

Sealing Borders: Fortress Europe's War on Refugees

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*“Rescue boats? I’d use gunships to stop migrants.” And so, the fantastically venal contributor to Rupert Murdoch’s *The Sun* Katie Hopkins adds her bit to the migration debate in Europe. “Make no mistake, these migrants are like cockroaches. They might look a bit like Bob Geldorf’s Ethiopia circa 1984.”*

The loss of almost a thousand EU-bound migrants off the Italian island of Lampedusa over the weekend provoked various reactions, and showed that such humans were not, in fact, durable cockroaches at all. It shocked the humanitarians (“A mass grave is being created in the Mediterranean,” claimed Loris De Filippi, Italian president of *Médecins Sans Frontières*); it excited the security-minded; and it confused the grey bureaucrats.

A statement from the European Commission insisted that a new migration policy would be embraced mid-May: “What we need is immediate actions to prevent further loss of life as well as a comprehensive approach to managing migration better in all its aspects.” Last year, a critical German President Joachim Gauck suggested that, “A common European refugee policy should ensure that every refugee can make use of his rights: not to be rejected without being heard and to receive protection from prosecution.”[1]

A common policy is exactly what Europe does not have. Morgan Johansson, the Swedish Minister for Justice and Migration, argues that, “More EU countries must take responsibility for the refugee situation.” But countries bearing the brunt of receiving such vast numbers of human cargo are also going cold – in Italy alone 170,100 refugees arrived in 2014. Countries under the false impression they do have a refugee problem, such as Britain, insist on providing mere peanuts to the EU border agency Frontex. The British Home Office has been conspicuously silent on the deaths at sea.

The humanitarian incentive is not popular. While the language of generosity is being encouraged in some quarters, the language of action suggests closing the EU’s external borders. Like drugs to an addict, expanding the scope of rescue missions is deemed an encouragement. Italy, to take one example, scrapped its *Mare Nostrum* search-and-rescue program last year, seeing as other European countries failed to contribute to the running costs of \$9.7 million-a-month. Its replacement, *Triton*, is a far more limited compromise, and fails to serve its protective functions.

Shades of respectable racism and prejudice are filtering into the foreign policy matrix. While some EU officials insist on the wisdom and humanity of search and rescue, others focus on drawbridges and repulsions. The populists are insinuating themselves into the establishment, and their message is proving popular.

The one thing that is not being considered is the dramatic idea of liberalised borders. For Adam Davidson, writing more broadly on debunking the “myth of the job-stealing

immigrant”, few “are calling for the thing that basic economic analysis shows would benefit nearly all of us: radically open borders.”[2] Instead, there are trenchant calls to target the trafficking phenomenon, with Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi deeming it a “plague in our continent”. The human factor is thereby ignored, while “business models” become targets of directed policy.

There are some who do concede that this tragedy has its roots in various sources. Migrants and “blowback” are inseparable features of the growing problem, accelerated because of a crippled, and very much failed Libyan state. Deposing Gaddafi gave birth to a broader catastrophe. In such an environment, the trafficking business has thrived.

Officials in Canberra are beaming with pride that they have hit upon the perfect solution. It entails systematic cruelty and smugness from a government that can boast of little else: turning back the boats. Commentators in Europe, notably British ones, have noted Australia’s “naval ‘ring of steel’.”[3] “It’s time to get Australian,” barked Hopkins. “Australians are like British people, but with balls of steel, can-do brains, tiny hearts and whacking great gunships.”

For historian Michael Burleigh, nothing, however miserable, comes close to the watery deaths. Rent poor islands and dump human cargo in processing centres. Tow them back. Buy boats from developing countries to facilitate that task. Make promises of never settling them in Australia.

For retired Australian Major General Jim Molan, borders “can be controlled to the benefit of all, and there is a moral obligation to control them.”[4] That is the attitude of reductionist processes entailing the fantasy of imposing order on chaos, a formalised queue that is simply a form of population control. And it smacks of false moral propriety, ignoring international conventions such as the Refugee Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. “The human tragedy is immense and is worsened by Europe’s refusal to learn from its own mistakes and from the efforts of others who have handled similar problems.”

This is not quite gun boats, but it might as well be. Asylum seekers heading for Australia are reconveyed to Indonesia. In some instances, asylum seekers have been kept at sea and given impromptu “processing”. And all of this doesn’t so much suggest the targeting of people traffickers, who continue to conduct their dastardly trade, as it does the embrace of alternative routes. Fortresses simply encourage dangerous rerouting. This “feral” flow, as Hopkins would like to term it, will dictate its natural course, even if the grave’s occupants continue to grow.

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.euractiv.com/sections/social-europe-jobs/german-president-attacks-eu-refugee-policy-303219>

[2]

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/29/magazine/debunking-the-myth-of-the-job-stealing-immigrant.html?_r=5

[3]

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3048032/We-reclaim-Europe-s-borders-stop-tragedies-repeating-MICHAEL-BURLEIGH.html>

[4]

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/immigration/europe-needs-an-asylum-solution-jim-molan/story-fn9hm1gu-1227312738365>

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