

## Europe's Many Souls: Abandoned Places and the Struggle for a European Dream

by Sara Candido

"Once upon a time there was Europe".

Europe, and the European dream, appear broken.

A dream born out of a nightmare, the horror, the blood of millions who died in the darkest years of our history. A dream established on the highest human ideals, centred on social and cultural cooperation, the free movement of goods and people and the courage and will to claim and promote the rights and dignity of every citizen.

A united Europe is like a second Enlightenment. A movement that has inspired and fertilized the ideas, habits and culture of an entire continent, but also the world.

Perfection, however, is generally the reserve of dreams. Reality and everyday life are different and it is here that

many obstacles are constraining the attainment of this dream.

Today, in 2018, I again find myself Italian. No longer European.

The refugee crisis; the continued rise of nationalisms since 2014; the closure of borders and building of walls; the UK's Brexit; growing Islamophobia; the widening gap between north and south Europe; the conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen; and the emergence of a block of countries in the East who consider Brussels a sort of new Moscow.

Divisions! Some large, others small, are undermining the European dream.

The Union needs to address these imbalances, beginning from the smallest cracks in its structure. These are not only corrosive and damaging, but also represent the plane on which

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individual citizens and groups of citizens can truly make a difference, contributing more sustainable solutions for tomorrow.

This is why I believe in the ideal of a united Europe. It is this ideal, this strong conviction that links me to my origins and propels my mind and hopes to imagine a future of integration, acceptance, plurality and sharing, that motivates me, gives me energy and ambition.

"United" does not mean standardized. The European continent is composed of thousands of different facets, perspectives, stories and memories. These differences, in my view, are Europe's strengths and must be used to bridge the gaps and cure the wounds currently emerging across Europe.

One theme which has long been central to my experience, and which today represents a deep scar on my consciousness, has to do with the abandonment of places.

I am Italian, and I come from Calabria. My hope is that my region, my city, my birthplace will be capable of developing and sustaining an ongoing dialogue with the world and with "the other", with who is considered "different".

Abandonment comes in many faces, shapes and forms. Each has different colours, memories and dreams. Calabria, like many regions of our continent, has witnessed continuous and, at times, violent migrations. These are the migratory flows of yesterday and today should remind us of the hard work of thousands of men and woman

who were forced to abandon their homes in search of a better tomorrow.

We should appreciate the feelings of disorientation, of fear and expectation held by migrants today as they search for their existential space in a context unfamiliar to them. Migrants live and contend with the permanent desire of returning home. Yet, what awaits them should they ever return are the ruins of the past. Ruins that are inevitably translated into the rubble of an untenable present, a present unable to provide for their dreams and ambitions.

Ruins and rubble, while often associated with "no-places" or "ghost towns", are actually alive. They live because they are deeply connected to the territory, culture and memory of its inhabitants, of Italians and Europeans, as well as others.

They are alive because they conserve the "*genius loci*", the local specificities, the genes and spirit of the place. These are central elements of the cultural exchange process that Europe and the Union should pursue and encourage for a dual objective:

- 1) Stop the depletion and abandonment that certain areas, regions and cities – including Calabria – are facing. Adverse consequences are not only limited to a loss of culture and memory by those who are forced to emigrate, but also a constant and growing impoverishment of a portion of European culture and identity, one that should instead be protected and nourished.

- 2) Stay! Stay in these places. This should not be a simple slogan or proclamation.

One can affirm a utopia of small things that require patience and care, caution and tenacity, attention and openness, a sense of responsibility and discourses that include an idea and an ideal of Europe.

Such ambitions aim for more sustainable development processes and a return to abandoned places, to breath new air and hopes into the peripheries of the European project.

This project stems from a (re)discovery of the "*genius loci*" which are passed on from generation to generation. It means developing tourist programmes that are respectful of local culture and able to connect visitors with locals in a mutual enrichment process. It means boosting the productivity of small and medium-sized enterprises, expanding opportunities from local and regional markets to the national and European one while protecting local traditions. This in an effort to enrich and expand the consciousness of individuals, seeking to foster new narratives and sense of belonging that is inherently European but also appreciative of the regional and local differences.

A rediscovery, and a renewed attribution of dignity to abandoned places, are necessary in order to bring modernity to territories such as Calabria, which have slipped into a limbo that keeps them on the side-lines of the European consciousness, a "restless land" to borrow from the work of Vito Teti.

There is ample richness in these lands, an untapped richness that may not produce resources or monetary gain, but from which new opportunities

and a new energy and drive towards integration and cooperation may arise.

Rather than being forced to leave their homes and struggle to survive, Europe and the European Union should devise means to encourage young people to remain, to live in their lands and regions. This "staying" must have meaning, and be dynamic in value. Migration should not be viewed only as a process of leaving behind, but also of rediscovering the place where one was born.

Those who remain are fulfilling a different kind of migration, one that was first accomplished outside. The difference today is that by staying "in place" and not abandoning one's lands, migration is also to be conducted within the mind by fostering an ideal of belonging to a social, economic and political system that is just and equal in its parts. That belonging, that belief and hope is the idea and the ideal of Europe.

For this reason, I dream of a Europe where places of abandonment come back to life in the hands of young Europeans. Forgotten places that are transformed from uninhabited "ghost towns" into new nerve centres of rediscovery, exchange, cooperation and opportunity. Places where life returns. Again.

My Europe is not limited to commemorating.

My Europe has many souls. Each of which lives.

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