

What Can a Ship Do?

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22 December 2018

Yes we can.

It was mid-June when what would later become the “Mediterranea” platform began to take shape. Matteo Salvini had just shut the Italian ports to the ship Aquarius, of “Doctors Without Borders” and “SOS Méditerranée,” choosing to define the long crossing that would bring to Spain the more than nine hundred refugees and migrants who were on board as “a cruise.” It was the culmination of a real war on NGOs, started in April 2017 by the prosecutor of Catania, Carmelo Zuccaro, and subsequently continued by then-Minister of the Interior Marco Minniti – the crowning achievement and at the same time an unprecedented climax: if in recent years many of us had critically analyzed the governmental turn of the “humanitarian reason,” i.e. the incorporation of NGOs in the mechanisms for governing borders and migration, it was clear that we were facing a brutal change of pace.

Humanitarian intervention was now directly criminalized, eliminating those voluntary rescue networks that in previous years, often integrated with the SAR (Search And Rescue) operations of the various coast guards and armed forces, had been deployed in the Mediterranean. What to do in the face of this turning point, which was clearly symptomatic of an attitude destined to shape the government’s action at sea and on land in the following months? The question allowed no beating around the bush, and it began to resound insistently in conversations between comrades.

Resistance, of course: the denunciation of what was happening, the protest pickets, the initiatives pressuring for the reopening of the ports. And the attempt to understand the deeper meaning of what was happening, to

anticipate the subsequent moves of the government by defining a general interpretative framework of the “phase.”

But it seemed to us that all this was not enough, that more should and could be done: that it was necessary to put in place a *practice*, capable of determining displacement and at least of alluding to an “offensive” move, beyond the necessarily defensive character of the resistance – and to re-equalify the ground on which the latter is determined. And so, why not act directly within the heart of the contradictions of the governmental campaign’s rhetorical and political *dispositif*? *Why not buy a ship, put it at sea?* A ship flying the Italian flag, so that no government could close the ports of our country...

In the following months we fully measured the almost quixotic character of the enterprise upon which we had decided – literally – to embark: a bet, a somewhat blind gamble. Some comrades who had a professional knowledge of the shipping world helped us orient ourselves. For a while, we set aside philosophy and political theory, trying to get at least the basics of maritime law, naval engineering and applied logistics science. As the search for the ship continued, we found many supporters and associates. Some of them came to a certain extent as a surprise, several work in the shipping industry – a world where the idea that “every single life that is at risk at sea must be made safe” is a deeply-rooted principle, and is considered inviolable. And we met with the willingness of Banca Etica to offer our project vital financial support, opening a dedicated credit line.

“Mediterranea” therefore developed both *within* and *against* logistics and finance, while a group of collective subjects of diverse origins and nature gathered to forge an unprecedented social and political platform. When we finally found the ship (the “Mare Jonio”) and managed to buy it, we immediately understood that the most important work began there and

then: we had to put the ship together and adapt it to “search and rescue” operations (a task to which dozens of comrades enthusiastically dedicated themselves, with the essential collaboration of the German NGO Sea Watch); and then we had to prepare the crews and set up the land networks that would support the action of the “Mare Jonio” at sea, keep it going. This work of collective construction is still far from over, nonetheless our ship set sail for its first mission on the night of October 3rd. At that point, we thought that a first objective had been achieved. We had shown that *it could be done*.

By sea...

Between last October 4 and December 4, the “Mare Jonio” has covered in three distinct missions more than 4,800 nautical miles, more or less the distance that, between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, separated Italian migrants from the coveted shore of Ellis Island.

We have been sailing across what is called the Central Mediterranean, in a sea that is marked by geopolitical tensions resulting in elusive yet unavoidable borders. The kaleidoscope made up of territorial waters, contiguous zones, exclusive economic zones, SAR (Search And Rescue) areas is transversally cut across by the lines of friction between Greece and Turkey (Eastern Mediterranean), Morocco and Spain (Western Mediterranean) and between Italy and Libya (the Central Mediterranean proper), while other coastal countries have their role to play (from Tunisia to Malta, from Algeria to Egypt to name a few).

It is no coincidence that the maritime areas we just mentioned also correspond to the three main “routes” followed by migration flows to

Europe and that the greater or lesser pressure along each of these transit corridors is linked to the changing economic, social and political conditions in the countries of departure and arrival; to the subjective drives that characterize each group's propensity to migrate; to the different and articulated strategies for managing the flows (especially the progressive externalization of the borders of the European Union itself), in a game of endless redeployments which still appears in full swing.

Suffice it to think of the role that Morocco is once again preparing to play in the trading side of the agreements aimed at containment and rejection of migrants, within a framework that over the past three years was initiated by the EU-Turkey agreement and by the deals between several Italian governments and Libyan tribes and militias. Or (with the latter deals in mind) let's think about the attempts to push further south, to the border between Niger and Libya, the "dirty work" that over the past few years was carried out by "formal and informal" apparatuses in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica.

In this endlessly shifting framework, of which we have been able to record the continuous changes even during the eight weeks of our first three missions, the presence and activity of the "Mare Jonio" have put pressure on the SAR régime, forcing boats of the Maltese and Italian Coast Guard to move to aid migrants several times, and have played a significant investigative role, bringing attention to an area where these agencies tried to erase any watchful and aware witnesses (this is a key objective of the attack on NGOs).

Mediterranea has successfully contended with the "competent authorities" for the right to intervene in critical areas and has thus brought to light both existing and developing transformations in the SAR régime. Here, areas of functional competence gradually grew to being interpreted as spaces for

the exercise of national sovereignty. Effective rescue at sea was put behind the deadly logic of bureaucracy, of operating protocols commanding rigidly drawn water “borders.” We have revealed and measured in practice the inadequacy of the current SAR system to perform rescue functions at sea, but also outlined a number of other crucial elements. First, contrary to what we hear from the propaganda of the Italian government, departures from Libya never ceased, but rather follow different patterns. The geography, logistical arrangements, and composition of the Mediterranean crossings have changed. Operations “upstream” along the migration flow, i.e. in Libyan territory, are dictated by complex and murky power games, revolving around political and economical issues (what happened at the International Conference on Libya last November gives us a clue). Moreover, we have documented the ongoing operations (within and without Libyan waters) of the so-called Libyan Coast Guard (we say “so-called” because working in its ranks and under the direct supervision of the Italian Ministry of Interior we find subjects who not long ago would have been considered “traffickers in human beings”), carrying out collective refoulement. Maybe even more importantly, we have witnessed the resistance and the formidable determination of women and men fleeing from the Libyan detention camps, refusing to be led back to those places of violence and exploitation (the two cases of the ship “Nivin” and the fishing vessel “Nuestra Madre de Loreto ” are exemplary from this point of view).

In mid-November, the Italian Minister of the Interior triumphantly announced that the Mediterranean had finally been freed from the presence of NGO vessels. On the contrary, “Mediterranea,” with its action, has facilitated an unprecedented transnational alliance between different NGOs: during our third mission we joined forces with Open Arms and Sea Watch, creating United4Med and putting at sea a small fleet, supported from the sky by two reconnaissance aircrafts.

This mission was characterized by our intervention in support of the fishing vessel “Nuestra Madre de Loreto,” but beyond the specific instance, we feel that the conditions have been laid for a coördinating effort capable to last in time, and to spur new alliances in the coming months. Another significant moment was the several day stopover in the port of Zarzis, Tunisia, where we met with the fishermen’s associations – that have always been engaged in rescue operations at sea, and are therefore criminalized in Italy – and with the activists of the “Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights,” thus beginning to build bridges with the mainland not only to the north, but also to the south.

... and Land

Building a strong, structural connection between land and sea has been for us, from the beginning, one of the main goals of “Mediterranea.” We have often said that *we are not an NGO*, yet the collaboration with Sea Watch and Open Arms has the utmost importance for our project, among other reasons because of the extraordinary passion that animates many volunteers of NGOs, and because of the extraordinary, tangible results – in terms of human lives rescued – they have achieved over the years.

Saying we are not an NGO rather wants to stress that we do not consider our intervention limited to the places where the “humanitarian” emergency occurs. We emphasize our intervention’s *political* character and not simply its “technical” or “neutral” nature. Should the conditions arise, we are prepared to act even outside the established legal frameworks, in the belief that new rights are rooted in and produced by conflict. Keeping all this in mind, the success of Mediterranea’s on-land activities is undeniable (and let us not forget the astounding results of the crowdfunding campaign, which managed to raise more than four hundred thousand euros in just over two months, unprecedented in Italy).

In the course of the initiatives organized by a group of writers and entertainers (the “Via di Terra,” or “Land-fare”), and in the dozens and dozens of assemblies that were organized throughout Italy (and in some European cities) we were struck by the enthusiasm and passion, by a heartfelt participation, a curiosity and a level of endorsement that we had not met in a quite some time. But such “emotional overtones” do not correspond to any political homogeneity. Our ship has been appropriated and somehow reinvented from a wide range of standpoints that go from occupied social centers to parishes, universities and schools, from small town circles to metropolitan assemblies. And we like to remember that on

November 24th on the “Mare Jonio” the flag of “Mediterranea” fluttered alongside that of the strongest and most radical movement of our present: the feminist movement “Non Una di Meno.”

This overload of meanings that are being attributed to “Mediterranea,” surpassing the initial intentions of this project, is greatly significant, and bears the most promising potential for the immediate future. In the meanwhile, the situation “on land” has also changed over the two months in which the “Mare Jonio” has carried out its missions in the Mediterranean. The consolidation of Salvini’s hegemony within the “yellow-green” (Lega+5-Star Movement) government and the undeniable consensus he is enjoying, added up with the so-called “Migration and Security Decree” becoming an ordinary law (we will leave aside the Budget Law and the “clash” with the European Commission for the moment).

We will not delve here into the legal provisions contained in the new law. Suffice it to say that the drastic downsizing of the SPRAR system (the “reception system” for refugees) aims at further spreading and rooting in society the logic of a permanent “emergency,” while at the same time

producing even more “illegality” and condemning thousands of refugees and migrants to an increasingly fragile and insecure situation. On top of this, the de facto dismantlement of the “humanitarian protection” harshly and selectively affects migrant women, especially those fleeing from conditions of violence. At the same time, harsher legal sanctions for roadblocks and squatting buildings for housing affect first and foremost migrants, who in recent years have been conducting extraordinary struggles for work (such as the blockade of logistics warehouses) and housing.

We are faced with a tendency towards zero mediations, which manifests itself primarily on the testing ground of migration but is selectively directed against a wider set of subjects. How to act in the face of this undeniable rupture? “Mediterranea” certainly does not mean to teach lessons to people who practice resistance on a daily basis, and yet from its experience it can offer at least two hints.

First, it shows the importance of accompanying the action of resistance with the implementation of practices capable of intervening directly on the problems. It is possible to think that today such practices can and should also be deployed by building material and immaterial *infrastructures*, through a construction process as open and evolving as the implementation of our ship. Let’s try to imagine an action that combines, in an open and wide-reaching way, resistance to the dismantling of the SPRAR system and of humanitarian protection with the construction of alternative infrastructures for the “reception,” involving people working in this field and benefiting from the feminist experience of anti-violence centers and women shelters. Would not the resistance itself end up being much stronger?

Secondly, “Mediterranea” can serve as an example of what we call *a politics of right* [*diritto*], that is, an attempt to affirm (once again: via a *practice*) the legitimacy and legality of something as elementary as the duty to save people at sea. In this attempt, Mediterranea has “tested” the interweaving of multiple legal systems (national, European, the “international law of the sea”), trying to widen the tensions within and between them, opening up gaps and clashing against a variety of limits. This attempt must not stop, at sea as well as on land, and it must proceed with even greater determination, and with as much unscrupulousness and radicality as required, because we are convinced that when faced with limits it is necessary to force them – *practicing a “rupture” from our point of view*.

To be continued

So what can a ship do? It goes without saying that there is an ironic trait in this variation on the theme of a famous Deleuzian question (“Qu’est-ce que peut un corps?”). Although we do not disdain quixotic enterprises, we try to remain level-headed. Undoubtedly, our ship has shown that it can intervene operationally in the Mediterranean, carrying out, among other things, a function of proper investigation and denunciation of the changes occurring within in the SAR system and of the dynamics of crossing and strengthening the maritime border.

It has connected the two shores of the Mediterranean and produced extraordinary effects of resonance on land, opening up new spaces through a multiplicity of unforeseen encounters.

But a ship is only one possible device we must equip ourselves with in the struggle to build a world where we can at least breathe more freely. In any case, our ship, as we have said many times, *is under construction*, and this

ongoing process of collective construction is particularly precious to us. What will “Mediterranea” become in the upcoming months? This question must remain open in its general outline.

Our maritime operations are definitely going to continue, but this will require further “professionalization,” a qualitative leap in the structuring of the “business company,” a renewed care for the logistical and financial aspects, the training of activists (hopefully in the framework of a strengthened coöperation with several NGOs). This is a fundamental aspect of “Mediterranea,” born from an agreement [*patto*] between different subjects recognizing themselves as equal in the acknowledgment of the urgency and importance of sea rescue. At the same time, it will be necessary to reaffirm and re-define what we mean when we say that “we are not an NGO.”

In other words, it will be a question of reassessing all the essential elements we have outlined: the political character of the project, the multiplication of bridges between sea and land, a “politics of right” that must be aware of the existing legal frameworks (and of the forced interpretations that recent political power relations imposed upon them) and at the same time must be ready to force its way through and against them. In order to pursue such goals, existing relationships must be expanded, and work, both on a social level and within the European space must go deeper, trying to involve the cities that, over the past few years, established themselves, both explicitly and implicitly, as “refuge cities.”

We have tried to list the major issues confronting anyone who is involved in this project. We suggest that from now until spring we work at building a sort of “States-General” of “Mediterranea,” by which we do not mean a single event, but rather a research and discussion process, incorporating the wide array of responses to “Mediterranea,” that must culminate in a

Original article from: EuroNomade – inventare il comune, sovvertire il presente

Source: <http://www.euronomade.info/?p=11466>

genuine advancement on the terrain of our collective enterprise. Let us start from the territories that hosted (and are still hosting) all the support initiatives for the project, making the most of all the unforeseen and heterogeneous meetings – political and cultural – as well as of the different “worlds” that we have crossed in these months (people working in shipping, doctors and legal staff just to name a few significant examples): this is the method we suggest, in order to keep on being where we need to be and to act – whether at sea or on land.