

CHAPTER 14

EXPATRIATE RELOCATION AND REAL ESTATE INVESTMENT IN SICILY

Sentiment, Sociality and New Beginnings

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INTRODUCTION

The abandonment and decay (*abbandono* and *decadenza*) of rural spaces and urban quarters alike, often associated with a long history of emigration driven by a lack of economic opportunity, is a central theme of public conversation in Sicily. The accompanying worry centres on the meanings of such a process, which most agree relates to Sicily's marginal status within Italy today and in the past. Successive generations leave for greener pastures. Those who remain, and who year by year get older, scrape by as best they can. The rural interior of Sicily is most afflicted by this process, with its many agricultural towns and villages in decline for generations. Countless of their inhabitants have long ago departed to northern Italian and European industrial centres, and further afield, to North and South America and to Australia.

Sicilian emigration dates to the nineteenth century, when rural labourers sought better lives than could be possible on the semi-feudal agricultural estates and in the sulphur and salt mines of the interior. Emigration continues into the present, but the key demographic is university-educated youth in their twenties and thirties, whose departure constitutes a brain drain to northern Italy and Europe. Across the rural districts of southern Italy, depopulated villages are surrounded by underused agricultural lands

that are worked by fewer local people with every passing year. Death rates outstrip birth rates by wide margins, and village streets are often deserted save for the summer months, when returnees come to visit ageing relatives for a few days. Even then, there are fewer visitors with every passing year.

Within these ‘small apocalypses of abandonment’ (Teti 2022), deserted old houses of the characteristic *centri storici* (historic centres) suggest a slower pace of life attuned to the rhythms of an earlier time. The aesthetic appeal of such places owes much to a particular vision of the rural idyll, of densely settled, close-knit towns that were minimally planned and reflect an image of bygone rural solidarity, of community feeling that surpasses anything that twenty-first-century city life can offer. There is a commercial potential to these desolate places that is not lost on foreign investors who make their way to small towns throughout Sicily and southern Italy to acquire real estate and even set down roots.

This chapter examines the dynamics of expatriate relocation and real estate investment in Mussomeli, a rural town in Caltanissetta province, western Sicily, where an enthusiastic mayor and town council, with the participation of local business, have spearheaded a programme for the sale of abandoned and unused real estate to foreign investors intent on living full- or part-time in rural Sicily. Mussomeli is one among several towns in western Sicily that has experimented with the one euro house scheme, created to revitalize towns in demographic decline through the sale of abandoned properties for the nominal fee of one euro to well-resourced buyers, usually foreigners, who commit to renovate and reside in them for at least part of the year. I present an argument that underscores the transformation of rural Sicily into a site of nostalgic consumption that positions it in relation to a broader set of attitudes that recapitulates its cultural and economic marginality. Namely, a sense of entitlement, born of their position as investors and their self-image as conscientious travellers, frames expatriates’ understanding of their right to the locality. What emerges is an image of transactional interest that is fundamentally economic in scope, where local administrators pursue the goals of economic revitalization, and buyers hope to realize a lifestyle goal that presents an edifying alternative to their workaday lives in large American or European cities.¹

MUSSOMELI AND ITS HINTERLAND

Mussomeli is a medieval town with a population of ten thousand, making it the largest settlement in its surrounding territory. At 800 metres above sea level, it lies on the eastern flanks of the Monti Sicani, a karstic formation in places exceeding 1,500 metres. The town is guarded by the ruins

of a fourteenth-century castle erected on a promontory by Manfredi III of Chiaramonte, one of four viceroys who governed during the reign of Maria Queen of Sicily. Today, wheat agriculture on fragmented parcels requires the use of compact mechanized vehicles, while large swathes of the territory have reverted to pasturage over past decades and are used by the few shepherds who are marginal to the regional economy. There is little pastoralism in the area, it having declined in importance in recent years, but some entrepreneurs and associations have attempted to bring the occupation into the regional tourist offering with guided tours and hikes in the pastures and cheese production facilities (see Mannia 2022). Likewise, the Via dei Borghi, a recently concluded project brought forth by the Ente sviluppo agricolo (ESA; the Sicilian agricultural development agency), promotes tourism across towns of the island's interior by mobilizing the appeal of traditional agriculture and folkways (see Samuels 2017).

The generalized state of economic stagnation in this district was exacerbated both by the closures of the sulphur and salt mines and by the decline of agriculture over the last generation. Today's emigration, unlike the earlier waves that were based on labour emigration, sees educated youth make their way to northern Italy and Europe to work in the professions and tertiary sector jobs. The characteristic response to why young people leave is always the same: there is no work and a lack of opportunity in Sicily. The story of those who remain is one of quixotic struggle, so much so that many of the more socially engaged youth animate a thriving associationism that reassesses the value and desirability of life in the South, and in Sicily manifests in movements that seek the regeneration and reclamation of abandoned spaces, from crumbling hamlets to marginal urban neighbourhoods. Their work is never finished, but their efforts yield satisfaction in light of the history of depredations to which Sicily has been subject, from the razing of its forests for wheat monoculture in antiquity and the after-effects of latifundism on the vast estates of western Sicily (Blok 1974; Schneider and Schneider 1976) to the consequences of petrochemical extraction and refinery in the south-east (Benadusi 2018) and the social costs of illegal construction (Trombino 2016), political clientelism and mafia infiltration, in its polymorphous forms (Santino 2006; Bascietto 2019), of institutions and markets, and spaces of cultural practice (Palumbo 2020) along the island's length and breadth. Sicily's history of emigration witnesses the unending quest for a more dignified life and freedom from want in a society where collective intuitions view social mobility as a zero-sum game, to which, according to one influential analysis (Gambetta 1988), two reflexes have tended to prevail among the responses to the machinations of mafia corruption: resignation to extant realities, or emigration.

Giuseppe Genco Russo, a powerful Cosa Nostra figure, was appointed mayor of Mussomeli by the Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories (AMGOT) in 1943. A handful of families dominated local affairs and controlled the large estates. Notable among these was the Feudo Polizzello, a 2,000 ha latifundium dispossessed by guile from the absentee noble Lanza Branciforte di Trabia family in the interwar years by Genco Russo himself, who started his career as a *gabellotto* (leaseholder), one of Blok's (1974) 'violent peasant entrepreneurs' (see Di Bartolo 2014). Frustration over local conditions came to a head in 1954 after the town's water taps had run dry for a week. Riot police dispersed a large protest using tear gas, with the resulting stampede causing four deaths and countless injuries. On the heels of this tragedy, authorities rounded up sixty labourers, whom they charged with sedition. In October 1954, the court handed down twenty-seven convictions, including a nine-month prison sentence for Salvatore Guarino, the secretary of the regional labour federation. These convictions were a blow to the local trade union and to peasant activism, and, paired with a failed agrarian reform, would hasten a wave of emigration. A small plaque on a wall of the main piazza commemorates these events of 1954.

The Italian economic miracle largely bypassed Mussomeli as it did most of the rest of rural Sicily, and in the two succeeding decades the town experienced a precipitous population decline as local men and women joined the ranks of the Mediterranean reserve army of labour across northern Italy and western Europe. Mussomeli's population is just over ten thousand, down from a 1950s peak of almost sixteen thousand.

The cultural articulation of a difficult history is expressed in a view of life in small rural towns as painful and unpleasant (see Schneider and Schneider 1974). Consequently, there is no romanticism to local conceptions of rurality, rural economy and rural living, and whatever appearance there is of a valorization of the countryside constitutes a minority sentiment based in an idealistic reassessment of the desirability of modern life and of urbanity. But what Sicilians in both rural and urban sectors share, in Mussomeli and in both smaller towns and large cities, is a widespread worry about problems of *degrado* (decay) and *decadenza* (ruin) as they are reflected in myriad spaces and landscapes, but especially in sites of former and current human habitation. What is meant by these apparently synonymous terms is coded according to rural or urban contexts. In rural places, *decadenza* is often referenced in the same breath as *abbandono* (abandonment) of old settlements by emigrants over the past century and more. In urban contexts, the descriptor *degrado* makes an appearance as something of an epithet – developers, entrepreneurs and city planners understand *degrado* as the result of the lifeways of undesirable populations (see Herzfeld 2021; Zinna 2020), and increasingly the presence of racialized migrants. However, to community

activists, *degrado*, *decadenza* and *abbandono* are all a consequence of deeply rooted problems of political mismanagement and civic indifference. Every locality within Sicily and across Italy has its own range of solutions to the problems of *decadenza*, *degrado* and *abbandono*, but the one I examine below involves the sale of abandoned real estate to foreign buyers with the expectation that this infusion of monies will help regenerate towns in decay.

THE ONE EURO HOUSE

Vittorio Sgarbi, one-time mayor of Salemi in the Sicilian province of Trapani and political impresario from the northern Veneto region, first proposed the one euro house scheme (*Case per un euro*, or ‘Houses for one euro’) in 2008 as a strategy to attract investment and new residents to a town in decline. Several municipal councils across Sicily and the Italian mainland have attempted the scheme, but the phenomenon received an unprecedented boost in spring 2019, when major English-language news outlets featured stories of one euro homes in quaint Italian villages, presented to international readers as a golden opportunity to live *la dolce vita*. Mussomeli’s own coming to international prominence followed on the heels of a series of CNN reports showcasing picture-perfect images of a bucolic town with breathtaking mountain views. According to the deputy mayor, Toti Nigrelli – one of the key architects of the town’s embrace of foreign real estate investment – the subsequent days and weeks were a flurry of email queries and international phone calls by eager would-be buyers. To harness this international interest, the municipal council founded a multilingual real estate agency staffed by local entrepreneurs fluent in French and English, and created an easily findable website (www.case1euro.it) that lists the services of local technicians and contractors and provided general information about the town for interested buyers. According to local sources, including the deputy mayor and manager of the local real estate agency, approximately three hundred dwellings had sold to foreign investors by late 2022, with several buyers acquiring more than one property.

The one euro house scheme attracts foreign nationals from around the world (but primarily North Americans and Europeans, with a smattering of Australians and Central and South Americans) who arrive with the intention to settle there, full- or part-time, and to partake of what they perceive as a style of life and local rhythms that are a soothing counterpoint to the tenor of life in large cities. In Mussomeli, their presence has occasioned considerable local ferment. They introduce conceptions of the good life that flow from a set of assumptions characteristic of exemplary neoliberal subjects driven by desires of self-actualization. As self-described expatriates, they

are spearheading a gentrification of the old quarter that renders the town a tableau for their desires for a better life in a picturesque landscape, which, however replete with the historical appurtenances of an agrarian society, is vacant of content for the newcomer who nonetheless embraces its rustic aesthetic as an antidote to urban modernity. A spike in interest in cheap rural Italian real estate followed on the heels of the first COVID-19 lockdowns, a moment when city-dwellers across the Global North pondered alternatives to dense urban living. As Irene Falconieri (2021) shows, Sicily has never thrown off its association with stereotypes of a traditional, archaic culture, and the appeal of this hidebound vision of Sicily exercises considerable influence on tourists and expatriates, despite a long history of investment in heavy industry and other sectors.

In Mussomeli, local businesspeople and the business-friendly town council actively confront what they perceive as the fatalist tendency expressed in resignation to the inevitability of decay, that small towns are fated to be abandoned, that all things have a beginning and an end (cf. Schubert 2021). Their own approach is to usher in a vision for revitalization that depends on a series of investments that aim to bolster outside interest in the town as a site of consumption. As Toti Nigrelli candidly points out,

We never had any illusions that real estate sales would be the solution to the problem of depopulation, but more simply it's a way to bring investment into town, from which everyone will benefit. Frankly, I would never live in any of the old houses in the old quarter. They're uncomfortable, far from amenities and not worth the hassle of upkeep. I could see it being appealing to tourists who might spend a month or two in the summers and then list it on Airbnb to the occasional tourist, but they're not suitable for permanent living, especially in winter.

However, to foreign real estate buyers, the age and decrepitude of the old quarter, with its empty houses beckoning an energetic buyer to restore them, is a feature, an attraction, as it bespeaks a sense of history, of cultural authenticity, of a momentous past that prospective buyers see themselves as becoming custodians of. The old quarter of Mussomeli, just like those of all neighbouring towns and villages, is in a ramshackle state. Situated on a hilly slope, its narrower alleyways are only accessible on foot. Every house is an aggregation of additions constructed to meet the needs of growing families, divided among generations of siblings and descendants into parcellated units with improvised partition walls periodically torn down as holdings might be reaggregated. The Italian legal norm of equal partible inheritance generates an extreme degree of fragmentation of property, both of houses and of agricultural holdings. Old, abandoned homes are marked by falling stucco, masonry and roof tiles, rusted balcony trusses and broken windows and shutters. If they are in less visible parts of the neighbourhood, their

doors may have been forced open, and a peek inside often reveals dumped appliances and construction materials from renovations to other buildings in town. Caved roofs or floors render some buildings perilous, just as broken and uneven stones render any walk down narrow alleys potentially hazardous. Colonies of pigeons, rats and their predators, felines, abound, along with their signature sights and smells, of cat urine and bird droppings, overlain with a patina of grime and, where the sun does not shine, mossy growth and musty smells. Several such houses have sat empty for generations, and are beyond repair, but several others might be salvaged, having sat unused for only a decade or two. The one euro houses consist principally of homes that are but a few years from collapse, all of which, if acquired, would need extensive structural repairs, if not to be demolished and rebuilt from scratch.

Homes sold by the local real estate agency for the symbolic price of EUR 1 entail a commitment on the part of the buyer to restructure (*ristrutturare*) the house and render it liveable within the space of three years. This involves paying the fees for the transfer of title, and the hiring of workers from a list of approved contractors (compiled by the town hall) who can bring the house up to code. Failure to abide by this obligation carries a EUR 5,000 fee, non-payment of which results in the forfeit of title. As of the time of writing, most such purchases have not lapsed. However, acquisition of property in Mus-someli can and does often follow a path more suited to the abilities of people who have serious DIY skills. Real estate sold on what is locally referred to as the upscale market (*mercato superiore*) includes dwellings ranging from EUR 5,000 to EUR 50,000. Such houses come in a range of sizes, are variably endowed with comforts and amenities and may be close to move-in ready. Twice a week, Nadia and Carla, local real estate agents, organize a walking tour for small groups of potential buyers, where they showcase homes for sale on the upscale market. Most prospective buyers who come with the intention of purchasing one euro houses are quickly dissuaded from doing so; there is simply very little worth having for that price. For Michael, an Australian buyer who did manage to acquire a one euro home, it was a frustrating experience. He was only shown the available one euro properties by quietly insisting on seeing them over the course of several walking tours, and, upon finalizing the paperwork, was able to begin repairs on it himself. As a skilled tradesman, he could complete several if not all required renovations on his own. More importantly, as a direct descendant of an Italian grandfather (from the northern Italian city of Treviso), he could acquire Italian citizenship easily and work full-time as an electrician, an occupation for which he garnered considerable recognition locally in little time. Most expatriate buyers cannot claim Italian citizenship, and, as I will explain below, this has important implications.

EXPAT LIFE

‘There is so much history here’, says Emily, a middle-aged woman from Boston, ‘but everyone just left the old town and moved into condos in the boring new part of town. So I’m here to help preserve the old part of town.’ Emily is emblematic of many North American buyers – middle-aged, gainfully employed but unhappy with life back home. Her experience as a politically left-of-centre American sensitive to the political polarization that pervades her country today, to say nothing of what she experiences as a generally poor level of social services and a modest schoolteacher’s income that does not meet her hopes for a comfortable retirement, led her to sell her home and invest in a 100-square-metre house in Mussomeli, where she hopes to retire. As she explains it, life in the United States is disagreeable and stressful. From anxiety over school shootings in the US (‘Every day that I go to work could be my last’) to the possible consequences of illness in a country with a for-profit healthcare system (‘I could lose everything if I get seriously ill’), life back home is unpredictable and precarious. Suzanne, her compatriot, arrived through similar calculations. A middle-aged woman from Philadelphia precariously employed part-time in a range of service industry jobs, she hit a breaking point over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a succession of public health lockdowns, she came to realize the thinness of her social network, and the futility of striving for a meaningful life in Philadelphia. Her frayed relations with her anti-vaxxer relatives, particularly her ruptured relationship with a favourite uncle, rendered her desperate for a change of scene. With her small dog, a pandemic-inspired acquisition, she packed up her apartment, put everything in temporary storage and tried to begin afresh at age 48. While Emily plans to live off modest investments (including the proceeds of the sale of her house in the US), Suzanne has limited monies and less than clear ideas about how to earn an income in Italy: ‘I have a friend who’s a massage therapist and is on call for a rich Russian, and he pays everything. I think it’s something I could try if I get a sports massage certificate.’ The more serious challenge is her inability to ascertain descent from an Italian ancestor – a great-grandfather, whose birth surname she does not know – which is a prerequisite for obtaining Italian citizenship on the principle of *ius sanguinis*. ‘I’m just winging it’, she admits, days before signing a contract for a EUR 5,000 property.

The desire to escape a fractious set of sociopolitical circumstances in favour of an idealized vision of life in rural Sicily motivates a good number of expatriates, including Michael, who claims to have burned many of his bridges in Australia prior to his departure. His experience of the apparent incredulity of close friends and relatives in Brisbane was disheartening. As he describes it,

I learned quickly who was a friend and who was not by their reactions to my decision. No one gave me their wholehearted support, but all I heard was a lot of people asking me, 'Are you crazy? Why would you go there? Why would you buy an abandoned house? What's wrong with you?' So I knew from that that I wouldn't be going back to Australia. No one was happy for me, no one thought I was doing something interesting. Everything there is about working, making money, buying stuff, and that's it. It's not the same here.

What Michael found in Mussomeli was a community receptive to newcomers and keen to have their participation in community life. His skills as an electrician render him an asset locally, and he charges fair rates to his many clients, several of whom are expatriates like him. He works every day and recognizes that his abundance of contracts speaks to the need for skilled trades in Mussomeli, which he sees as a town desperately in need of help. He cuts off work most days by mid-afternoon and will meet with his mates for an *aperitivo* by early evening, and may decide to retire early or, on weekends, meet friends for dinner or, during summer months, take day trips to touristy coastal locations. Michael's friendly and open manner renders him a fixture in the growing expat community in Mussomeli, which, at time of writing, numbers about three dozen people. This small cohort is supplemented in their sociality by enthusiastic locals who have lived away from town – often in the UK or France or Belgium – for a time but have returned and are eager to meet and connect with different kinds of people. One of these is Federico, the town photographer, who is always obliging in the assistance he offers expats in securing contacts and in sorting out papers for residency requirements.

Michael, as we know, did not need this assistance, but not everyone can so easily obtain residency permits, and most will face a series of hurdles that may prove insurmountable. Sam and Tracy, for instance, came to Mussomeli in 2019 and purchased a one euro home, to then give it up for a more comfortable rented apartment. Their two-bedroom unit on the top floor of a low-rise residential building (owned by the deputy mayor's father) allows them to live with amenities they could not enjoy in their earlier home in the old quarter. Having arrived on the promise of cheap real estate and a low cost of living, Sam and Tracy have lived in Mussomeli for stretches that long exceed the legal limit of ninety days of residency out of every 180-day period. As middle-class retirees from California they pursue a series of interests locally that Sam claims could cause no upset to the Italian government: 'Why should we not live here? We bring money, we cause no trouble, we're not crooks, so I just don't see why we don't have the right to be here.' Being among the first expats to settle in Mussomeli, their reputation as ambassadors for the town (Tracy writes a popular vegan travel blog and organizes walking tours for English-speaking tourists) has endeared them to many

locals, including members of the municipal council. With the mayor's support and the forbearance of the *questore* of Caltanissetta, they have been assured that their residency is not a problem, and that their status will be resolved with the creation of the much-hyped 'digital nomad visa', which will allow remote workers to live in Italy for up to three years (the legislation for which is stalled at the time of writing).

A wide range of other expats make their way to Mussomeli and towns like it. A good many are members of the creative class – a painter, a photographer, an amateur singer, an illustrator and a fashion designer (but also a Belgian trucking company magnate and her husband, a hard-drinking Dutchman and retired legionnaire) are among the many expats who have bought houses in Mussomeli – as well as entrepreneurial people who seize opportunities for greater self-realization and expansion of online businesses and digital brands. Among these is James, an energetic African American millennial and self-defined 'serial entrepreneur' who is founder and director of a US-based consulting and lifestyle agency whose name is inspired by the Myers-Briggs 'personality type' of 'Extroverted, iNtuitive, Thinking, Perceiving'. He offers one-on-one personal consulting services and online how-to courses on investment and career-building, and his comprehensive YouTube and Instagram channels feature videos and commentaries on real estate investing, entrepreneurship and travel. As the owner of two properties in Mussomeli – one for family use and the other to rent on Airbnb – he sees Sicily as ripe for opportunity for energetic entrepreneurs, similar to Brazil and Colombia, where he also travels and owns properties, and for similar reasons. As he puts it, Sicily, like Latin America, is marked by a history of exploitation. In what he defines as a 'classic colonial context', powerful actors have extracted wealth from it, and this has generated a widespread fatalism that forestalls peoples' willingness to tackle their circumstances in the present. Sicilians, like Latin Americans, defer to the premises of a difficult history and the assumption that it is futile to fix that which is broken, preferring instead to emigrate, as their deeply engrained guiding assumptions reflect the principle that life is a zero-sum game, and success is never rewarded but rather a target for suspicion. For him, this is a cultural disposition that does not generate closure to outsiders – one of his YouTube videos underscores that his Blackness is not a hindrance to meeting and knowing people and being respected in Sicily, because Sicilians do not have Americans' racist preconceptions – but on the contrary presents an opportunity for enterprising outsiders who want to try out new things. This curiously sociological assessment of Sicilian life, for all that it recapitulates long-standing stereotypes of southern Italy, reflects thoughtful attentiveness to local discourses, which however proceed from an assumption of Sicilian cultural defectiveness.

Other expats pursue more explicitly consumption-oriented lifestyle interests. One is a social media influencer who owns a *palazzo* in Mussomeli, which she features on her personal blog and various digital channels. Her luxury product and lifestyle brand sells organic teas and tea sets that bespeak refinement of taste and indulgence, while her website celebrates travel and self-improvement and offers reflections on life, love and friendship, which are themes central to her life-coaching courses at her online school. With credentials based in a 'Masters in Metaphysical Science with a strong focus on subconscious money programming', she offers, for a USD 1,998 annual subscription, personalized mentorship that will allow clients to achieve the inspiration necessary to earn their desired seven-figure income and total life success. Mussomeli is an occasional backdrop to her personal brand, a site that reflects her skill in refined forms of consumption and the associated embrace of the cornucopia of delights that make Sicily a beautiful, splendid place full of tradition, good food and picturesque people.

A more community-oriented undertaking consists of a charity kitchen established by an Australian food writer and former collaborator with a UK celebrity chef, which provides free meals to local families in need. As a self-funded endeavour that depends on the goodwill of a wide network of grocers and wholesalers, the kitchen can acquire from them, free of charge, end-of-day fresh produce for meal preparations, which are distributed twice weekly to a local women's shelter, several destitute families including infirm elderly with limited support networks, two families of Ukrainian refugees, and the local parish priests. As an important node that assembles a range of people who together realize a series of reciprocal obligations tied to their common interests as outsiders to Mussomeli, it pursues a charitable function that is inseparable from its founder's personal brand as it is curated on his widely followed social media accounts and covered in local news.² The performative virtue central to this endeavour is a matter of public record; no group dinner, no act of giving, no form of hospitality and no sharing of food is ever only a locally embedded event, but rather is documented with carefully framed images of food, selfies and group portraits that find their way to Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.

Mussomeli does not yet have a fully developed and formalized set of expat associations and groups that integrate newcomers into the local community (see Schiller 2022), and social ties with locals are fluid, opportunistic and often dyadic. Federico, the town photographer, partakes regularly of events hosted at the charity kitchen, and maintains cordial ties with several expats, just as Giovanni, a retired local firefighter and talented painter, is a key local contact for James and his family, and Emily has become close friends with Pina, a local amateur cook who was raised in the UK but returned in her twenties to marry a local man. For many newcomers, these new ties with

local people present an antidote to the condition of general anomie that they experience in the cities from which they arrive, reflecting Marc Augé's (2009) dictum that the proliferation of non-places – of homogenized, socially atomized zones – may generate a desire among the denizens of 'supermodernity' to seek out site-specific, emplaced communities where the fabric of day-to-day life depends on face-to-face sociality.

For several local interlocutors, friendship with expats offers a release valve from the grind of day-to-day relations with townspeople. As Giovanni tells me over the course of a walk through the old quarter of Mussomeli, being out and about represents the epitome of tedium: 'See how friendly we are with one another? Always stopping and talking with people? I can hardly walk two steps [and] my walk is interrupted, and everyone wants to inquire about my business. *Che rompimento* [what a pain]!' Giovanni is at turns irascible and cordial, and on this warm July day, the greater part of his ire was directed towards Sebastiano, the *assessore al turismo*, town councillor responsible for the tourism portfolio. The context of the dispute involved an event called Art Doors/Porti Tingiuti, originally proposed by Pippo, a local painter and sculptor, in which local artists negotiated access to a portico of an abandoned house in the old quarter to depict a scene characteristic of the culture or folklore of Mussomeli. Being the culmination of the *Settimana della cultura* (Culture Week), the creations would be unveiled on the final day of a lengthy period of activity filled with concerts and street food gatherings organized by the town's Pro Loco, the local events organizing committee. A flyer for the event included a map of the walking circuit where interested visitors could take in all the fresh artwork. Several days ahead of the event, Sebastiano called Giovanni to inquire, in apparently reproachful fashion, why he had not covered up his work-in-progress to maintain the integrity of the event, which was supposed to include an orchestrated unveiling of the artwork. Indeed, Giovanni thought the idea unnecessary, as did his friend Pippo, who never envisioned a grand unveiling. As far as Giovanni was concerned, this represented an undue interference that aimed only to seize credit for a local initiative:

We want to organize something nice after two years of COVID, and the ignoramuses on town council want to claim it for themselves! What does the *assessore al turismo* have to do with matters pertaining to art? I agreed to do this on my own terms, and now I get a call because I broke rules they decided to invent! I'm old and retired and I don't need this, I'll sooner just destroy my painting than abide by these silly rules!

Giovanni's painted door, one of the most evocative of the twenty or so contributions, depicted a chiaroscuro silhouette of James walking hand-in-hand with his young mixed-race daughter down an adjacent alleyway where Giovanni had romped as a child sixty years earlier. Inspired by a vision of

hospitality to newcomers, and indeed of local rebirth and new beginnings, of change and of openness, the image, and the idea behind it, won Giovanni many accolades.

FROM PAESE TO BORGO

The *Settimana della cultura* is one among several endeavours that are part of a larger ecosystem for the promotion of rural places in Sicily, and what they share is the desire to explore new vistas for towns with uncertain futures. The keywords of regeneration – *ripopolazione*, *ricupero*, *smartworking* and indeed *rigenerazione* itself – reflect a peculiarly urban and neoliberal vision for rural places reimagined as sites of consumption for urbane middle-class people. A significant platform of Mayor Giuseppe Catania's administration involved a plan for local regeneration that saw considerable infrastructural improvements in town, and the development of an ample online presence that would put Mussomeli on the map for would-be investors who could relocate there. His receptiveness to expats, his willingness to meet newcomers and his wide social media presence – not least his unrestrained digital tagging of thousands of followers, including dozens of expats, in his Facebook posts – impart broad reach that amplifies his popularity locally and regionally. As a rising political figure, he recently sought his fortunes with the Fratelli d'Italia party and was elected to the chamber of deputies for the Sicilian regional assembly in the 2022 national elections.

Mussomelesi position themselves within a global heritage-scape that celebrates a definition of their town as a place of inspired history (it has an important Norman castle) and authentic food, sociality and culture.³ Several local artists and artisans, as well as amateur cooks, are active in online communities and post images of their creations, and social media posts of the many local events offer an image of a vibrant town and together generate a brand that the municipal administration and mayor enthusiastically propagate on social media channels of their own. Toti Nigrelli, the deputy mayor, is an enthusiastic proponent of local investment in old real estate, and welcomes any form of outside interest or publicity in Mussomeli. Among these is ITS Lending, a boutique lender that offers crowdsourcing investment opportunities in abandoned houses in rural towns across Italy. Their portfolios are purported to offer guaranteed returns on restructured old houses in rural towns, and target would-be expats who dream of relocating to 'ancient and charming villages across Italy'.⁴ The ITS brand is part of EAT DRINK LOVE ITALIAN Ltd, a UK-based lifestyle platform, digital branding company, and consulting and PR firm that promotes 'the Italian lifestyle'. According to local sources, Mussomeli is the most successful investment site for ITS

Lending, with the entirety of its local projects fully crowdfunded, but many stalled for a lack of architects, engineers and workers who can see to their final restructuring. In a meeting in his office, Nigrelli lauded this enterprise, and, handing me a recent (December 2020) copy of the Italian business magazine *Millionaire*, beamed that Mussomeli is at the forefront of Sicily's rural transformation, and enjoined me to read the special themed articles in that issue on 'La rinascita dei borghi' (the rebirth of burghs). Talk of *borghi* and of the regeneration of semi-abandoned rural towns has hit a fever pitch in recent years as entrepreneurs, investors, journalists and academics feel out the possible opportunities of and alternatives to Italy's rural flight.⁵ But as Barbera, Cersosimo and De Rossi (2022) note, the redefinition of Italian *paesi* (sing. *paese*, village or small town) as *borghi* (sing. *borgo*, burgh) overlays upon these rural sites of human experience and habitation a set of connotations of bourgeois derivation. Namely, it depends upon a regeneration of rural spaces as sites for the realization of an urbane vision of modern life in a sanitized understanding of the quaint small town. The *paese*, with its dense, generationally rooted networks of kin- and kindred-based sociality, grounded in a rural economy, is adapted to the aesthetics, lifestyles, interests and pursuits of late modern urbanity unmoored from its habitat, a process that was accelerated over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic as more people left the city in order to embrace remote or hybrid models of 'work-from-home', in Italian known as *smartworking*. Furthermore, as Rizzo (2002) notes and as the foregoing suggests, the idealized image of rural villages depends on a conceptual sanitation that allows them to fit the aesthetics of the aspirational hashtag that calls to mind all the salubrious wholesomeness that is life in charming rural Italy.

Many expats in Mussomeli explicitly or implicitly embrace an understanding of their move to rural Sicily as an act of 'adoption' of a beautiful village in need of their custodianship. A key particularity of such patterns of small-town regeneration efforts is their concentration of focus on the built-up space of a town, extending no regard to the surrounding countryside that has historically sustained it. The rise of what Jean-Didier Urbain (2008) calls 'escapist new ruralism', characterized by urban peoples' seeking a reconnection to place and the creation of community-based ties, is paradoxically unmoored from any engagement with rural towns' surrounding territory (see Pazzagli 2022). In this sense, the decision to valorize the town and its architectural heritage is an explicit one, and expats do not come to Mussomeli or any other small town with the intention of communing extensively with its rurality, aside, perhaps, from admiring its vistas and rolling hills from afar. It is as if the long-standing Sicilian knowledge of the suffering that characterizes work in the countryside somehow, indirectly, is not lost on newcomers. As my friend Salvatore, a local shepherd, said to me,

‘Foreigners look at the countryside and say it’s beautiful, but they know nothing about it. They see it from afar, like a postcard, and seeing it that way, maybe I could agree that the hills and valleys are pretty, but even then, my bones hurt just looking at it, because I know what it’s like to work in it.’ Most local people are in general agreement, and the few remaining youth do not want to work in agriculture or pastoralism. Salvatore’s sons refuse to help their father with his small flock of sheep or his hay fields, leaving him no other option than to hire Albanian informal labour in the district whenever the work is too much for him.

REFLECTION

In a long-form interview with French journalist Marcelle Padovani, Sicilian novelist, essayist and parliamentarian Leonardo Sciascia described Sicilian history as a succession of domination by outside forces, collectively leaving behind the remnants of their civilizations, none of them indigenous to Sicily. He follows up his articulation of this commonplace with the disquieting claim that Sicily has never had a moment of historical grandeur all its own, an efflorescence of a properly local great tradition followed by decline and decay. Rather, all Sicilian history exemplifies an existential condition of permanent decay born of a pattern of foreign domination geared to wealth extraction that leaves in its wake a landscape of ruin. According to this interpretation of the past, the Sicilian landscape is replete with the detritus of a history of subjection that offers a stark reminder of the island’s place on the margins of the human story.

This gloomy assessment of the past rests on a view of Sicilian deprivation born of a denial of agency by powerful outsiders of diverse kinds. It is a place to be seen, sized up and conquered, or, today, consumed within a tourism imaginary where it is possible to find oneself and seek personal meaning, connection and the warmth of community, using the island as a conduit to realize a better way of being in the world. Such a reassessment may be read optimistically as a revalorization of a place long maligned in the Western imagination as a mafia-ridden backwater, but it reinscribes a set of images of Sicilian rurality that resonate with the aesthetic predilections of middle-class seekers who project their desires for an alternative to their own realities. It transforms rural Sicilian towns, with their decaying quarters and abandoned real estate, as sites of consumption for comparatively wealthy outsiders. These newcomers seek something that is missing from their own places of origin, and the meanings of Sicily to which they subscribe underscore its rustic charm and the social communion that is alleged to be possible only in a small town. For their part, local people – members

of town councils, local entrepreneurs and townsfolk eager to connect with different kinds of people – variously welcome expats while remaining uncertain of the long-term outcome of their acquisition of real estate. Clearly, the realities at hand transcend Sicily and resonate with a broader Italian concern with the fate of small towns and villages, as well as the desire of local politicians and businesspeople to integrate them within a broader touristic imaginary of Italy and Italian life that helps to supplement the usual urban circuits and sites of mass tourism. In Sicily, the depopulated small town, village or hamlet is thereby assimilated to the interests of a wide range of opportunistic actors, thus re-consigning them to spaces of conceptual extraction.

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NOTES

1. For an examination of second-home tourism in Sicily, see Volo (2018).
2. Compare with Trundle's (2014) examination of American women who reside in Tuscany. Being of predominantly middle- or lower middle-class, it bears noting that in the present case most expats' relationships to Mussomeli are not mediated by charitable giving or philanthropic action.
3. See Palumbo (2003) for an ample examination of heritagization in Italy.
4. See <https://itslending.it/how-it-works> (retrieved 8 February 2024).
5. A series of edited volumes (Barbera, Cersosimo and De Rossi 2022; Barbera and De Rossi 2021; Carrosio 2019; De Rossi 2018; Lucatelli, Luisi and Tantillo 2022) and two scholarly manifestos (Cersosimo and Donzelli 2020; Rizzo 2022) in recent years seek to critically assess and offer solutions to the problem of rural flight and abandoned villages in Italy.

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