

Original article from: Laboratorio Dire la verità – riflessione pubblica su libertà di parola, libertà e potere, Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli
Source: <http://fondazionefeltrinelli.it/dire-la-verita-dal-centro-del-mare/>

Mediterranea Saving Humans. Telling the truth from the middle of the sea

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19 March 2019

I have been concerned with migrations, borders and human rights for many years, as a researcher, a socio-legal operator, and project coordinator in Sicily.

When I began speaking up on these issues, there were not many of us doing it; our stance was that, as Abdelmalek Sayad claimed, “after all, reflecting on migration means questioning the State, its foundations, and its internal dynamics, structures and functions” (2002: 370).

As I’d always been aware of this, it is only to a point that I am surprised to see that nowadays, in Italy and Europe, migration has become the focus of public debate, the main tool of government propaganda, and a hugely divisive issue for people.

What is surprising, though, is that those who would be able to speak of it seriously and competently struggle so much to have their voices heard; in the meantime, in the arena of communication, false, approximate, and misleading information, condensed into crude slogans, is received and gets accepted so a-critically – “out of inertia, respect, or fear” – and so powerfully, that it becomes resistant to “all rational counterargument” (Bobbio, 1998:107).

Today, the “fear factory” (Ferrajoli 2013: 31) works at full speed and at a capacity entirely unknown to us, thanks to the promptness and pervasiveness of new media, but also because people have grown unused to receiving complex messages. A couple of tweets; a Facebook post with codewords, as immediate as they are banal; a Youtube video going viral. Enough to build a given sense of security – and above all, insecurity; a

perception that is as convincing as it is detached from the actual causes of the precarity and distress experienced by people and yet, capable of “besieging institutions, leading them to take measures and decisions – both at the *micro* and at the *macro* level – that make democratic and inclusive politics *move backwards*” (Casadei, 2016: 9).

In this context, a few months ago I decided to take part in an extraordinary collective adventure: *Mediterranea Saving Humans*. *Mediterranea* is a platform of Italian civil society that has sent a boat to the sea with the goal of monitoring and publicly denouncing violations of human rights in the Mediterranean, without ever withdrawing, where necessary, from its legal and ethical duty to save lives in danger. The first mission started on October 4, 2018; by this time, the Mediterranean had turned into a desert, a cemetery: “rules of engagement” and various forms of criminalization had made it so that NGO ships that in previous years had saved hundreds of thousands of people had had to move away.

During our first press conference, we inaugurated the launch of the first boat flying an Italian flag, the *Mare Jonio*, and defined *Mediterranea* as “a non-government act of civil obedience” that confronted actions of institutions that had, instead, established their violations of international law, of the law of the sea, and of human rights, into a system of government.

Ours would be an action to create obstacles to the daily construction of a liquid border where rules are drawn, against the law, by a play of strength amongst European powers, literally hatched on people’s bodies. Take, for instance, the shameful cases of dozens of shipwrecked recently detained aboard the *SeaWatch III* weeks on end, just by Malta’s shores and, just month earlier, in the waters by Siracusa – in both cases, this happened following an illegal ban to land.

Ours would be an action to speak up by doing something concrete, right from the middle of the Mediterranean, where the future of Europe is being

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decided; and by doing so also placing ourselves, physically as well, outside of the dichotomy between the Visegrád Group and the Troika, showing that there still is an alternative, a third way that won't make us end up defeated by a conflict that does not represent us.

Everyday, we find ourselves “telling the truth” from a particular position, our bodies exposed: telling the truth about why people are forced to cross borders and risk their lives, in the absence of any legal channel of entry; about why European policies are the best allies for the traffickers whom these very policies have hypocritically set up as their only target, instrumentalising the language of humanitarianism to “prevent deaths at sea”. To tell the truth about why people drown, when the signals of their presence in the waters are no longer broadcast by the maritime coordination centres, or only get broadcast when vessels in difficulty have exited a given SAR (search and rescue) zone, to exempt a given country from taking on responsibility for their rescue; why these SAR zones, born as instruments to guarantee greater efficiency in search and rescue operations, have actually turned into water border devices that produce death. The truth of why Lybia is not a safe harbor and cannot legitimately claim to have a “coast guard” when it captures whoever manages to escape from its detention centres only to take them back to that hell, and when preventing departures from the Lybian coast only means letting children, men and women die a little bit further away from our view.

Telling the truth, especially on what consequences this normalisation of death and the allocation of blame on rescue bears even on the lives of those who are not at sea, who do not emigrate, and who feel safe “in their own homes” (Zagrebelsky 2017: 65ff). We are somewhere we would never wish to be, where no one should ever find themselves either “drowned or rescued”, we've said this over and over, “in order to save ourselves, first”. Because everyone should be scared of a power that tears down the

safeguards that Constitutions and international law had created against the thinking that “everything is possible” (Arendt, 1951) and the horrors of Nazism and Fascism; everyone should be scared of a society that puts up with the notion that rights are a zero-sum game – I take them from someone to have them myself – where rights are in fact a realm of demands that can only continue to be intelligible by virtue of its universality.

These truths, no matter who tells them, are not easy to affirm now. We’ve chosen to go into that sea, our sea, to try. And in this spirit, we keep sailing.

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