

## **“If you are in Palermo, you are a Palermitan”**

An interview with Mayor Leoluca Orlando

Harald Bauder

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### **SERIES EDITOR**

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Leoluca Orlando was born in 1947 in the Sicilian city of Palermo. After studying in Heidelberg, Germany, and Palermo, he worked as a professor of public law at the University of Palermo. In 1985, Palermo's city council elected Orlando for the first time as Mayor. Currently, he serves his fifth term. In between, he also had seats in the European and the Italian Parliaments, and he served as opposition leader in the Sicilian Parliament. In his first term as Mayor, he took up the fight against the Sicilian mafia; today he fights against racism and the restrictive migration policies of Italy's national government and the European Union.

In March of 2015, Orlando released the [Charter of Palermo](#), which promotes freedom of mobility as a human right, calls for the abolition of the residence permit in the European Union, and advocates for the fundamental reorientation of European refugee and migration policies. The Charter has received widespread international attention and is considered a landmark document for European municipalities, [solidarity networks](#), and [safe-harbour initiatives](#) committed to migration and the admission of refugees. Together with his counterparts, the mayors of Naples, Florence and other Italian cities, Orlando [has refused](#) to [fully implement](#) Italy's national asylum law at the municipal level, which is why the Italian Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, has accused Orlando of [civil disobedience](#).

The interview took place on 14 March 2019 in Orlando's residence Villa Niscemi in Palermo. Having studied in Heidelberg, Orlando speaks German fluently and was eager to conduct the interview in German. The following text is a shortened and edited translation of the interview.

**Mr. Mayor Orlando, you have inspired people across Europe, first with your fight against corruption, and then with your passion for refugees and migrants.**

*Orlando:* The two topics are not separate. They are related to each other. Being against the mafia and being against the residence permit means having respect for human rights.

**How did you address both issues in Palermo?**

Palermo was the capital of the mafia. Today it is a capital of culture. Today, people from all over the world come to Palermo, also to invest. Last week, the Statistical Institute, which is under the control of the Italian government – not exactly my best friends – declared that Palermo is the safest city in Italy. Palermo, capital of the mafia, is the safest city in Italy! That means: mission accomplished. We have to thank the many people who have come to our aid in the fight against the Mafia.

**And migration?**

We cannot say today that Palermo respects the rights of migrants. Because we have no migrants in Palermo. If you ask how many migrants are in Palermo, then I do not answer 100,000 or 120,000, but none. If you are in Palermo, you are a Palermitan. I'm sorry, but you are a Palermitan. You can leave Palermo if you want. But as long as you are in Palermo, you are a Palermitan. ... I discovered – that was a great discovery – that migrants are humans! Wow. They are humans. Like my brother, like my daughter, like my mother, like my wife. They are humans. I make no distinction between people who are in Palermo and who live in Palermo.

That's why we have become a tourist city. Because we welcome migrants. The tourists are not afraid to come to Palermo. ... If a Muslim who could be dangerous comes to Palermo, then the other Muslims call me and I call the police. The Muslims protect Palermo. That's not the case in Paris, in the banlieue in Paris. My daughter lived in Paris for a long time and, like her father, she

was always with migrants. She told me: Papa, when a terrorist arrives in the banlieue, nobody calls the police. They close their eyes – as the Palermitans once did.

### **What is your political vision for Palermo?**

Palermo has become a new city; not a "new" city, but a "renewed" city. We rediscovered our soul. I'm sorry, we are not a European city; we are a city in Europe. Palermo is Beirut, is Kabul, Palermo is Tripoli. My political project is to be Beirut with Wifi and trams.

I always say we are a mosaic. There are different stone pieces, in different colors, in different dimensions. But a mosaic needs a frame. A mosaic without a frame is a collection of different pieces of stone without harmony. A Picasso does not need a frame. A Caravaggio needs no frame. A Miro, a Goya or van Gogh does not need a frame. Our framework is respect for human rights. "To be different, to be equal." We are not the same, but we have the same rights.

Today, I am proud to organize the biggest gay pride in Southern Europe. One hundred thousand people – in the streets in Palermo! You have to understand. Last year, it was not only a day long, but three months. Do you know what the topic was last year? The topic was migration and homosexuality. I talked to my friends; they asked about the rights of migrants. May I also ask to respect the rights of homosexuals? Too many homosexuals are against migrants. When I talked to migrants, they expected us to respect their rights. But may I also ask to respect the rights of homosexuals? Not all migrants respect the rights of homosexuals. I locked them both [homosexual and migrant] up in a room – with a key – and said: you will stay here until you organize a Gay Pride with the theme of homosexuality and migration.

### **And that worked?**

Yes! And Thomas Geisel the Mayor of Dusseldorf (Germany), was here, and migrants from Africa, from India, transsexuals, homosexuals, LGBT, everyone!

### **Migrants and the LGBTQ+ community are demanding their rights together?**

Legality is not enough for us. We do not need the legality of the law, but the legality of rights. Human rights! That's not the same thing. Often the law is against rights. May I remind you of the fascist laws? May I remind you of the Nazi laws? May I remind you of the Salvini Decree? May I remind you of European legislation – against rights. How can I belong to Europe if I do not respect human rights? No thanks, NO THANKS! I'm for Europe – for Europe – FOR EUROPE!

### **You are a former Member of the European Parliament. Please tell us more about the role of migration for Europe.**

We have to thank the migrants because they bring together three different themes: security, climate change, and peace. Only the migrants experience these three topics at the same time. They have a problem with security; they have no security. Climate change – are the Germans victims of climate change, or the people of Norway and Sweden? Or are the people in Africa the first victims who have to leave their country? ... Peace – and war: we have not had war in Europe for 80 years! Let's talk about war and migrants: they are the victims of war, not us! Today, the three different themes are united in the context of migration.

**And what does that mean for Palermo?**

You know, our future has two names. One name is Google, or Alibaba, or Facebook. The other name is Ahmed – the migrant. The first stands for virtual connections, the second for human connections. The two must stay in harmony. To live in a world where there is only Google is a tragedy. In a world where there is only Ahmed the migrant, there is no hope for a future. That's why we need both. Do not you know that Palermo with migrants is the best-connected city in Europe? The best! That's why we have free wifi. We have security, we have cameras and a modern system. We control everyone [slams his hand on the table]. There is no city in Italy that is as perfectly controlled as Palermo. I think we have to give two names to our future: Google and Ahmed.

**You oppose the migration policy of the Italian Minister of the Interior, Salvini.**

I received a beautiful letter from the Pope. About migrants. When Minister Salvini said, I will send the army against Orlando, then the Archbishop said it is a duty to be against this law. And he said we have to organize resistance. The Archbishop of Rome! [laughs]. So, the church too can change.

**What is your general attitude towards the nation state?**

The State? What is it? A closed space? We have learned, we know, that the state is a closed space. Sometimes protected with flowers, sometimes with weapons. But try asking a young man, "What is the state?" He does not know. He talks about the world and his village. What is in the middle [i.e. the nation state], is an enemy of his fortune. What is the state for Google?

**That is interesting. How should a city like Palermo behave towards the nation state?**

We do not want to remain under the state. Three "terrorists" said "no more states". One of them was Konrad Adenauer, another one was Alcide De Gasperi, a third one was Robert Schuman. After the Second World War, these three "terrorists" understood that we cannot remain within the borders of the state. They had a great vision: the European Union. And now we are talking [again] about closed states? We have to protect Italy? No, we have to protect Europe, not Italy!

**In the Charter of Palermo, you are against the citizenship principle of descent (*ius sanguinis*).**

We have been told that identity is determined by the blood of our parents. May I ask what the difference is between your blood and my blood [points to the veins in his arm]? It does not matter if my mother or father are Sicilian. I am a Sicilian because I have decided to be here. My mother is a Sicilian, my father is a Sicilian, but I can decide not to be a Sicilian. I am free! Identity is the first act of freedom in the world. I should decide to be a Tunisian and a Jew or a German Hindu. I decide myself what my identity is [knocks on the chest]. Identity does not come from the blood of my parents.

Let's talk about the homeland: I chose my parents well; but they have decided that I have to be born in Italy – without my permission! Your parents have surely asked you: where do you want to be born? Not mine! And I was born in Italy, and Italy must now be my homeland! No thanks. NO THANKS [slams his fist on the table]!

That's what Ahmed says. What is the home of Ahmed? He decides what is home for him. I

decide, like Ahmed, what my home is; and that I decide that Italy is my homeland is a free decision. Only as a free choice, can you have a homeland like Italy with such a bad national anthem. Did you hear *Inno di Mameli*, the Italian national anthem? You can't listen to it! It's a scandal. But I have decided that I love it. Like my wife. My wife is not Miss Universe, but I love her. That is my decision.

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