Relatos e reflexões

THE MEDITERRANEAN "CRISIS": THE EUROPEAN IMAGES OF OTHERNESS AND THE POSTGLOBALIZATION REALISM

Menara Lube Guizardi[*]

In the first semester of 2015, 137,000 persons crossed the Mediterranean Sea trying to enter European territory as undocumented migrants or asylum seekers[1]. In the first nine months of 2016, this number was of 300,000[2]. International Organizations claim that this situation has become a social, humanitarian and political crisis without precedent in the recent history of the European Union[3]. Migratory, commercial and cultural contact among African, Asian, Middle Eastern and European territories through the Mediterranean is a centuries old phenomenon, but at least three important characteristics of the current situation have reshaped these past patterns of mobility.

Firstly, there has been an undeniable surge in the number of non-European migrants arriving at Southern European borders. The *European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union* (Frontex) states that the number of migrants and refugees has increased around 400% in 2015, in comparison with the previous year's figures. In July 2015, migrants numbered 107,500 persons: an amount three times superior to that of July 2014, making it a record high since Frontex started registering this data[4]. In terms of asylum seekers, the most important ports of reception since 2014 have been Greece, Italy, and Spain[5].

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[*] Researcher of the Institute of Higher Social Studies of the National University of San Martín (IDEAS – UNSAM. Buenos Aires, Argentina), Associate Professor of the Department of Social Anthropology of the University Alberto Hurtado (UAH. Santiago, Chile).

[1] UNHCR. *The sea route to Europe: The Mediterranean passage in the age of refugees,* p. 2.

[2] UNHCR. *Over 300,000 refugees and migrants cross Med so far in 2016.*

[3] UNHCR, *The sea route...*, op. cit.

[4] FRONTEX. *Number of migrants in one month above 100,000 for first time.*

[5] UNHCR, *The sea route...*, op. cit., p. 3.

Secondly, there is a notable diversification of the migratory routes used. Through them, the past histories of commercial and social itineraries that crossed the Mediterranean are being redesigned. This diversification of routes has been accompanied by a multiplication of migrants' and refugee's countries of origin. The Migratory Routes Maps developed by[6] show the consolidation of four important itineraries[7].

This diversification of both routes and countries of origin has had a deep impact in the patterns of interaction between migrants and hosts societies. The Greek, Italian, Maltese, and Spanish port cities (that have become the "border territories" of these routes) are social spaces in which identity negotiation processes take place (often leading to conflictive situations). It is possible to identify the existence of *longue durée*[8] imaginaries regarding the Southern waters of the Mediterranean Sea as a limit between "European civilization" and its archetypal counterpart: the "others". This imaginary could also be tracked in the labeling of Spain and Italy's most Southern cities as "underdeveloped" localities in their own countries hegemonic representations. Edward Said[9] addresses this analysis. Following Gramsci[10], he explains how the relationship between Northern Italian cities and Southern Sicilian islands reproduces on a national scale the relation of otherness that Europe (as an imagined community) creates with its Southern borders territories in the Mediterranean.

These non-European others are generically represented as belonging to "other religions" (as "non Christian people"). Whenever they express any intense religious ties, beliefs or practices, these are usually understood as a mark of otherness, since secularism or a disenchanted assumption of the world – as in Weber's[12] argument – is generically accepted as characteristic of European modernity and post-modernity[13]. These "others" are also seen as acting according to strange (or exotic) social habits and ethics, and expressing an ethnic affiliation that is often interpreted in connection to their alleged phenotypical differences.

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6   FRONTEX. *Migratory Routes Maps*.
7   These four itineraries would be: i) *The Western Mediterranean Route:* which connects African territories with Andalusia (Spain), and through which 6,698 migrants arrived in Europe from Syria (3,789 persons), Guinea (671 persons) and Côte d'Ivoire (354 persons); ii) *The Central Mediterranean Route*: this connects African territories with Sicily (Italy) and its surrounding islands. This route has brought 91,302 migrants to Europe in 2015, from Eritrea (23,878), Nigeria (10,747) and unidentified Sub-Saharan countries (9,766 persons); iii) *The Apulia and Calabria Route:* connects Africa with Southern Italian territories. Its migration statistics are included in the *Central Mediterranean Route* data; iv) *The Eastern Mediterranean Route*: connects Asian and Middle East territories with Greece. This route has brought 132, 240 migrants to Europe in 2015, from Syria (78,190 persons), Afghanistan (32,581 persons) and Pakistan (6,641 persons).
8   BRAUDEL, Fernand. *Histoire et sciences sociales: la longue durée*.
9   SAID, Edward. *On late style: Music and literature against the grain*.
10 GRAMSCI, Antonio. *The southern question*.
11 WEBER, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism: and other writings*.
12 GAUCHET, Marcel. *The disenchantment of the world: A political history of religion*.

Therefore, these otherness imaginaries are still mobilizing images of racial difference which include the rise of xenophobic and racist opposition to the arrival of migrants and asylum seekers in the Southern European borders.

Both images (of an archetypical Europeanness and of its alleged counterpart) derive from the long-term processes of invention of a "pan-European" identity. Even agreeing with Anderson[13], who connected the generation of social identity with the origin of Nation States in the continent, it is central to distend that perception in order to avoid methodological nationalisms[14], and to assume the importance of religion in the shaping of European processes of otherness, especially in border regions. In this sense, and following Hastings[15], it should be stressed that the religious imaginaries were raised long before the emergence of Nation States, and centrally influenced the latter by connecting them with past practices and performances of identity. In many aspects, the arrival of migrants and refugees in Mediterranean port cities builds local scenarios of intense cultural and religious diversification, including the presence of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Catholics, Protestants, and believers in Native African religions, among others.

Furthermore, this human migration has great potential in transnationalising religion[16], generating ties between origin and host societies, and creating diversified religious enclaves in Mediterranean localities. Although the specific encounter between host societies and these new migrants/refugees can assume different forms, it is currently acquiring the shape of an identity crisis, motivating politics that overlap interests, that include "heterogeneous or hybrid publics", challenging "conventional notions of belonging, identity and citizenship"[17]. This situation leads migrants and autochthones to ask some key questions regarding the cultural encounter: "Can we ever peacefully live with one another? What do we share collectively as human beings?"[18].

But a third point must be addressed. The phenomenon can also be stated as a humanitarian crisis due to the intensification and spread of the violence and danger that accompany different moments of the migrants' itineraries up to their arrival in Mediterranean port cities. There has been an intensification

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[13] ANDERSON, Benedict. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*.

[14] The methodological nationalism is "the tendency to accept the nation-state and its boundaries as a given in social analysis". It could be expressed in three aspects: "ignoring or disregarding the fundamental importance of nationalism for modern societies", in the "naturalization or taking for granted that the boundaries of the nation-state delimit and define the unit of analysis", and in the "territorial limitation which confines the study of social processes to the political and geographic boundaries of a particular nation-state" (LEVITT, Peggy, GLICK-SCHILLER, Nina. Conceptualizing simultaneity: A transnational social field perspective on society, p. 1007).

[15] HASTINGS, Adrian. *The construction of nationhood: Ethnicity, religion and nationalism*.

[16] VAN DER VEER, Peter. *Transnational Religion*.

[17] VERTOVEC, Steve, COHEN, Robin. Introduction, p. 1.

[18] *Ibidem*.

of the role carried out by criminal transnational human trafficking organisations in transporting migrants, sometimes including long journeys that imply desert crossings or lengthy walking trips. At the same time, the change in the management of Mediterranean borders[19], with an intensification of the use of high technology in border patrol and defence[20] has led to an increase in casualties among those who try to cross these frontiers. In 2012, European Union Authorities carried out 15,900 detentions of persons trying to enter illegally through EU's external borders. This number jumped to 40,000 in 2013; to 170,760 in 2014; to 153,949 in 2015 and, finally, it reached 181,126 detentions in 2016. The effect created by this massive investment in technology for border control in Europe –generating what some experts have called "Fortress Europe"[21]– is the opposite of what is expected by public managers: there has been no reduction in the numbers who attempt to migrate, but an increase in the number of persons that die during the journey. UNHCR[22] identified the Mediterranean Sea routes as the most dangerous in the world for migrants and refugees. Furthermore, many of those travelling are escaping from territories at war, trying to evade violence and religious persecution. On their arrival, they are moved to "detention camps" or "holding centres", where they could wait a long time for judicial decisions regarding their asylum cases or deportation[23].

Therefore, the crisis must be read from another perspective: one that is deeply connected to the changes in the international politics regarding the human mobilities. Since 2001, we have entered a new phase in the governance of international migration. The last two decades of the 20th century were generically designated "the age of migration" by social scientists[24]. As many researchers stress, this expression is not related to a quantitative change in the percentage of international migrants in that period. Rather, it summarizes the contradictions of globalization regarding the production of representations on transnational and transborder mobility. Beyond the varied meanings attributed to the "age of migration", the fact is that it has come to an (unhappy) end, giving rise to the beginning of an "age of migration crisis".

The transition between these "ages" entails a change in the production of globally shared imaginaries about migration: from a discourse that celebrated (very contradictorily) cross-border and transnational mobility, to one that speaks of it, openly, as an evil to be persecuted and eradicated. Although this transition has been taking place for at least 15 years or more, its imprint was radicalized

[19] WOLFF, Sarah. Border management in the Mediterranean: internal, external and ethical challenges.

[20] SORENSEN, Nina Nyberg, GAMMELTOFT-HANSEN, Thomas. Introduction.

[22] UNHCR. *The sea route...*, *op. cit.*

[23] ANDRIJASEVIC, Rutvica. From Exception to Excess: Detention and Deportations across the Mediterranean Space, p. 149.

[24] CASTLES, Stephen, MILLER, Mark. *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*.

in 2016 due to a set of global political outcomes. Since then, a conservative, xenophobic and racist twist in international migration governance has been consolidated, Trump's discourse being a clear example of the above. However, this change is part of a more complex picture, articulated by the radicalization of neoliberalism, by the lack (or active destruction) of alternative models, and by the consolidation of a capitalist realism that disavows humanist values and counter-hegemonic worldviews[25].

It is hard to relate the Global North's current political agenda on migrant issues to any humanitarian rationale. Postglobalization configures a scenario in which the migrant condition –especially when experienced by populations from peripherical countries– has become a fundamental part of the fragmentation processes of advanced capitalism. Furthermore, migrants are increasingly being used to sustain a generalized fear of "external enemies" that has economic purposes: it justifies the increase of State investments in the war industry (which happens to be the most important economic niche in the US and many European Countries). This discursive use of fear is based on bringing together nationalist sentiments that are easily manipulated politically: an outcome we observed in 2016 in the United States' presidential election campaign, and in the vote for Brexit in UK. In the European Union, we have seen it repeatedly in the reaffirmation of the restrictive policies applied to Syrian refugees. The imaginaries of fear and rejection of cultural difference are getting progressively stronger, and the claims for "renationalization" of borders, economics and politics are becoming hegemonic ideas. The metaphor of these ideological outputs is the emergence of a renewed interest in materializing the national barriers through literal walls. Trump's proposal regarding the Mexico-US border is the clearest example of the latter. Postglobalization seems to be, as the Cold War was, another "Era of Walls".

Shortly before his death, Bauman[26] stated that all these events must be read from a specific political context: as part of a deep crisis in the global neoliberal economy, which is proving to be incapable of restoring itself after its cyclical breakdowns. Simultaneously, they are also related to the inability of democratic regimes to reconcile their structural legal principles with the intensification of the neoliberal models of accumulation[27]. As Mirolslav Hroch said two decades ago, the nationalist rejection of "the others" is "a substitute for factors of integration in a society that is disintegrating. When society fails, the nation appears as the ultimate guarantee"[28]. Denominating this new

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[25] FISHER, Mark. *Capitalist realism: Is there no alternative?*

[26] BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *Extraños llamando a la puerta*.

[27] On this particular point, Bauman's reflections coincide with those of HARVEY in "El neoliberalismo como destrucción creative".

[28] Coted by HOBSBAWN, Eric. *Naciones y Nacionalismos desde 1780*, p. 183.

postglobal scenario as immersed in a "migration and/or refugee crisis" is part of the problem[29]: it fosters the production of hate for minorities as an escape valve that relieves the prevailing tension, but at the price of reproducing and materializing it in a specific rejection of certain social groups[30]. The "crisis" is related to the mode of production, and its increasingly conflicting relationship with the forms of political institutions that are minimally necessary for the existence of democratic regimes.

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[29] BAUMAN, *op. cit*.

[30] For a coincident reflection on the hatred of minorities within the framework of the failure or instability of national projects, see APPADURAI, Arjun. *Fear of Small Numbers. An Essay on the Geography of Anger*.

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