The children of Augusta

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Two abandoned schools in a Sicilian port town raise uncomfortable truths around how Europe is treating its ‘native’ and ‘migrant’ children.

Augusta is an industrial port on the southern coast of Sicily. Home to 35,000 residents, it is a typical southern conurbation of empty houses, dirty beaches and water-starved palm trees. It was once known mostly for its oil refineries and chemical processing plants. Since October 2013 however, this small community has served as a landing site for Mare Nostrum, the Italian search and rescue operation that has assisted the thousands of refugees and asylum seekers arriving to Italy in boats.

This year alone, 130,000 successfully made the crossing with another three thousand drowning in the attempt. Most of the new arrivals are moved immediately for processing to camps at the island’s interior, in the mountains near the city of Enna. Due to a clause in Italian law, however, under 18’s who arrive unaccompanied are required to remain in the port of arrival to receive documents. Since April there have been five thousand such cases in Augusta alone.

This influx of parentless children, mostly from Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia, has placed an added burden on a town that is already failing to take proper care of its young people. It is estimated that forty per cent of under-19s in Sicily leave school before graduating and academic performance is among the lowest in Italy. This is particularly drastic in Augusta, where truancy has historically been encouraged by

parents who require their children's labour in the fields and at home.

Last month I travelled to the town to learn about the lives of its native and migrant children. During my visit I discovered two spaces, just a short walk apart from one another, which together demonstrate the deprivation and lack of care common to both groups.

The holding zone

The first of these spaces is the 'scuola verde', an old fascist building that was abandoned following an earthquake in 1990. Since April, this has housed the unaccompanied minors who arrive in Augusta on boats. The centre is run by a small staff of one paid official, two volunteers and a local medical team, and has a capacity of up to two hundred. Throughout the day the kids sit on window ledges, staring at passers-by. Others beg on the town's high street, pooling their resources to buy clothes and smartphones.

Interior of the 'Scuola Verde' centre

During my visit I met children from Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, Ghana, Nigeria, Eritrea and Bangladesh. All were fleeing conditions of poverty, debt and very often war, and all wanted the same thing: to find simple and peaceful work and a place to live. I spoke with K who told me his story. “I came from Dhaka” he said, “but I have not been there for a very long time now. Years. I was very poor. I wanted to come to Europe to find job and so I went to Libya and I work and earn enough money in construction to pay for a boat”. K was travelling with his brother who was killed in a dispute over the price of a chicken a few weeks before he made the crossing: “things are mad there you know, there are children with guns and knives and they kill you over the smallest thing without thinking. It is a terrible place and so I come here finally.”

K’s boat capsized in the Mediterranean and he was fished out of the water by the Italian navy. “They saved my life,” he tells me, “I owe my life to them. For this I want to stay here. Italians are good people, friendly and kind. When I get a permit I want to go to Rome where I have some friends who work in a shop”. We drank coffee in K’s dorm, which he prepared on a small kettle and served with powdered milk in foam cups. I spoke with his friends: S, a 15-year-old from Libya, and sole survivor of a bomb attack on his home; F, a 16-year-old from Egypt who had also lost his parents and was here to find a job; and T, a 17-year-old who was fleeing debts and threats of violence in Sudan.

M, a well-built young man, clearly over the age of 18, talked to me about life in the school and about the physical and mental health problems that the paltry staff are clearly unqualified to deal with: “This one is the worst centres in Italy, man. I know because I’ve got friends in other places, in Perugia and Naples. People are goin’ crazy in here you know, we can’t live like this. There’s nothing to do. This guy Enzo,

he come on the boat with me and he's lost it, you know, he wasn't like this before. Now he's, like, screaming in the nights sayin' 'take me back to Ghana, take me to Ghana'. Beating up the other kids in the daytime and nobody does nothing. The other week he robbed this old lady in the town, took her bag". As we were talking, a scrawny ill-looking boy came round the corner wearing a pair of audacious plastic sunglasses and a flowery pink vest. He looked at me with a smile and gave me a rough high-five before walking out into the town, singing nonsense words at the top of his lungs. "There he is now," whispered M, "we all a bit scared of him".

Gentile's graveyard

Around the corner from the migrant children is another abandoned school with a tragic story of its own. Until a few years ago it was one of the most well respected academies in the town, a *liceo classico* for the human sciences. These institutions were formed in the fascist era by Giovani Gentile as a means of safeguarding the transmission of 'high culture' to future generations. The schools have one of the most demanding syllabuses in the world, including five years of Ancient Greek or Latin and a heavy emphasis on rhetoric and spoken presentation. While this system is a cornerstone of public education in much of Italy, such lofty subject matter is but a memory in Augusta – the school was closed in 2009 for 'economic reasons' related to the building's mortgage.

Now the doors are bolted shut, the basement filled with litter and used needles. As I was looking through a window at the sad remains, an old man snuck up behind me and offered his thoughts: "my daughter used to go to this school. It was the best place in town. Half of them would end up at the University [of Catania] and make it as lawyers or politicians. Now there's nowhere left in this goddamn town for our kids to

learn something important. What choice to they have to progress? They'll end up in the factories or at home just like the past."


The abandoned 'Liceo Classico'

Augusta has forty-seven educational facilities, an enormous number for such a small community, and most are struggling to maintain basic facilities. During the week that I spent there, three had their phone lines cut off by the Comune (Italy's municipality) because they did not pay their bills. This is all the more frustrating as funds could be distributed between far fewer schools, but Sicily's notoriously chaotic administrative system has failed entirely to manage the town's education sector.

The people I spoke with were furious about the situation, rolling eyes and swearing passionately. "My children don't go to school," admitted Lucia, a waitress at a local bar, "I prefer to teach them how to look after the house than waste their time in these shit-holes". It is clear, however, that political chaos underpins these attitudes, as local journalist 'Gianni' put it to me: "After the earthquake [of 1990] another of the schools collapsed. I made a public suggestion that they use a building

up at the end of town, a big space on the edge of the fort. Instead they moved the kids to an apartment block in the suburbs and pay €30,000 of rent per year to keep them there. It's nonsense. This town doesn't need fifty schools, it needs a few good ones with good resources".

A choice between children?

The Italian government is acting to alleviate the crisis of refugee children in Augusta. Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has committed the government to permit documentation for those under 18, a bold move that would enable these new arrivals to gain restricted citizen rights, including the rights to housing and work. The government also announced they would be spending €2.4m on providing support for the Southern European regions dealing with child refugees. Augusta was recognized as being one of the most urgent cases and will receive the most funds in Italy. As of September, each unaccompanied minor in the town has been allocated €20 worth of government resources each day.

The decision has vexed many of the locals on grounds of fairness. "How can they do this to us?" asked a young naval officer who I met drinking coffee in the town's main square, "I mean we can't blame these kids for fleeing a warzone, it is a terrible thing. But if they can suddenly find €20 for each of these, why can't they get something similar to the rest of us who are sitting here with no roof and no money to pay our bills? If something doesn't change, soon there's going to be war on our own land". 'Gianni' likewise conceded that there was a sense of mounting tension: "it is a sensitive area", he said, "the people here are not racist but they are starting to lose their patience".

It is important to note that the Italian state is doing a fair amount to address the worst of the problems in the south. Compared with the initial €2.4m pledged to refugees, Rome has promised €91m to Sicilian schools this summer, a sum which could significantly revitalize the sector. There is also, of course, a categorical difference between the experience of fleeing a warzone and that of living on precarious and underpaid jobs. Nonetheless, the officer's experience speaks to a wider truth. According to UNICEF, one in three Italian children live below the poverty line. In Augusta, the Red Cross hold regular aid-drops in the town's square, distributing antiseptic creams, painkillers and basic foodstuffs.

Interior of the 'Liceo Classico'

Given these appalling conditions it is remarkable that the far right has not established a greater foothold in the town. I asked Roberto, a law student at Catania University, why he thought this was. "We are not bad people here in Sicily, even if there are some of us who buy all that CasaPound shit," he said, referring to the radical right movement. "In fact in Italy, except maybe Milan, people are relatively good at dealing

with this problem even if we have no money. People are kind to the migrant kids. They give them clothes and food and money. Some people have even adopted them. Why can't the North of Europe be more like this? It's time for France and Britain to recognize the extent of this problem. They can't just leave it for us".

The prospects of more help from abroad do not good. Since I visited Augusta, Mare Nostrum has become obsolete, and is soon to be replaced by a more limited EU mission, which will not venture into international waters. While some naval units in Augusta have defiantly continued their rescue campaign, the new operation has seen little opposition at a political level. Germany was clear from the start that it would provide only the most basic help. In France, Marine Le Pen's violent proclamations have caught the headlines, while the silence from Hollande's socialist government is perhaps even more ominious. Last week, Britain withdrew its support for any future rescue operation on the basis that the support "encourages people to make the voyage".

People will continue to make these voyages whether or not there is a rescue operation. By refusing to confront this reality, the richest countries of Europe have relinquished responsibility for some of the world's most vulnerable, including hundreds of thousands of young people, many of them parentless and with no support. In Italy, it is the impoverished Sicilians and their children who are bearing the brunt of what is essentially a European problem. In such a climate, the loose threat of war, while clearly hyperbolic for now, should not be disregarded as mere rhetoric. The children of Augusta are the children of Europe. By failing to care for them, we're creating a time bomb for the future.