

The Politics of the Humanitarian Crisis in Europe

Written by Roberto Orsi

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ROBERTO ORSI, JUN 2 2015

One of the greatest moral achievements of the ancient world has been the enshrinement of a solidarity principle for the fellow human in distress, which finds perhaps its highest formulation in the evangelical parable of the “good Samaritan”. It is worth recalling that parable in full:

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? (Luke 10:30-36)

The parable offers a clear portrait of what “being a neighbour” should mean, namely coming to the rescue of people in difficult situations and imminent danger, in order to let them recover (if possible), and regain their autonomy.

The parable of the good Samaritan would however look very different if its author had added that a secret deal between the inn-keeper and the robbers was in place, and that to a certain extent even the beaten man was somehow half-aware of the scam in which he plays the admittedly most uncomfortable role (to use an euphemism). It would look even more different if its author added that such a scam was operated on an industrial scale, with the vast complicity of those who were supposed to safeguard the security of that territory, and a plethora of intellectuals and spiritual leaders, who were using the best of their intelligence to envisage narratives providing direct or indirect legitimation for such traffics.

In such a different version of the parable, what would the Samaritan have done? The man was indeed severely beaten and in distress, should he then be rescued?

The parable also indicates that the Samaritan, after providing what may be called “first aid” to the disgraced man, “brought him to an inn”, and “on the morrow [...] he departed”. The Samaritan therefore did not take the man as part of his family, in his own house, including the man’s cognates and descendants, for an indefinite future. Nor the Samaritan took the episode as the starting point of a project for promoting a radical political programme in Samaria, one theorising the country’s liquefaction as a political unity in the name of a superior idea of “humanity”, without duly informing and debating with its fellow Samaritans, but under the guise of a rather questionable “necessity”.

The most noble forms of humanitarianism can be summarised in the “thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:39) commandment. However, what is mostly understated in the current reading of this quote is that there cannot be “love”, or better the parental love expressed by the Greek concept of *agape*, to put it bluntly, without discipline, or rules, or the law (of God, of one’s parents, of the political community, and so on). To express it through Augustine’s words:

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Man [...] ought to be taught the due measure of loving, that is, in what measure he may love himself so as to be of service to himself. [...] Now he is a man of just and holy life who forms an unprejudiced estimate of things, and keeps his affections also under strict control, so that he neither loves what he ought not to love, nor fails to love what he ought to love, nor loves that more which ought to be loved less, nor loves that equally which ought to be loved either less or more, nor loves that less or more which ought to be loved equally. *De Doctrina Christiana*, I 26-28.

Discipline goes for the love towards the “other”, as much for the love towards “oneself”. The love for oneself does not and cannot transcend from self-discipline, as countless traditions, from Indian to Hellenistic philosophies, to Confucianism, have warned for millennia. As one should love his neighbour as oneself, the same discipline applies.

A further problem with simplistic humanitarianism lies in the persistent gap between possible moral rules governing the single or episodic interaction between individuals, and the adequacy of such rules to make sense of far more recurrent situations. Quantity is quality, and politics differs from ethics precisely, among other elements, on the qualitative differences enhanced primarily by the recurrence of certain episodes. In these cases, the direct transposition of moral thinking into politics remains of limited help, this being the reason behind the resilient separation between ethics and politics, of which the “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21) remains the hermetic cypher.

A Blackmail of Horror

In the light of the above, the abnormality of the ongoing human trafficking in the Mediterranean starts to appear as one of the most serious political, criminal, and intellectual blunders in recent European history. The most remarkable element is the almost inexplicable, wide gulf between its media-enhanced image, and what slightly more informed narratives can immediately reveal. Far from being a recent emergency, human trafficking and illegal immigration across the Mediterranean have been continuing at least since the late 1990s. Tragedies such the one where over seven hundred people have drowned already occurred in the waters facing Libya a decade ago and more. Reading the newspapers reporting such episodes reveals the consistency of the Italian (and European) inadequate attitude and initiatives in addressing such phenomenon. A dramatic change has however occurred since the so called Arab Spring in 2011, and even more with the overthrowal of Qaddafi in Libya, which has opened the doors to a flood. However, this is not the entire picture.

Italy has become the most important approach to Europe thank to a series of choices made by the various governments, which have made all this possible. Contrary to those who see the continent as “fortress Europe”, whoever makes it to Italy, remains in Italy and in Europe, indefinitely, independently from any legal status, unless he decides to leave. The major part of Italy’s almost four million non-EU residents has been amnestied, or re-joined amnestied illegal immigrants. Even in the presence of hundreds of thousand illegal entries, the number of people effectively removed from the national territory never exceeded the low thousands. The country’s immigration law, which tied the number of immigrants to the availability of jobs, has never been applied.

This has been the pattern of immigration (non-)policies in Italy at least from the second half of the 1990s. At that time, Italian readers will remember, countless Albanian citizens were illegally crossing the narrow strait separating the countries. What was the response from the Italian government? It was the acceptance of a gigantic operation of human trafficking as a normal, “inevitable” fact. No serious attempt was ever made to govern the phenomenon, with the exclusion of some cosmetic operations. Practically no trafficker was ever punished, despite the recurrence of shipwrecks with hundreds of casualties. Albanian immigration eventually faded when a large part of young adult Albanian population moved to Italy, later to be amnestied, essentially exhausting the emigration basin.

The current phenomenon presents similarities, but also many differences. The main difference it that immigrants are no longer reaching the coast of Italy, nor of Lampedusa, contrary to what is normally to be read in the press. The boats are often a hundred nautical miles away from Lampedusa, and even more from Sicily or mainland Italy. From there, the traffickers (so called *scafisti*), with a satellite phone, call their contacts in Italy, who in turn call the Coast Guard in Palermo or elsewhere, giving the position of the boat. The Italian Navy and/or Coast Guard then intervene (they have to according to the law), take the immigrants on board, often including the *scafisti*, and ferry them to Sicily.

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If they did not intervene, the passengers of the boat would be probably unable to make it back to Libya, or to any shore, thus dying of dehydration, or drowning, or freezing. From a legal viewpoint, it is a perfectly engineered trap, whose steps are all recorded and monitored by the traffickers' network in Italy, ready for legal action for omission (art. 328 and art. 593, Italian penal code) against the state. From a political and media perspective, it is an equally ingenuous humanitarian blackmail, which exploits, with some obvious risks, the ever-rising tide of unconditioned humanitarianism, against which Europe seems to be unable, and unwilling, to construct a more sober counter-discourse. Of course, any blackmail or threat would never become credible if sometimes the evil which is hinted in the threat did not materialise, namely in this case the death of people in the Mediterranean. Such horrible deaths strengthen the position of the traffickers, by making their threat increasingly credible. This multiplies the efforts to save the boats, which in turn multiplies the boats, and in the long run, the deaths. Italians and European leaders pretend they have not understood this.

Once in Italy, immigrants are routed to "reception centres", normally run by cooperatives, or even, directly or indirectly, by the Catholic Church. It is almost needless to say that, in a country which is rapidly sinking in the corruption rankings, numerous scandals have demonstrated the emergence of an authentic para-criminal "solidarity industry", entirely fuelled by public funds (i.e. public debt), possibly one of the fastest growing sectors in the past decade, in a context of economic desolation.

From these centres, they "flee". They then wander on Italy's railway system to reach the North of the country, where they re-connect with their networks, and they attempt to cross the borders towards the final destination, mostly the generous welfare of Germany and Sweden. Interesting elements can be added to the story at this juncture. Immigrants have long "won the right" not to be identified by the Italian authorities. If they did, they would not be able to claim asylum or refugee status in Germany or Sweden, as the rules in the Dublin Regulation affirm that such statuses are to be granted by the jurisdiction which first receives the claimants. The immigrants would be therefore deported from Northern Europe to Italy. The results of all this is clearly that Italian authorities, in spite of any contrary international commitment and regulation, have been discharging into the Schengen area from hundreds to thousands of completely unidentified people every week for years. Such policy is hurting Italy's allies and partners, causing considerable economic damage, security stress, and severe political harm, including the recent collapse of the Swedish government, overwhelmed by a tidal wave of asylum seekers equivalent to around 1% of Sweden's population in a single year.

While the Italian press invariably and enthusiastically labels such traffics as *viaggi della speranza* (voyages of hope), a further sign of the intelligentsia's bad faith, readers will struggle to find information about what happens to the *scafisti* after they are arrested, who are almost immediately released and sentenced to mild punishments *in absentia*, even in the case of shipwrecks with hundreds of casualties, or what happens to the boats.

An Orwellian Language

One of the most remarkable features of this story is the systematic creation by the media and political leaders of narratives which accommodate, and foster, such state of affairs. This result is primarily achieved by the enhancement of a veritably Orwellian *newspeak* grounded in the expansion and manipulation of ethical concepts in a clearly abnormal situation, without any regard for political and strategic consequences. The Italian public in particular has been for many years accustomed to consider *accoglienza* ("reception" or "hospitality") as a duty. However, hospitality in this case is stretched to unheard extremes. The idea of hospitality, as already in the ancient world, relates to the visitor and traveller, who stays for a limited period of time, and is protected by traditional and divine precepts (*Zeus Xenios*). This has of course little or nothing to do with the political problem of large scale population transfers, population re-settlement, population replacement, which form, behind the humanitarian façade, the core of the phenomenon *de quo*, a phenomenon whose political analysis is continuously hampered by deliberately pushing the individual and/or legalistic viewpoint as the only valuable, in a move leading to the inconclusiveness of any debate.

Related to this point, is the idea that any political position critical of the current immigration policies, and of Lampedusa's blunder, commits the sin of xenophobia. As in the case of hospitality, the meaning of xenophobia has

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been ideologically manipulated in order to let it mean something it never did. The xenophobe, literally “the one who fears the guest/foreigner”, is a person irrationally hostile to anything foreign. Xenophobia is a word describing an excessive attitude of closeness with regard to what lies beyond the boundary of one’s political community in a time of normal exchanges and interaction. The irrationality of the xenophobe lies in not understanding that such interactions do not necessarily pose a threat, but they are instead often a welcome occasion for mutual enrichment. In this case again, the focus is on the individual, telling little or nothing about the collective and the political. The problem is that Europeans today do not live in – historically speaking – “normal times” of interactions with the foreigner, but in times when such interactions have surged to a political problem of primary magnitude, which is becoming impossible to deny. Migrations have always occurred, but the idea that unlimited, massive movements of millions of people (and many more to come) is a naturalistic phenomenon, constitutes a clumsy attempt at masquerading policies which appear as the continuation of the worst twentieth century social engineering experiments.

More in general, the often reported idea that “migrations always happened and always will”, with the consequent fatalistic attitude to ongoing events, entirely misses the mark on a number of levels. For most if not all European countries, the quantitative dimension of immigration in recent decades is simply unprecedented. Migrations have historically occurred throughout human history, particularly towards underpopulated areas with untapped natural resources and/or for the purpose of conquest. In none of such cases mass migrations have been unproblematic and peaceful. The determinism of the unavoidable human migration argument, if of any value, should then also extend to its direct and indirect consequences. This very determinism, more in general, seems to be at odds with the fundamental idea that politics, albeit “the realm of the possible”, can be steered by human will, without which any talk about government and its forms, including “democracy”, becomes pointless.

Other explanatory genres, which tend to see mass migrations as a way to balance economic inequalities and/or past wrongdoings, particularly colonisation, miss the point that these cannot constitute solutions for past and present woes, nor are the recipe for a “better world”. Even if a healthy critique of capitalism and/or globalisation (however defined) were to be embraced, one cannot but noticed the regrettable tendency to employ it as a deterministic explanation format, as a theological *insh’Allah*, which ends up producing an upside-down ideological legitimation for any policy, while humanity should faithfully await an eschatological as much as utopian liberation, one that constantly shifts farther into the distant future.

Solidarity has been another victim of ideological manipulation. An expression of the piety and empathy, if turned into a policy, it cannot simply be articulated as an unconditioned duty – outside the cases of extreme necessity, irreversible and chronic disease. It must always contain limits, conditions, guarantees, and a clear idea of its quantitative dimension. Unlimited, unconditional, unquestioning forms of solidarity are morally naïve and exposed to the obvious risk of parasitism.

Distorted Images of Places and People

Besides the manipulation of concepts, producing a legitimating narrative for the current predicament passes through the creation of disputable images of places, and of people.

Already for a number of years, in all main European languages the word “migrant” has replaced any former denomination, particularly “immigrant” (*immigrato*, *Einwanderer*), which contained a clearer sense of direction into the territorial dimension of a state, thus undermining the conceptual in/out difference. Crucially the concept of migrant relies on the previously exposed idea of human migration as a sheer naturalistic phenomenon with no political design, or implication. It has also limited any meaningful distinction between the ways and reasons why borders are crossed, whether legally, or illegally, or for a grounded humanitarian necessity (refugees, asylum seekers), or in absence of any such requisite.

A more recent twist has taken place with the ongoing crisis in the Mediterranean, whereby the “migrants” have suddenly been all labelled as *profughi* (“the ones who flee”), without any enquiry on whether the factual and legal presuppositions for defining them as such are in place, and to allow them a legal entry to the Schengen area. It appears that in reality, according to the European Union, only a small fraction of those arrived in Europe via

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Lampedusa can qualify for the status of refugee or for political asylum. Consequently, their demands are likely to be rejected and they should be taken back to the country where they entered the EU, namely Italy. The vast majority of immigrants, in other words, comes from countries where there is no immediate danger for their lives, nor serious, large scale violation of human rights to justify their permanence as refugees.

European and particularly Italian media have been restlessly working on the creation of a fictitious image of the African continent. According to it, Africa is a massive concentration camp of unlimited, inexplicable violence, torture and death (it is never entirely clear who is perpetrating it, and for what reasons), without any place to escape, or to live. The only possibility for every single person in Africa is to leave to other parts of the world. However, there are many possible immediate counter-narratives. In the days when several hundred people drowned off the Libyan coast, African leaders gathered together with their Asian peers in Bandung (Indonesia), to discuss the continuous expansion of South-South cooperation, trade, joint development, and investments. Particularly in the past decade and half, numerous African nations gained the top ranks among the fastest-growing economies in the world. Countries in Western Africa, where numerous immigrants are coming from, such as Ghana and Nigeria, have become centres of very rapid development. While many challenges persist, a certain consensus is emerging around the idea that most African nations will attain middle income status by the mid of the current century, barring major trend disruptions. If it is undeniably true that poverty and economic underdevelopment remain extremely widespread, the picture of Africa as an unliveable place is completely misleading. This also goes for the presence and persistence of military conflicts, whose number and intensity has vastly declined almost everywhere from the 1990s. Statistically, the risk of dying in a shipwreck in the Mediterranean is several orders of magnitude higher than that of suffering a violent and premature death in Africa or the Middle East.

If a distorted image of the African continent has been fabricated in order to fit a certain narrative, so it is the image of Europe. Europe is the specular image of Africa's desolation, a place forever free from serious political and security questions (an outdated, but diehard legacy of a post-historical vision à la Fukuyama), and where, inexplicably, prosperity is a given for all residents, and whatever group of people comes to Europe, will enjoy it for the simple fact of its geographic relocation. An illustration of the problematic sides of this vision, which are becoming all too apparent, does not need to be re-iterated here.

The European Union, as in the case of other national problems, constitutes a valuable tool for shifting responsibilities and create deliberately deceptive accounts of the crisis. On the one hand, Europe is supposed to be committed to the unlimited, unconditioned "humanitarian" policies of unquestioning hospitality, this being a constitutive part of its "core values". Here is a clever mix of half-truths and overstatements: Europe has been historically conceived as a community of nation states according to the principle of subsidiarity, where certain "humanitarian values" are present, but they cannot trump basic security and strategic concerns, nor the idea that social phenomena are ruled by laws passed according to constitutionally determined mechanisms, including those norms regulating immigration, asylum status or refugees, and not by the emotional, sensationalistic drive of political radicalism trying to spread the idea that all borders are immoral, therefore there should not exist, whatever the consequences.

Particularly the Italian media and political leaders are engaged in a pathetic "double game". In order to deceive the Italian audience, they decry "Europe's selfishness" and the stubborn anti-immigration attitude of the main EU partners. They fantasise about absurd measures, such as spreading illegal immigrants and legitimate refugees/asylum seekers alike all over the continent, pretending to ignore that this would be the capitulation to human trafficking, a huge political blunder, and it will not be accepted by any European state, which will certainly never be inclined to put their national security in the hands of the continent's most corrupted bureaucracies, one of the reasons why this traffic exists in the first place.

At the same time though, in the official diplomatic and international legal agreements, the very same leaders never officially questioned the rules of the Dublin Regulation, and so the principle that the EU has external borders which have to be guarded, monitored and defended.

Who profits for the fabrication of these narratives? In the short term, as already clear from the various scandals and deficiencies mentioned above, those who have advanced their agenda and achieved to channel public resources

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towards the (however patchy) management of this emergency, to whose appearance and expansion they continuously contribute. Secondly, such narratives are to be understood in the context of path dependence in the “humanitarian” interpretation of the Other exclusively as a victim, bound to remain a victim so forever, as “bare life”. In the long run however, considering the destabilising effects of rapid, massive and undesired population movements, nobody should seriously be thinking of receiving any gain from the continuation of current trends.

Policies and Trajectories

It has been immediately clear that the recent tragedies in the Mediterranean have not changed the course of events, nor the policies which particularly the Italian government is going to pursue. Authorities in Rome have instantly reiterated the above-described, essentially pointless idea of a “common European effort”, whose non-existent positive effects have been for everybody to see in the past few years. The promised “war on the traffickers”, in a world of ubiquitous espionage and electronic surveillance, is immediately depicted as an impossible task. The situation is therefore likely to worsen, especially when increasing numbers non-qualifying asylum seekers will be deported back to Italy. In the long run Italy, by failing to comply with its international obligations, may find itself excluded from the Schengen area, also considering that many of its policies seems to be almost designed to hurt its Northern European partners.

As in recent weeks many proposals have been advanced on how to find a solution for the severe situation of trafficking and illegal immigration in the Mediterranean, it is arguable that no “solution” can be envisaged within the current “humanitarian” conceptual horizon. While authentic human tragedies are indeed occurring, European naivety, short-sightedness and fixation on electoral politics impede the formulation of a broader vision. The first step in order to stop human trafficking and the consequent humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean is to change the way it is narrated and thought about. The colossal dimension of its organisation, which is simply unthinkable without vast complicities in the Italian institutions, has to be weighted as a sign of the severe degradation of territorial control from the part of the state, a void of authority which is being filled by unaccountable and aggressive forces, such as transnational criminal networks. Europe needs to face the ineffectiveness of its methods in dealing with actors who are ready to violate and abuse legal rules issued by institutions whose legitimacy they do not recognise, while are willing to die and kill to reach their goals.

The sheer quantitative dimension of the phenomenon is indicative of how humanitarianism can be exploited on an industrial scale, particularly forcing the hand of institutions by means of well-engineered blackmail, and organised violence (e.g. against identification, or deportation procedures), which are impossible to resist in the current political-cultural landscape. Consequently, humanitarianism has been weaponised, and illegal mass immigration is in the process of becoming a primary instrument of asymmetric warfare.

The deaths in the Mediterranean will cease only when the trafficking will be brought to an end, and the political actors, both in Italy/Europe and in Africa, who are making it possible, will be neutralised. Chances that this will occur in the next future are, however, very small. The Italian government has continuously resisted the idea that the country is in the presence of an asymmetric threat, but only of a humanitarian crisis. It has therefore failed to mobilise those resources which can stop the trafficking. Instead of envisaging nonsensical Europe-wide policies which will never materialise, Rome should have called for protection and assistance upon the US, its main ally, the one for which Italy has sent its troops to fight and die in counterproductive and pointless wars, the same wars, largely opposed by public opinion in Europe, which are destabilising the southern bank of the Mediterranean, and, particularly for the Libya campaign of 2011, which destroyed vital security interests of Italy, and (as it should be clear by now) of Europe. The US, whose Sixth Fleet is the most powerful in the Mediterranean, has the intelligence assets and the freedom of manoeuvre to influence the situation in Libya, if they wanted to, much more effectively than any European initiative.

It should also be noticed that the current situation constitutes a completely abnormal, very dangerous misuse of the sea, and an obvious threat to maritime security, which, given the continuous reinforcement of the organisations behind the trafficking, may naturally evolve into full-blown piracy and an immediate threat to Sicily and southern Italy.

The severity of the situation lies not only in today’s escalating numbers, but much more in possible future movement

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of incalculable masses, which the current show of weakness is encouraging. It should be clear that political authorities are playing in this instance with historical forces, namely those of political demography, whose magnitude they are grossly underestimating, and which may easily lead to their (non-metaphorical) ruin. This is not electoral politics, but a matter of utmost historical impact. If such is the predicament in 2015, what will it be in 2025 and beyond? Epochal challenges require a deep strategic vision, courage, and toughness, qualities which are in stark contrast to the despicable feebleness routinely shown by European leaders, encouraging further aggression.

In conclusion, even in the face of the horrors and the tragic loss of life, allowing or even encouraging the spread of chaos by yielding to blackmail is always the wrong policy, it is morally and philosophically unacceptable, nor it may be considered a correct way to show compassion and love to the fellow human, precisely in reason its disorderly, unregulated, and fundamentally corrupt process. It can only lead to further blackmail. The good neighbour and the morally cultivated person is not the one who asks no question, pretends not to be aware of the frauds operated to his detriment, and wraps himself with multiple layers of self-deception. Even the Good Samaritan will not be able escape the strategic aspects of political life indefinitely.

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Roberto Orsi is researcher at the Security Studies Unit of the Policy Alternatives Research Institute, and lecturer at the Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Tokyo. He holds a PhD in International Relations obtained from the London School of Economics in 2013. His research interests focus on international political theory, history of political concepts, East Asian and European international politics.