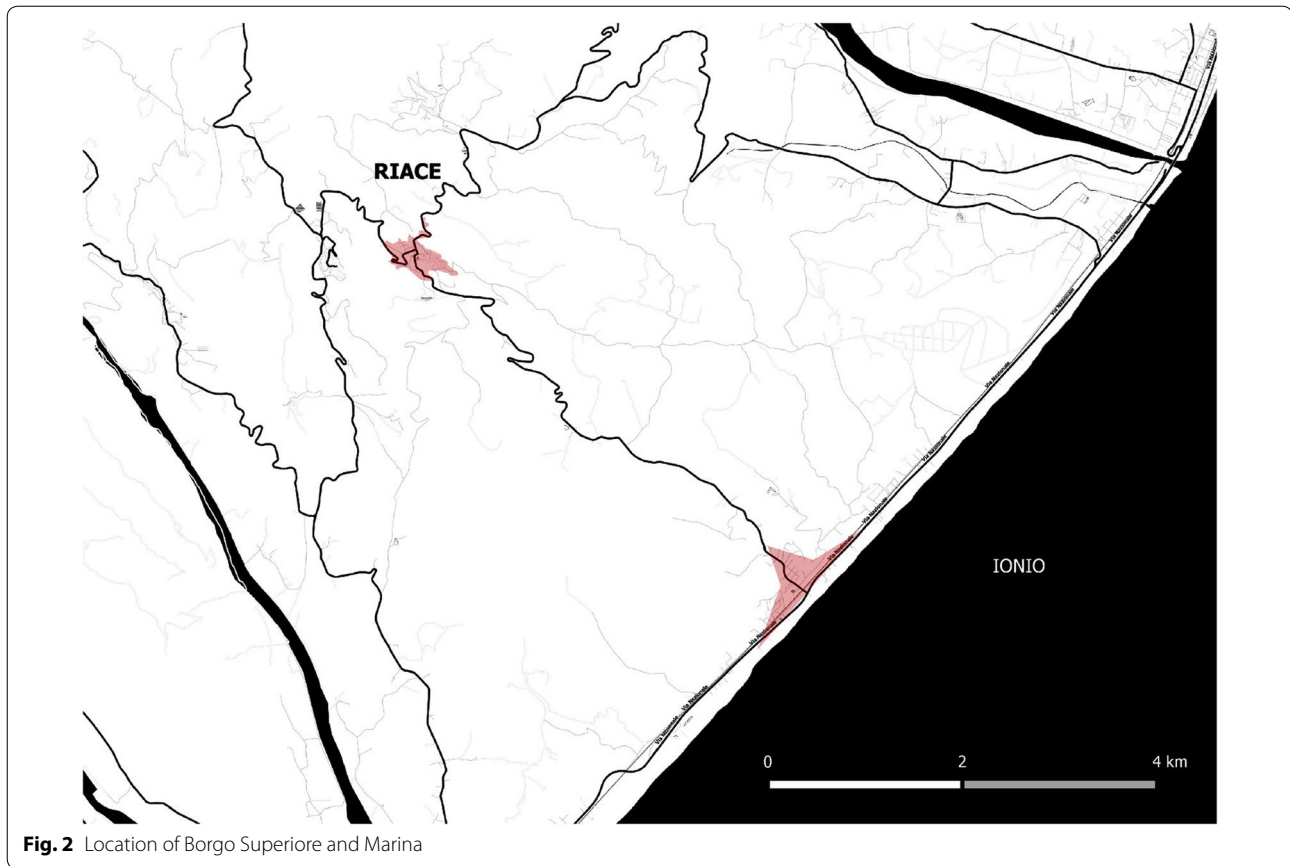
**Fig. 1** Location of Riace in the broader context of Italy

conditions, who had made “the impossible, giving life to something that should have been dead”.

This very act of “bringing to life” was depicted by the mayor as an effort to “transform a centrifugal force in a centripetal one”: if in the past centuries Riace went to the world because of emigration flows, since 2002 the world was coming to Riace thanks to immigration flows. To make this change of direction tangible and concrete, according to the mayor it was not enough just to improve Riace’s wealth: “I don’t care about wealth, I don’t care if my citizens are richer, or if now they can buy a car and

go on holiday. What I care is that now they can stay here, have a life here... they are not forced anymore to go away”. But there was also something else behind this new possibility to stay: a sort of revolutionary and counter-hegemonic liberation from what that territory had suffered. “For a place like this, what we are doing is totally revolutionary: people now can choose, can have a job that is not to break your back in the fields, to be an underpaid worker on tourist seasonal jobs, or to be an industrial worker in northern Italy’s cities. Now this territory is not spoiled anymore”.





**Fig. 2** Location of Borgo Superiore and Marina

To understand to what extent it was not spoiled anymore, as well as the counter-hegemonic value of this new condition, it is worthy to follow the mayor's line of reasoning through which he put in relation three different things: development models, the sea, and the relationship between the two settlements (Borgo Superiore and Marina). As different as these three things may seem, they were connected through a common element: namely, immigration hosting practice, that was not interpreted by the mayor as an ordinary activity useful to improve Riace's conditions, but rather it was conceived both as "deeply rooted in this territory" and as an "effective way to react to injustices", as he said.

As regards development models, the mayor firmly believed that Riace's territory was spoiled by what he defined "a destructive transition toward modernization". According to him, this transition should have been blamed because of its destructive consequences on the way of life strictly bounded to that territory. Family bond, kinship, friendliness, gift culture, role of mothers in social life, the cult of saints and the dead, rural culture, hospitality: in the process of modernization, all of these values were considered anachronistic if not even social plagues. Nevertheless, they were "the core of this land, they are

our means to know right from wrong", the mayor said. To state his position, during a meeting he took from the library of his office a book, written by Mario Alcaro,<sup>3</sup> and read a quotation: "The kind of solidarity that prevails in the social relations of southern populations is a human, existential, pre-political solidarity, [...] that is untranslatable in economic and political models of organization and that cannot become productive enterprise". This thought conveyed the reason why, according to the mayor, only a certain kind of development model could have fit with Riace's territory, whereas modern development models (i.e. those fostered by government programs after World War II and based mainly on the industrialization of southern Italy) were conceived "unjust" with respect to the distinctive traits embedded in that very territory. So, immigration hosting practice was "advantageous" not only because of the possibility to use national and European funds to improve local community conditions, but

<sup>3</sup> Mario Alcaro was a philosopher and *meridionalista*. *Meridionalismo* is the study of the economic and social issues of southern Italy, started in the XIX century. The study of these issues was not only meant for theoretical research, but also to bridge the economic, social and cultural gap between north of Italy and south of Italy.

also thanks to the very fact that it was conformed with the “pre-political solidarity” and the values of Riace. Moreover, according to the mayor, for the first time Riace was “not suffering anymore the choices of someone else, somebody in high places who looks down on us, claiming to have the right to choose for us”.

This re-established possibility to choose (to stay as well as to put in place specific development models) was also connected by the mayor to another specific element strictly related to the way immigrants reached Italy in the context of irregular migration flows. Here too, there was a kind of restoration, but this time it was thanks to the sea.<sup>4</sup> With this respect, a specific episode is worthy to be reported. With the coming of warmer weather, it was not unusual that school groups (especially from Calabria) visited Riace to experience its immigration hosting model. During one of these visits, the mayor began to talk about how much the perception of the sea had changed for him and how much this change meant for his fellow citizens: “Before the Riace model, the sea was a threat for this territory: think about Saracenic invasions which compelled Calabrian people to move from the coasts to the mountains. But there is more than that: the sea was also stealing the sons of this land. They sailed on boat, to reach unthinkable places far away from here”. Then, in the words of the mayor, the were times where the sea was the paradigm of a distance, a separation, the perfect metaphor of the exodus of emigration. Nevertheless, thanks to the reversal movement of migration flows, the sea became something else: “And yet, nowadays, the sea is a means of restitution: it gives back what it took away”. Through this interpretation, the sea became the symbol of one of the main characteristics of Riace’s territory: “This is a land of comings and goings. Everybody can come and find his own place, or they can go their own way”. Thanks to immigration hosting, Riace was finding its territorial balance.

According to the mayor, another kind of balance was also restored. As well as the sea regained its proper meaning, becoming the “natural” vehicle of flows of arrivals and departures, Borgo Superiore (the historic town) went through the same transformation. The process of depopulation which involved Borgo Superiore during the second half of the twentieth century was due not only to emigration flows. In fact, testimonies of older people in Riace showed the impact of land reform, that pushed a high number of residents to move towards

coastal areas where the majority of lands expropriated from large estate owners were located. Moreover, in the 60s and 70s the new owners applied for land change of use, and former agricultural plots became residential ones. Thanks to this process the Marina was established, causing a change in the geography of territory that led to a deep imbalance in the demographic distribution of residents, exacerbating the process of depopulation of Borgo Superiore: “There used to be only elderly people like me here. Our kids were in the North, nobody could take care of us... you know, some days one word is enough. It was a town of already dead. We are waiting to be dead”, said an old woman. This imbalance lasted until 2002, when the Riace model put in place its strategy of re-population. This meant a lot not only in terms of social and economic fabric, but also with respect to the common perception of dwellers. In fact, if in 80s and 90s the Marina was the main pole of every-day life, with immigration hosting practice there was a reversal: “Even tourists now prefer Borgo over Marina. They prefer the calm life of this place, the possibility to become everybody’s friend, over monstrous hotels down on the beach. That is a tourism that spoiled territory. This is a tourism of solidarity”, said the mayor. “I really don’t understand why tourists come here. I mean, yes, the weather is better, in Marina mugginess kills you. But, I mean, you can sleep in Borgo and you can go on the beach during the day. Instead, they spend days here, around the streets, talking to people... I mean, if they are happy, good for them... There must be something special here”, said a bartender. So, the historic town was not only structural upgraded, but it was finding its proper denomination on maps: if the road sign in Marina read “Welcome to Riace”, the road sign in Borgo Superiore read “Welcome to the hospitality town”.

To synthesize, thanks to immigration hosting practice, the local administration was improving the social, economic and physical conditions of Riace’s community. This “material” strategy was accompanied by a narrative about the identity of Riace, rooted on characteristics which were believed to be the natural dimension of that territory. Immigration hosting practice was the tool through which such characteristics could both emerge in their uniqueness and acquired an “objectivity”, making Riace a crisscrossing hospitality town where solidarity could have its proper revolutionary role. As the mayor said: “You see, emigration is not just a flux, a direction, it is the worst injustice in the world. And when you understand that, when you really understand that, then you can see what we’re doing. Riace was always like that, even when there was nothing, even when there were not hosting centres. All of this was always here, on the streets, inside people, in the relationships. Now we are able to show it”.

<sup>4</sup> Because of the geographical characteristics of the peninsula, during the so-called African migration in the 2000s as well as the Balkan migration which occurred during the last decade of the twentieth century, the final segment of most part of irregular migration routes was across the Mediterranean Sea.

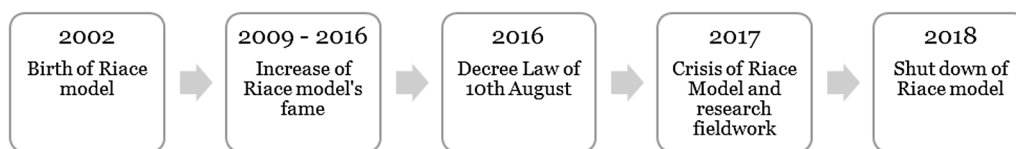
### The crisis of the Riace model: a matter of justice

Because of the events occurred during 2017, this identity's narrative became the main strategy to defend the Riace model. To better understand the circumstances behind this fact, it is necessary to report the remarkable change of Sprar governance occurred since January 2017. In 2016, the decentralized approach to immigration policies was drastically reduced by the Decree Law of August 10th 2016, in favour of a more centralised management of refugees and asylum seekers system of protection. This new legal framework had consequences especially as far as it concerned the reduction of local institutions' room for manoeuvre in planning and implementing integration projects for immigrants. This meant a harsher control by central government (namely, the Minister of the Interior) on local institution's budgeting design, subcontracts of services for refugees and asylum seekers, training and professional qualification of hosting practice teams, and on the kind of training activities (i.e. job training) proposed to refugees and asylum seekers. During a phone interview, a Sprar official declared that the rationale behind the Decree Law should had been interpreted considering the increase of mismanagement cases in immigration hosting practice around Italy, which have had serious consequences on immigrants' well-being. Nevertheless, the official also suggest how those changes in policy could become a betrayal of the very *raison d'être* of Sprar and its decentralized and multi-level governance: "We need to find a balance between keeping local institutions in charge and assuring best conditions for refugees".

of Riace. According to activists who support Riace, what the government should had done was to recognize this irreducible objectivity.

With this respect, the elements used to create Riace's identity—a crisscrossing hospitality town where solidarity could have its proper revolutionary role—were also used to make claims for diversity and recognition. In other words, rhetorics of recognition were used in order to shape a public discourse in defence of Riace.

"They [the government] demand for bureaucracy, pieces of paper, rules... Those are legal stuff: volatile, superficial. Here things work in different way: the Riace model is not about legality, it's about justice", said the mayor in front of hundreds of people from all around Italy during one of the two public assemblies (respectively on June and October 2017) hold in Riace to support the model. This was one of the main arguments put forth to defend Riace, according to which that context could not be judged through norms and rules. Even if some actions could be interpreted as illegal, it was the very identity of Riace, as long as its territorial context, that made it an exception to the rule. "The territorial marginalization, the impoverishment... all of these aspects, along with the fact that here the community's identity coincided with humanity, needed to be taken into account in the evaluation of local administration choices", said an activist during the public assembly on June 2017. In this respect, during that very occasion, the mayor told a journalist: "I am not a perfect mayor. If I were perfect, I would not secure the interests of this community but



Due to this new legal framework, some of Riace model's methods and modes were judged by government as unacceptable. Moreover, budgets and invoices were evaluated as inadmissible, so that they could not respectively be funded and refunded. This practically meant the stop of Riace's economy. In order to react to this condition, the strategy adopted by the mayor, and supported by activists and organizations around Italy, was to use a robust information campaign aiming to highlight how Riace was not an ordinary member of Sprar network, but rather an exclusive place where hosting and welcoming practice was properly carried out thanks to the objective identity

those of government". This sentence was used to mark the difference between the administrative role of a local administrator, on one hand, and the political role behind that very position, on the other. It also suggested a repudiation of the administrative role in favour of the political one, considering the former as totally inadequate with respect to Riace's needs and issues. If to be a good local administrator meant to be a "bad" one, this implication inevitably led to a clash with national government.

In fact, following this reasoning, the exceptional reality of Riace became the basis upon which irregularities denounced by government were depicted by some local



and national newspapers as acts of civil disobedience. The core of this defence was grounded on the meaning each part in conflict (local administration and national government) were supposed to give to public interest, and ultimately to justice: as far as it concerns national government, justice was to follow rules which must be equal for all; on the contrary, for local government justice was to recognize the irreducible differences of each context and to understand that, because of it, some rules can have unequal consequences. Not by chance, this very long-standing conflict was reported by some newspapers using the myth of Antigone, tragedy by Sophocles on the conflict between divine law and earthly laws: “Antigone rejects the written law of democracy, hoping to survive in the name of the law of gods, Riace tries to survive by acting in the name of the natural law”; “just as Antigone wittingly violated the “law of men” to comply with “unwritten and indestructible laws”, so today Riace will continue to claim the right to share solidarity with the last ones damaged by unfair laws and bureaucracies”; “we should choose between Antigone and Creon, between law, supported by complex bureaucracy, and *pietas* [...] Riace was reborn thanks to the creative generosity of its mayor and fellow citizens who support him”; “exactly as in the case of Antigone, history repeats itself. Despite historical developments, totalitarian power remains unchanged. [The mayor] resolved an enormous contradiction following Antigone’s model: choosing humanity against barbarity”.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the analogy with the myth of Antigone and Creon was also employed by that part of public opinion that was not supporting the Riace model. In some way, those who defended Riace was able to set the public discourse on the matter, even if there were some stances strongly arguing for Creon and his “law of men”. In this case, the main argument was linked to the significant territorial differentiation of Italy in terms of social, cultural and economic systems context-related, which were—as in the case of inner areas—not infrequently characterized by conditions of territorial marginalization and impoverishment. As consequence, taking too seriously Antigone’s reasons may lead to a national territory fragmented in a myriad of exceptions.

No matter the side of public opinion, the crisis of the Riace model brought into light the old and unsolved question regarding how to structure national policies to respond both to the demands of citizens and the compelling heterogeneity of national territory. Furthermore, this challenging question was particularly tangible

taking into account concrete cases through which the conflict between the two abovementioned kinds of justice emerged in Riace. To conclude the case description, the paper will report one particularly sensitive case.

An irregularity alleged by national government was about the quality of services for refugees and asylum seekers in Riace. Social services, psychological support, language teaching, job training, legal support, cultural mediation, medical support: each of these services was not fully guaranteed in Riace according to national government criteria. The reason behind this situation was twofold. On one hand, as managing body of hosting centres, local administration wanted to guarantee as much as possible the involvement of local community in hosting and welcoming practice. Among others, this meant to employ locals in order to ensure both their benefit and a willing inclination towards immigration hosting. Nevertheless, on the other hand, local employees were not professionally qualified. In part, this was a very context-related issue, because it was quite compelling to find in that territory professionals for the positions required, also considering the high number of refugees and asylum seekers hosted in Riace. “The entire world should come in Riace”, a migrant rights activist said, during a conversation at the bar, in order to stress how difficult was to guarantee that kind of professional assistance considering the territorial marginalization of Riace.

Still, migrants’ living conditions were seriously affected by this state of affairs. Even if no social, cultural or racial struggle was ever reported, immigrants faced on a daily basis context-related issues: not only job placement, but also job training strongly depended on kinship and friendship bonds; although they had been living in Riace for months, a significant number of immigrants spoke very little or no Italian; psychological assistance was completely missing; cultural mediation was limited to translation. “I know that I’m not very good at my job, but I mean, this is not my job. I am a bookkeeper. I asked for something more fitting, but now that is what is needed”, said an Italian teacher during a break between one lesson and the other. Moreover, Sprar reports pointed out immigrants’ complaints about cultural mediation and, specifically, cultural mediators’ bias about specific nationalities. These complaints were also topic of private meetings and conversations during the fieldwork: “She preferred north Africans, she help them more than the rest of us. She’s never told me how to get my driving license, I had to figure this out on my own”, a Syrian refugee said about the cultural mediator.

To summarize, on one hand, the national government was reacting against the unequal conditions of migrants as far as their hosting placement was concerned, trying to assure a greater territorial uniformity in services supply;

<sup>5</sup> These sentences are extracts of newspaper’s articles from October 2017, sources are respectively La Stampa, Linkiesta, La Repubblica and The HuffingtonPost Italia.

on the other, Riace's local administration tried to do what was supposed to be the best for local community, facing the condition of a marginalized inner area which had consequences not only on immigrants, but also on natives.

Regardless of the two different kinds of public interest highlighted (territorial uniformity and the best for local community), it might be worthy to focus on actions put in place to achieve these different goals. National government limited itself to ensuring compliance with rules and norms, no matter the actual context of Riace. By way of example, considering the situation it could had been possible to imagine specific training courses both to improve local workers' performance and ensure their professional qualification. Nevertheless, if the government did not act in this direction, the mayor's position on this matter was not less resolute: it was his opinion that trainings, as well as certain kinds of social service, were not necessary in Riace. "They do not need a psychologist. No professional qualification is required to look into the eye a person and understand what is needed. They need solidarity, humanity". And again: "they are not clients and lawyers, patients and doctors, students and teachers. They are all persons who are helping each other". In a way, the "naturalness" of the Riace model, as well as the kind of relationships feasible in that place, were not negotiable. As said the mayor: "Riace is a difficult place. Everyone is living here in difficult conditions: *riacesi* [locals] as well as immigrants. But those difficulties made Riace and its people different. There would not be any hospitality town without this kind of struggles".

### Discussion and evaluation

In case description, the paper shows the Riace model's rhetorics of recognition. Namely, how an invented identity unfolded, based on the territorial characteristics of that specific place, and how that identity was used to make claims for recognition and diversity in the context of an institutional conflict between local administration and national government. At the same time, the paper highlights how—because of this very conflict—claims for recognition and diversity had material effects on Riace's living conditions. In fact, local administration was trying to enforce an idea of justice which is context-related. Yet, in doing so it also underestimated migrants' struggles, contributing to keep certain conditions of territorial marginalization effectively unvaried (i.e. lack of specific services). But, at the same time, another kind of effects can be seen in the way the institutional conflict on justice was carried out.

Riace's local administration, and precisely its mayor, was trying to accomplish what can be referred to as a "break" in a territory characterized by the inertia of

path-dependency (Moulaert et alia 2007). Migration, development models based on solidarity, the sea, the balance between Borgo Superiore and Marina: they were all rhetorical elements which not only revealed the identity's place, but also represented a caesura. This caesura, interpreted as revolutionary and counter-hegemonic, was about depopulation processes and emigration, industrialization models spoiling territories, violent urban development, lack of services. Namely, events, actions and choices which were supposed to be fostered by the national government's policy strategies since the 50s. Against this kind of "state hegemony", conceived to be characterized by a deeply-rooted misunderstanding about the socio-spatial features and distinctiveness of Italian territories, Riace's territorial-embedded idea of justice was interpreted as able to account for the socio-spatial distinctive traits of the territory.

To better understand the local administration's point of view, it might be helpful to clarify the historical background of this concept of "state hegemony". Since 1945 Italy has been transformed from a predominantly agrarian country into an industrial economy. Nevertheless, the economic transformation of modern Italy has coexisted with a heavy inheritance from the past: on one hand, the relatively short history of political unification; on the other, major geographical disparities in wealth and economy (Putnam 1983). Both those circumstances contributed to make unification as something imposed on large parts of the Italian peninsula, rather than as a shared vision (Zariski 1983). This led to recurrent state legitimacy crises, through which the concept of the state has been questioned and identified with bureaucracy, ineptness and corruption (Allum 1973). In this context, regional and local claims gained a centrality to political identity prior to unification, and this has been reinforced by important differences in social organization among different parts of Italy, namely historic differences in settlement patterns and different degree of social isolation (Gallino 1979). Moreover, from an urban point of view, Italy has been characterized by a considerable geographical differentiation. In fact, unlike many other European countries, urbanization in Italy has not been centred on a single dominant city, but rather on an urban hierarchy developed in a complex way: two dominant metropolises (Rome and Milan), regional capitals and secondary regional centres (Mainardi 1973). Within the context of this diffuse urban system, the national territory has experienced a massive redistribution of population along with sectoral specialization, which had serious consequences on inner areas in terms of depopulation and marginalization. In the face of this fragmentation, the Italian state was not able to overcome it but in terms of redistribution of national revenues at regional level (King 1987):

in other words, governments have been implementing a financial approach inadequate to address the issue with a view to relations among territorial units (Tarow 1978). “What unification achieved was the territorial incorporation under one label, Italy, of a variety of forms of social organization and levels of economic development” (Agnew 1990: 773).

This scenario helps to make clearer the conflict in terms of public interest and justice between the local administration and the central government on the basis of local administration’s claims for recognition and diversity. Rather than suggesting a break in path-dependency, those claims seemed the revival of a long-standing tension within the Italian context about the state as a legitimate source of national policy (Agnew 1990), and specifically a revival of what Barca (2009) defines as the public policy dilemma of centralization vs decentralization. Furthermore, it might be said that claims for recognition and diversity made by Riace’s local administration had the effect of exacerbate this very dilemma, by proposing a need for recognition without adequately taking account of the needs of individuals, as if Riace’s territory had had a well-being of its own. In fact, in terms of spatial justice, along with what Barca defines a *de-contextualised individual approach* in policy making (focusing on individuals without taking into account how their well-being is strongly depended on the context where they live), it may also be identified a *depersonalised place-based approach*, “referring to place almost as if it had a “preference function” (Barca 2009, p. 36). The case description showed how both Riace model’s rhetorics of recognition and the local administration’s claims were about to address this kind of approach. In fact, the marginalized condition of Riace’s territory was considered to be actually functional for hosting and welcoming practice. This was because marginalization was strictly related to the way Riace’s objective identity—along with its place-based cultural traits of humanity, solidarity, hospitality—had unfolded. In other words, conditions, services and advantages could improve in Riace, but within the limits of its objective territorial-embedded nature.

There is also another aspect showed by the case-study which leads more to an exacerbation, rather than to a break in path-dependency. Namely, how claims for recognition and diversity had addressed the socio-political system of Riace.

When the public opinion supporting the Riace model argued for its exceptional character, it was doing this through narratives which represented that context as a manifestation of an “absolute other” way of life. These narratives focused on the kind of humanity showed by Riace’s community (the familiarity, closeness and spontaneity of social relations) that had its own specific rules,

especially in terms of justice. Moreover, these peculiar rules had to be taken into account in order to understand local administration’s choices and its conflictual position against the government. Because of these rules, what might had been defined as illegitimate should had been defined as completely legitimate: for example, how much kinship and friendship were important to find a job, or how much social relations could fill the gap in social services. These were not only the means to react to marginalization, but they represented also how social relations worked in that context.

In marginalized local contexts, it is not infrequent that social relations could become a fundamental resource to face, overcome or simply reduce conditions of poverty, economic and cultural ghettoization, stagnation (Sandercock 1998). This was also quite true in Riace, where bonds of social solidarity had made an effective difference to dwellers, e.g. in the choice between leaving or staying. Nevertheless, the effects of these bonds (as well as the way these bonds operate) are not necessarily or intrinsically just. Firstly, because they may depend on criterions which can be conditioned by prejudices, personal inclinations, biases, and temporary situations (or, using a different terminology, by different cultural objectification processes). Secondly, because in contexts like Riace, characterized by patronage, mafia influence, unemployment, undocumented work and weak social regulation (Agnew 1990; Fantozzi 2007), these bonds and their effects can be easily distorted. As Roy (2009) argues with respect to informality and forms of insurgence, there is never a clear boundary between legitimacy and illegitimacy when logics of exception emerge, and this condition of uncertainty is not simply the result of place-based practices with their own cultural and identity traits, which could be not easy to understand and interpret, but also the result of context-related mechanisms of social control, path-dependency and power relations, which could constantly re-affirm economic, social and political marginalization. For this reason, it might be said that not only the government’s, but also Riace’s idea of justice did not recognize territorial distinctiveness as a proper spatial justice variable. In fact, while on one hand centralized approaches may be blind to context-related socio-economic conditions, on the other decentralized approaches based on exceptionalism may not be able to call into question local common sense and automatism. In other words, the way “things work here”.

So, in relation to research questions set out in the background section, the case of Riace shows how rhetorics of recognition and claims for diversity may drive towards negative outputs in terms of spatial justice, especially when diversity is treated as an *exceptional* manifestation, a value per se, as *the* issue at stake. In this case, negative

outputs were far from being represented by the mere conflict against the national government, but rather they emerge in the way this very conflict was carried out both by the government and, as far as concerns this paper, the local administration that claimed for a territorial-embedded form of justice. Moreover, the case shows how diversity, heterogeneity, recognition can become very insidious in the field of planning theory and practice. In fact, it is questionable to what extent the takeover of territorial peculiarities, context-related diversity and regional differences leads to a deep, thorough and ethically attentive activity, or rather to research behaviours which may underestimate the spatial effects of these differences in the name of diversity as a value per se.

### Conclusions

The paper highlighted a specific “dark side” of the relation between spatial justice and recognition. Namely, it showed how a claim for diversity based on territorial-embedded identity may lead to problematic outcomes which, rather than subverting marginalization, can re-affirm it. The paper suggested that drawing attention on rhetorics put in place by local actors who claim for recognition may represent an effective means to acknowledge these outcomes, especially with regard to territorial issue.

Analysing the process of cultural objectification that unfolded in Riace in the framework of immigration hosting and welcoming practice, the paper showed both the narratives through which Riace’s identity was produced and how this identity shaped Riace’s rhetorics of recognition within the context of the conflict between the local administration and the national government. In so doing, the paper showed how, in the case of the Riace model, claims for diversity re-affirmed path-dependency and conditions of marginalization as a result of a depersonalised place-based approach and logics of exception.

In terms of spatial justice and planning theory and practice, the paper suggested that researchers should avoid considering diversity as a value per se. Whith this respect, a very important lesson comes from both the work of Watson (2003) and Campbell (2002).

On one hand, when facing claims for diversity and rhetorics of recognition, researchers should be aware of how deep differences can be. Using the paper’s terminology, this means that they should be aware of how cultural objectification processes can lead to situations of fundamentally conflicting rationalities. Moreover, world-views and value-systems may not be always transparent and graspable, especially (and paradoxically) in contexts which are familiar to researchers. Focusing on rhetorics of recognition, then, may help firstly to understand how these rationalities unfold, work and to what extent they are conflictual; secondly, it may help researchers

to recognize and not fall into common sense traps and automatism.

On the other, when justice concerns are particularly heightened in a specific context, rhetorics of recognition may help to formulate what Campbell defines as situate ethical judgments about what is legitimate and illegitimate. Indeed, analysing these rhetorics shows how the “work in progress” that leads to specific claims for diversity evolves. In other words, it may help both to focus on how a process of cultural objectification happens and, in so doing, to understand if and how interests expressed by those claims can be problematic and complex. Moreover, this kind of investigation may help to acknowledge how the “situatedness” of a context is neither given once and for all, nor pre-determined. In other words, if justice in relation to planning should be based on “the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals and communities, rather than only concentrating on differences” (Campbell 2006, p. 101), researchers should be aware that the elements which make up interconnectedness and interdependence may both express ambiguity and be double-meaning, as was the case of “marginalized conditions” in Riace: they had both to be improved and preserve as they were.

### Abbreviations

Sprar: Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (*Sistema di protezione per richiedenti asilo e rifugiati*); Anci: National Association of Italian Municipalities (*Associazione nazionale comuni italiani*).

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