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Sandro Mezzadra, Abolitionist Vista of the Human. Border Struggles, Migration, and Freedom of Movement

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Sandro Mezzadra (University of Bologna)

**Abstract**

We are confronting today in many global borderscapes (including the US/Mexico borderlands and the Mediterranean Sea) a criminalization of humanitarian intervention in support of people in transit. This raises important questions with respect to the critique of the governmental turn of the 'humanitarian reason' articulated in recent years by critical border and migration scholars. This article discusses such questions through an engagement with the issue of the 'human' inspired by black abolitionist thinkers. It also dwells on the transformations of the maritime border regime in the Mediterranean, emphasizing the relevance of the stubbornness of migrants challenging that regime and examining emerging forms of border activism and the practices of solidarity they embody. A discussion of freedom of movement as a political project concludes the article.

**Keywords:** solidarity; humanitarianism; abolitionism; border struggles; migration; freedom of movement.

## 1. *Solidarity will win!*

‘In our hands is placed a power / Greater than their hoarded gold / Greater than the might of atoms / magnified a thousand-fold.’ The verses of *Solidarity Forever*, the popular U.S. trade union anthem written by Ralph Chaplin in 1915, nicely encapsulate the peculiarity of the understanding of solidarity within the diverse traditions and experiences of the world labor movement. What characterizes in very broad terms such a notion of solidarity, distinguishing it from other interpretations (say, from the catholic or the sociological ones), is precisely the emphasis on the building of a collective power of the exploited people capable to transform the world. ‘We can bring to birth a new world / from the ashes of the old,’ the song indeed goes on. There is definitely a need to critically interrogate the ways in which the manifold practices and theories of solidarity within the labor movement imagine and construct the moment of ‘union’ upon which they are predicated. Such questions as subjectivity and ‘difference’ are particularly important here (see Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 123-130). Nevertheless, in general terms, the link between solidarity and the building of a new collective power as well as the emphasis on the need and possibility to radically transform the ‘world’ we inhabit continue to provide us with a powerful and effective framework for political theory and action. And this is even more the case if we remain aware of the relevance of *international* solidarity in the history of the labor movement.

It is this set of meanings of solidarity that one can find at work, as a lived experience and as a rallying cry, at the City Plaza Hotel in Athens, one of the most interesting instances of self-organization of migrants, refugees, and activists in the wake of the ‘long summer of migration’– the way in which critical scholars and activists call the summer of 2015 (see Kasperek and Speer 2015). The occupation of an eight-floor abandoned hotel in the center of Athens in April 2016, soon after the signing of the “EU-Turkey deal”, laid the basis for a quite extraordinary experience of cohabitation and common struggle that involved hundreds of migrants and refugees (from Syria and Afghanistan, Iraq and Kurdistan), Greek and international activists (see Kotronaki and Lafazani 2018 and Augustín and Jørgensen 2019, chapter 3). Cohabitation and struggle were far from smooth in the three years of the project (that was terminated in July 2019). Multifarious practices of translation, not merely in linguistic terms, were invented and creatively enacted to negotiate the frictions, tensions, and conflicts that shaped everyday life in the squatted hotel and revolved for instance around such issues as religion, gender, health, or simply drinking alcohol. Solidarity was not taken as an

abstract slogan, as something given, it was rather a crucial stake of political action and interaction, and the same is true for the unity of the ‘community of struggle,’ of the collective subject of the City Plaza.

Rooted in the urban fabric of Athens, where it intervened in many ways as an actor of social and cultural transformation, the City Plaza Hotel was characterized by a multi-scalar geography, ranging from the wide networks of international solidarity that supported it to the imaginary and actual links of migrants and refugees with their places of origin and with the destinations they were longing for in other European countries. *We live together, we struggle together. Solidarity will win!* was one of the main slogans of the City Plaza Hotel. What seems particularly interesting to me, I want to repeat it, is that in this slogan solidarity is not simply taken as the basis of struggle. It is rather conceived of as a stake, as an outcome of a struggle that involves and transforms heterogeneous subjects, histories, imaginaries, and experiences. In a way, one can say that for local and international activists the participation in the squatting, self-organization, and everyday life of the City Plaza Hotel has been in this regard a crucial experience of learning, which has tested established political cultures and views of solidarity and autonomy.

It is precisely this tension that makes City Plaza so interesting for a rethinking of the notion of solidarity, definitely one of the main motivations spurring the involvement of local and international activists. It also draws a clear line of separation from what Olga Lafazani (2018, 909-913) calls ‘NGOization of migration management,’ which became particularly apparent in Greece in the wake of the ‘long summer of migration’ and the great wave of ‘hospitality’ that led thousands of people on the islands and in the mainland to ‘welcome’ and assist refugees. The *lived* solidarity experimented with at the City Plaza took seriously the autonomy and subjectivity of migrants and refugees (even when they took forms quite different from the ones imagined by leftist activists) and cannot therefore be reduced to the combination of ‘charity and technocratic management’ that characterizes the paradigm of NGOization (Lafazani 2018, 911) and produces specific victimizing and managerial effects.

Solidarity appears here as conceptually and politically quite far from the field of humanitarianism, at least if we understand the latter as the main discourse legitimizing the operations of NGOs under the Aegis of the state. One could say that the picture of the human embodied by the City Plaza, with its radical heterogeneity, its vulnerability, and at the same

time its potentiality for solidarity and for the building of a new collective power, exists in tension with the coding of the human provided by humanitarianism. Nevertheless, many residents of the squatted hotel had crossed the Aegean Sea to reach Greek shores and had therefore had to confront humanitarian logics and actors both in transit and upon arrival. Those encounters mainly happened during the 'long summer of migration,' which means at a crucial moment of transformation for humanitarianism, particularly (although not exclusively) at sea. In order to make sense of the clashes, but also possible encounters, between solidarity and humanitarianism there is a need to go a bit more into the details of such transformation. It is indeed the case that nowadays, looking at initiatives to support migrants and refugees and to oppose the border regime in the Mediterranean, the boundaries between solidarity and humanitarianism (from the angle of political discourses and of the motivations of the activists involved) often appear to be blurred.

## *2. Mutations of the 'humanitarian reason'*

In order to tackle the question of a possible encounter between solidarity and humanitarianism there is a need to go deeper into the multifarious mutations of the latter. Humanitarianism has of course a relatively long history. It does not start with boat people fleeing from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the 1970s, or with the foundation of such an important NGO as 'Médecins sans frontières' at the beginning of the same decade. A genealogical investigation of the emergence of humanitarianism should at least dwell – to mention just a couple of important sources – on the history of abolitionism in Britain in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, on colonial 'humanitarian' and missionary endeavors, on philanthropy and charity, on the Hôpitaux Généraux in France and workhouses in England. To intercede 'in behalf of the most injured of the human race,' to confront 'all the varieties of human wretchedness' was the call issued by the prominent British anti-slavery activist William Wilberforce (1807, 348, 345). We can observe in his writings the steady tracing of a boundary that circumscribes the domain of the speaking subject separating it from the pain he observes and condemns as a spectator who decides to speak 'in behalf' of the wretched of the earth, which means African enslaved people. This is an asymmetry that characterizes the genealogy of humanitarianism as a whole, which is shaped by what Silvia Salvatici (2015, 72) calls in her brilliant historical reconstruction a 'paternalistic approach' that continues to haunt humanitarianism notwithstanding its multiple transformations.

'Benevolence and compassion' prompt a specific humanitarian attitude, which has become prominent in the 'humanitarian decade' of the 1990s (Office of the Coordinator of Humanitarian Assistance 2004), among wars (in particular in former Yugoslavia) that have often blurred the boundary between military and humanitarian intervention. Investigating the French case, which is particularly relevant from this point of view, Miriam Ticktin emphasizes the specific ethics of care nurtured by humanitarianism. 'Rather than change the conditions in which people live and thereby improve human life on a broader scale,' she writes, 'the focus is on alleviating pain in the present moment' (Ticktin 2011, 62). This focus on the 'present moment' of pain corresponds to a logic of emergency, with which humanitarianism has a complex and even paradoxical relationship, since on the one hand it intervenes to manage and 'fix' it while on the other hand its legitimization and operational logic depend on the reproduction of emergency. As Didier Fassin effectively argues, it is precisely this prolonged temporality of exception that leads humanitarianism, 'independently of the goodwill of the rescuers,' to construct 'an unequal relationship between the one giving aid and the one being aided' (Fassin 2012, 193). The world of humanitarianism is populated by *victims* (or 'excluded'), and what is incited and mobilized is a compassion that should lead 'us' to benevolently take care of 'them' – the helpless victims. It is easy to see here the continuity of the 'paternalistic approach' and of the asymmetry noted by Salvatici.

It is important to emphasize Fassin's reference to the 'goodwill of the rescuers.' Articulating a critique of humanitarianism (of what I called above the 'coding of the human' provided by humanitarianism) does not imply ignoring or downplaying the multifarious motivations and the generosity that lead thousands of volunteers to take part in humanitarian intervention. Shedding light on the contours and logics of the 'humanitarian reason' is nevertheless necessary in order to make sense of its contemporary mutations. One of the most important implications of the humanitarian ethics of care is the invocation of the political neutrality and merely technical nature of humanitarian interventions (Ticktin 2011, 63; Fassin 2012, 224). The world of victims exists outside of politics, 'rescuing' does not imply a direct confrontation with the power relations that nurture pain, death, and crisis. It is rather a question of technical parameters and skills, definitely supported by the passion and engagement of 'rescuers' but somehow detached from the materiality of conflicts that constitute the fabric of the world. More generally, a peculiar economy of proximity and distance shapes the humanitarian gaze, as it is possible for instance to observe from the images that support and orient the communication of the main NGOs. Adapting a famous observation by Susan Sontag

(2004, 71), such images – images of shipwrecks and destitution, natural catastrophes and war, suffering women and children, corpses, and tortured bodies – ‘carry a double message. They show a suffering that is outrageous, unjust, and should be repaired. ... The ubiquity of those photographs, and those horrors, cannot help but nourish belief in the inevitability of tragedy in the benighted or backward – that is, poor – parts of the world.’

Precisely due to its claim of ‘political neutrality,’ the ‘humanitarian reason’ has undergone a clear governmental twist since the 1990s, which is for instance apparent from the change of paradigm in social policies targeting the ‘excluded’ and marginalized in a country like France (see again Ticktin 2011 and Fassin 2012). What is even more relevant for the purposes of this essay, is that humanitarianism has been steadily (although contradictorily) incorporated into the working of border regimes in many parts of the world, including at the ‘external frontiers’ of the EU and most notably in the Mediterranean (see Heller and Pezzani n.d.). There have definitely been moments over the last years in which this incorporation was more apparent than in others. One thinks here above all of the large-scale *Mare Nostrum* operation launched by the Italian government after the catastrophic shipwreck off the island of Lampedusa on October 3, 2013, with the explicit aim to rescue migrants. But even beyond this moment, humanitarianism has long been a constitutive component of the European border regime, leading to what William Walters (2009) has termed a ‘humanitarization’ of the border and to the emergence of specific hybrid formations of humanitarianism and militarization (see Garelli and Tazzioli 2018).

If one emphasizes the heterogeneous and tense constitution of the border regime, which is composed by different and potentially conflicting actors, logics, and discourses, it is easy to track the incorporation of humanitarianism looking both at the multiple roles played by humanitarian actors (from the UNHCR to NGOs) in its working and at the use of human rights and humanitarian rhetoric by other actors (from national governments to European institutions, even including Frontex). This process of governmentalization of humanitarianism (and human rights) inscribed specific tensions onto the European border regime, it opened up spaces for migrants and refugees, while at the same time it altered the nature of humanitarianism, subordinating it to governmental and managerial logics (see Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, chapter 6). Above all, it was the tension (and potential contradiction) between humanitarianism, economic valorization, and security as concurring imperatives underlying the working of the border regime that prompted its development and generated powerful



oscillations since the late 1990s, giving way to different constellations – which never really challenged the illegalization and precarization of migrants' journey, the risky and too often lethal nature of border crossing at sea.

The unstable and even precarious assemblage of the European border regime was radically challenged and eventually disrupted by the 'long summer of migration' in 2015 (see Hess et al 2017). The uncontrollable movement of hundreds thousands migrants and refugees across the Aegean Sea and the 'Balkan route' was indeed a moment of insurgent politics of migration (although at a tremendous cost), an opening that invited a radical rethinking of the European border and migration regime, as well as of the very relation of Europe with its multiple outsides. As we know, after an initial moment characterized by widespread solidarity in welcoming refugees from Greece to Germany, the European response to the challenge of the 'long summer of migration' was not characterized by opening and democratic inventiveness. The opposite was rather the case. Walls and fences proliferated along borders in many parts of the continent, even free movement within the Schengen zone was restricted at times (for instance at the border between Italy and France) in the framework of a re-nationalization of border controls and politics. In the Mediterranean, this new conjuncture led to an attempt to intensify practices of externalization and outsourcing of border control. The "EU-Turkey deal" in March 2016 works as a model in this respect, while the search for reliable Libyan partners, in a country torn by civil war, has characterized Italian politics for the last years (and since 2017 it translates onto supply of patrol vessels to the so-called 'Libyan coastguard'). There is no need here to describe once again the dire and intolerable conditions, the torture, enslavement, and violence prevailing in the 'camps' where sub-Saharan migrants are held in Libya – and to whose horrors the ones intercepted at sea by the 'Libyan coastguard' are taken back (see United Nations Support Mission in Libya 2018; Human Rights Watch 2019). What counts more is that the outsourcing to Libya of border control necessarily implied a marginalization, and possibly a sidelining of NGOs, in their roles both of 'rescuers' and of 'witnesses' along the maritime frontier. As Heller and Pezzani (n.d.) write, 'the Mediterranean had to be *de-humanitarianized*.'

It is in this framework that one has to make sense of the dramatic qualitative shift engendered by the politics of 'closed ports' inaugurated in the summer of 2018 by the Italian government (and most notably by the deputy Prime Minister and Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini). Such a politics was characterized since its inception by an explicit anti-humanitarian and anti-

NGOs twist, which lead to their criminalization both in political rhetoric and in legislation (see Camilli 2019, Rigo n.d., and Human Rights at Sea 2019). While there is a need to remain aware of the peculiarity of the Italian situation (which has once again changed after the fall of Salvini and the formation of a new government in September 2019), it would be a mistake to see in such a criminalization of humanitarianism and NGOs a specific Italian circumstance. Although it takes different forms, it is rather a defining feature of the political conjuncture we are living through, characterized by a surge of nationalism and authoritarianism in many parts of the world. One thinks here for instance, to remain in the West, of the proliferation of ‘crimes of solidarity’ in Italy and France (Tazzioli 2018; Tazzioli and Walters 2019), or of the criminalization of a group like ‘No More Deaths’ in Arizona, where it runs a desert medical clinic and disseminates bottles of water and food across migrants’ routes (Smith 2017). Humanitarianism mutates in such a conjuncture, it necessarily takes on oppositional meanings, and volunteers engaged in humanitarian projects are compelled to critically reflect on the ‘humanitarian reason’ and its governmental turn. In order to better understand the stakes of such a situation it may be useful to look at a specific location, the Central Mediterranean. I will do that in the next section starting from the discussion of a project I am involved in.

### *3. Struggles at sea*

It was mid-June 2018 when Salvini shut Italian ports to the ship *Aquarius* of ‘Médecins sans frontières’ and ‘SOS Méditerranée’ carrying more than 600 hundred rescued migrants and refugees. In those days I joined a small group of friends and we started to discuss about what was to be done to effectively confront such a qualitative leap and dramatic change of pace in anti-immigration politics. Needless to say, we considered the usual tools of political activism – from issuing calls to writing statements, from organizing pickets at the ports to launching a general mobilization in major Italian cities possibly with European support. With many others we passionately engaged in all this kind of initiatives. Nevertheless, we had the impression that it was not enough, that something more was needed, an *action* capable to materially instantiate a radical challenge to the politics of closure of the Italian government and to its implications for the European border regime in the Mediterranean. We felt a need to go beyond the constitutively ‘defensive’ character of resistance, and to directly take action, opening up a new and unexpected space of struggle. An idea began to circulate in our conversations: why not buy a ship, put it at sea? Nobody among us had any clue about what it

meant to look for and to buy a ship – which, as we soon discovered, is a quite complicated financial and logistical endeavor. Nevertheless, we took the risk, we spent the whole summer exploring docks and ports, finding often unexpected help and support in the world of shipping, and we were able to get financial backing for the project from a cooperative bank ('Banca etica'). At the same time, we started to collaborate with several actors (from social centers to important cultural associations, from unions to a small party of the left) to build a platform designed to run the project. The birth of the platform, 'Mediterranea' (<https://mediterraneaescue.org/>) was announced on October 3<sup>rd</sup> (the anniversary of the 2013 shipwreck), the same day on which the ship we had eventually bought (a tug boat, the 'Mare Jonio') sailed for its first Search and Rescue (SAR) mission (see Hardt and Mezzadra 2018; Caccia and Mezzadra 2019).

I will not go into the details of the seven missions undertaken by 'Mediterranea' between October 2018 and August 2019, which included a systematic monitoring activity, four rescues (with a total of 237 people), and three prolonged standoffs with resulting clashes with the Italian government and impoundments of the vessel. What seems more important to me for the purpose of this article is to shortly dwell on the meaning and aims of the 'Mediterranea' project in the framework of the criminalization and crisis of humanitarianism discussed at the end of the previous section. Nobody among the initiators of the project had any kind of background or experience in NGOs. The project had since the beginning an activist and political twist that was clearly in tension with any emphasis on the merely technical nature of humanitarian intervention. In order to make such a twist explicit, we insist that 'Mediterranea' is not a NGO but rather a 'NGA,' a 'Non-Governmental Action.' Nevertheless, we staged productive dialogues with several NGOs active at sea in the Mediterranean (most notably 'Sea Watch,' 'Proactiva Open Arms,' and 'Lifeline') and we established manifold forms of coordination and cooperation with them, foreshadowing the formation of a real 'civil fleet.' 'Mediterranea' has played a role in prompting a process of radicalization of humanitarian actors at sea that was already underway, with vessels that became on many occasions flexible platforms for the development of legal and political battles and for an alternative public opinion. Carola Rackete, the captain of Sea Watch3 who openly defied Salvini docking her ship without authorization in the port of Lampedusa on June 29, 2019, offers an iconic representation of this radicalization (see Gennari and Rigo 2019). Speaking of radicalization does not imply a full-fledged mutation of humanitarianism but rather the opening up of a field (due to multiple factors, including the criminalization attempts of European governments and

the intervention of more radical actors at sea) in which humanitarian discourses and practices are confronted with their limits.

Politicizing SAR operations at sea has been since the inception of the project one of the main aims of 'Mediterranea,' and taking stock of the work done in a year presents us with a relatively positive outcome (without ever forgetting the people who lost their lives in the past months due to the many shipwrecks facilitated by the politics of 'closed ports' and by the criminalization of the NGOs). Politicization should be understood here in at least three different respects. Firstly, 'Mediterranea' was able to deploy an effective resistance to the politics of the Italian government, radically contesting at sea, on the land, and in court its legitimacy, compelling the government to account for its action, and eventually succeeding in rescuing and bringing to Italian shores hundreds of migrants and refugees. In a way, we can say that we played a (modest) role in the process that led to the weakening and fall of Salvini. Secondly, 'Mediterranea' was part of a wider network of civil actors that managed to shed light on the actual working of the cooperation agreements between the Italian government and Libya, connecting through its monitoring activity the operations of the 'so-called Libyan coastguard' with the management of camps. Thirdly, as I explained, 'Mediterranea' contributed to a radicalization of humanitarian actors that is already prompted by a reflection on the implications of the criminalization of humanitarian intervention and that often leads to a more general rethinking of the experiences of the last years.

'Mediterranea' is part of a lively and heterogeneous spectrum of actors engaged along the European borderzones on the land and at sea in attempts to support migrants and refugees in the process of border crossing. Over the last years we have been witnessing a growing engagement at sea (see Stierl 2016 and Heller and Pezzani 2019), for instance with the birth of such an amazing transnational project as the 'Alarm Phone' (a multi-sited hotline employing information and communication technologies to provide immediate assistance to migrants in distress) and the connected 'Welcome2Europe' network. 'Activist border interventions in the Mediterranean Sea' proliferate, mutate, and multiply, often directly involving migrants and in some cases, as Maurice Stierl (2016, 562) explains, transcending '*activist* and *migrant* signifiers.' If one looks at the politics and discourses behind the different projects (and at the motivations of the activists involved) it is easy to see that there are apparent differences between the classically humanitarian arguments supporting the operations of established NGOs, the invocation of human rights, and a more radical 'NoBorder'

approach, with significant references to the legacy of abolitionism, ‘flight help,’ and the ‘Underground Railroad’ that are particularly important in the case of a project like the ‘Alarm Phone’ (see Stierl 2019, chapter 4). While these differences continue to exist and matter, the radicalization of humanitarian actors over the last year has been part of and at the same time has contributed to foster a process of reorganization of the whole field of border activism, and particularly of activism along the maritime frontier. In the remaining of this article I will reflect upon the potentialities of such a reorganization and I will attempt to flesh out some of its stakes, focusing upon three main issues – the meaning (or the coding) of the ‘human,’ the position of migratory movements in border activism, and freedom of movement.

#### *4. The human as a battlefield*

‘Humanity,’ ‘humanism,’ and the ‘human’ are contested notions in contemporary academia. There is a suspect of naïveté surrounding any uncritical use of those terms. And rightly so, one could add thinking of the powerful critiques articulated by anti-colonial, anti-racist, and feminist thinkers of the specific asymmetries, violence, and relationships of domination underlying the Western tradition of humanist thought and its supposed universalism. Nowadays, poststructuralist rejections of humanism abound, the notion of the ‘posthuman’ is proposed to open up new frontiers for the study of subjectivity (Braidotti 2013; Braidotti and Hlavajova 2018), science and technology studies explore the blurring boundaries between machines and the human, while ‘transhumanism’ goes a step further and tests the boundary between life and death – traditionally corresponding to the one between the human domain and deity (see O’ Connell 2017). My aim here is not to directly engage in a critical analysis of such theoretical elaborations. It is rather to ask whether in this frantic attempt to go beyond not only established traditions of humanist thought but also the ‘human’ as such there is not a risk to lose something crucial for critical theory and for our understanding of relations of domination and above all of resistance and struggles against them. What I am thinking of is quite simply the materiality of passions and affects (of pain as well as of joy), of yearning, and of the multifarious embodied experiences of life that at the end of the day are constitutive of the human.

Border activism is confronted precisely with such materiality. And it is not by accident that it takes at times the form of a claim that directly tackles the question of the human. *We are human* is indeed a slogan that often resonates in demonstrations and protests of migrants and

refugees. What this slogan invites us to do is to reverse the gaze from which we look at the human, to abandon the normative perspective of the full-fledged humanist subject, and to rather take the standpoint of people whose humanity has been and continues to be denied. Such a standpoint opens up completely different vistas of the human, where processes of dehumanization and – to put it with Frantz Fanon ([1961]2005, 7) – animalization nurture subject formation and denial and at the same time lay the basis for an insurgence of the human amid and against violence, insult, and destitution. As the reference to Fanon makes clear, colonialism is a crucial site for the proliferation of such forms of hierarchization and negation of the human (and colonial ghosts abound in the choppy waters of the Mediterranean). Not accidentally, the experience of the ‘legal, scientific, philosophical, theological, economic, psychiatric’ contestation of the belonging to a shared humanity is today at the center of attempts to rethink the human from the angle of Africans and Afro descendants (Ajari 2019, 20-21). One could say that there is a continuity between those attempts and the endeavor of Fanon ([1961]2005, 236) to ‘invent the man in full’ against the background of the massacre of the human prompted by racism and colonialism.

African American thought and activism are particularly relevant in this respect. Speaking of the historical roots of humanitarianism I was mentioning before abolitionism in Britain, quoting Wilberforce’s call to denounce ‘human wretchedness’ ‘in behalf of the most injured of the human race,’ which means the African slaves. Independently of the historical relevance of Wilberforce’s contribution to abolitionism and to the passing of the 1807 Slave Trade Act, it is easy to see that his addressees here are European, Western middle-class subjects, part of an emerging ‘public opinion.’ The picture is completely different if we turn our attention to *black* abolitionism in the U.S. (and in the Caribbean). Take for instance one of the founding texts of African American political thought, David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1830). Walker’s tone is far from defensive and deferential, his thorough knowledge of black America – both in slavery and in freedom – and the experience of slave revolts in the 1820s crisscross his writing. Directly addressing his ‘beloved brethren’ he tackles the question of the human at the very beginning of his appeal. “All the inhabitants of the earth, (except however the sons of Africa) are called *men*,’ he argues, ‘and of course are, and ought to be free. But we, (coloured people) and our children are *brutes!!* and of course are and *ought to be SLAVES* to the American people and their children forever!! to dig their mines and work their farms; and thus go on enriching them, from one generation to another with our *blood* and our *tears!!!!*” (Walker [1830]2000, 8). The claim to be human opens and supports Walker’s whole

argument, that culminates in a radical dismissal of the basis of slavery and submission precisely because slaves and masters alike are nothing more than ‘dying worms’ (18). ‘How we could be submissive to a gang of men,’ Walker writes, ‘whom we cannot tell whether they are *as good* as ourselves or not, I never could conceive’ (18-19).

Black abolitionism is more generally characterized by the direct appeal to the slaves (challenging any paternalistic attitude) and by the painful experience of a tortured, plagued, and denied humanity. The black voice that speaks never forgets such experience but attempts to reverse it through a language of claim. At least since the talk given by Sojourner Truth, a fugitive slave, at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention held in Akron, Ohio, female voices soon began to inscribe a difference onto Walker’s claim to be human (see Du Bois [1924]1970, 143-144). African American thought would remain profoundly influenced by the abolitionist struggle against slavery, which took many forms ranging from abolitionist propaganda to resistance in and flight from the plantations. The denial of the humanity of black people in the U.S. took many forms too, from the age of Jim Crow to segregation and current police brutality and mass imprisonment (see Taylor 2016). One can say that the reaction against that denial is at root of a specific productivity of African American political thought and culture. While for instance it is possible to reconstruct an original and radical line of understanding of ‘human rights’ from W.E.B. Du Bois to Malcolm X (see Gilroy 2010, chapter 2), the very fact to be compelled to claim the human opens up a field of experimentation where the very meaning of the human becomes a stake.

Such a notion of the human as the one that I have attempted to sketch with respect to anti-colonial thought and black abolitionism seems to me particularly fit to make sense of some of the main challenges faced today by activism at sea. Dehumanizing processes are definitely at play in borderlands and along maritime frontiers, at the juncture between racism, violence, and the specter of death that often haunt migrants’ journeys since their inception. The human appears here, in front of the risk of a shipwreck or interception by an actor like the so-called ‘Libyan coastguard,’ precisely as a *claim*, as an uncertain and even fragile wager. To be more precise, it appears as a *battlefield* where the denial and the affirmation of the human are directly confronted. There is definitely a need to further elaborate on this point, in order to take the experience of border crossing at sea (as well on the land in many parts of the world) as a constitutive moment in a wider phenomenology of instances that would provide the material background for a rethinking of the human from the perspective of the subjects that

struggle against its denial. For now, I want to stress that an understanding of the human such as the one I foreshadowed in this section definitely challenges 'humanitarianism' but at the same time it can also point to a way out of its current predicament that may result attracting for many volunteers and activists. What matters more also in this respect is of course the way in which we make sense of the agency and subjectivity of those people who struggle against processes of dehumanization and claim to be human – in our case, migrants and refugees.

##### 5. *'The border is closed, but we will cross'*

The effect of victimization associated with the benevolent gaze of humanitarianism is for me a critical question in the discussion of the 'humanitarian reason.' Since the 1990s the rhetoric of victimhood has become ubiquitous, for instance penetrating and reorienting historical debates (see Traverso 2017) and more generally shaping mass culture and public discourse. Victimhood is usually associated with 'innocence,' but at the same time also with a specific form of complete powerlessness. To be clear, I do not want to deny that myriad people are victims of awesome and often dreadful manifestations of power, including war, genocide, and torture, while many others have to confront extreme poverty and destitution or environmental catastrophes. The problem arises when the subjectivity of those people is reduced to victimhood, when it is posited as completely exposed to overwhelming processes that at the end of the day completely delete the very possibility of agency. Then, the only chance they have is to get help and assistance, to be 'rescued' from the outside, by someone else. Again, the point is not to obscure the relevance of 'care,' which is usually inspired by a genuine sentiment of solidarity (although in a sense quite different from the one that I discussed at the beginning of this article). However, a unidirectional care as systematic attitude toward the 'victims' cannot help but reproduce a profoundly asymmetric relationship between the subjects involved in the care relationship. What is important to stress is that even in the direst conditions people are never completely victims, are never fully deprived of their capacity to act and resist.

Border crossing in the Mediterranean is a good instance of that. While the journey of migrants and refugees is haunted by all kind of obstacles and potentially lethal risks (say, the crossing of the desert, hunger and thirst, rape, enslavement, detention and torture in the transit countries, precarious vessels for the maritime crossing), they deploy an incredible capacity to cope with such circumstances, to organize, and to resist pursuing the aim to continue their travel. Movements of migration across the Mediterranean, as well as in other parts of the



world, are characterized by an amazing *stubbornness* and by autonomous dynamics of mobility that continuously clash with the multiple and heterogeneous actors (legal and illegal, public and private) that aim at containing, channeling, filtering, and stopping migration. Such a stubbornness and such autonomous dynamics find manifold expressions even at sea, for instance in the chant *Freedom, Freedom!* of rescued migrants and refugees, in the active refusal to be brought back to Libya, or in the self-organization that often shapes relations between people on board rubber boats or other precarious vessels. What I am calling the stubbornness of migration directly challenges the image of ‘victimhood’ prevailing in the humanitarian discourse with respect to migrants and refugees. We are rather confronted here with a dense fabric of subjective attempts, efforts, tensions, needs, desires, and claims that go completely lost if we consider those people merely ‘victims.’ There is definitely a need to forge a different conceptual language to politically understand and to throw into sharp relief such a subjective fabric.

A subjective stubbornness characterizes contemporary migration well beyond the Mediterranean maritime frontier. Take for instance the migrant ‘caravans’ that in the last couple of years have profoundly changed the migratory landscape across Central America and along what critical scholars call the ‘vertical border’ in Mexico (see Aquino, Decosse, and Varela 2013). If one looks at the composition and dynamics of the caravans, it is easy to see that humanitarian actors and discourses play an important role also here, more often than not with a religious inflection (see Varela Huerta and McLean 2019). The network of ‘casas del migrante’ (migrant’s houses) across Mexico, in particular, provides a crucial logistical support to the caravans, while activists with different approaches to the question of borders and migration engage in providing assistance and facilitating the crossing. But what is more striking in the caravans is what Blanca Cordero and Gina Garibo (2019) call the dynamic of *acuerpamiento*, the gathering of bodies to produce a collective power capable to cope in a more effective way with the risks (also in this case often lethal, coming from both legal and illegal actors) that haunt the journey. There is a sense of open challenge to the border regime circulating among these collective bodies in motion, emblematic of a politics of migration that in no way can be reduced to the language and imaginary of victimhood. *La frontera está cerrada, pero vamos a pasar* (‘The border is closed, but we will cross’), a verse from a Honduran song circulating among migrant caravans, ‘En caravana’ by Chiky Rasta (2019), nicely captures what I am calling here the stubbornness of migration. And again, it invites us

to adequately take into account migrants' subjectivity and agency in our attempts to make sense of the stakes surrounding border struggles.

While it is definitely important to emphasize the roles played by activists in borderlands and along the maritime frontier, it is even more important to shift the focus of analysis and to read also border activism from an angle that prioritizes the continuity of the challenge posited to borders and border regimes by the movement of migration. It is this challenge that turns the border into a field of tension and that makes even the most rigid border profoundly unstable (see Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). Stressing the subjective dimension of migration is a crucial aspect of the so-called autonomy of migration approach that I have contributed to develop over the last years (see for instance Mezzadra 2011). There is a need to repeat that speaking of the autonomy of migration does not imply romanticizing migration or downplaying the hardship, pain, and violence that surround it. It rather opens up a perspective from which to analyze and possibly criticize in a more effective way such hardship, pain, and violence as well as what are usually called the 'structural' roots of migration. For the purpose of this article, an emphasis on the subjective dimension of migration, on its stubbornness provides us with a kind of razor that allows us to discriminate among different forms and understandings of solidarity and activism with respect to border struggles. And not surprisingly, my point is that we should privilege and foster those forms and understandings that acknowledge the constitutive relevance of migrants' agency and take it as an indispensable and fully material basis for action and discourse. It is against this background that the very notion of solidarity has to be rethought.

## *6. A politics of freedom of movement*

Again, the history of abolitionism in the Americas can be for us a source of inspiration. The movements and struggles of slaves were indeed acknowledged as basis for a more articulated political action even beyond the circles of black abolitionism. In the work of Benjamin Drew, a white abolitionist from Boston who was commissioned to travel to Canada in the mid-1850s and to interview escaped slaves from the United States, we can find for instance a quite extraordinary politicization of flight. The book he published in 1856 significantly bears the title *The Refugee* and basically consists of the interviews he made. It is worth quoting at length the opening passage of Drew's introduction to the book. When 'in any state,' he writes, 'the oppression of the laboring portion of the community' is so overwhelming that it includes

‘bodily torture’ and reaping ‘the rewards of their labor,’ ‘to them, insurrection and rebellion are primary, original duties.’ At this point Drew adds: ‘If successfully thwarted in the performance of these, emigration suggests itself as the next means of escaping the evils under which they groan. From the exercise of this right, they can only be restrained by fear and force. These, however, will sometimes be found inadequate to hold in check the natural desire of liberty. Many, in spite of all opposition, in the face of torture and death, will seek an asylum in foreign lands, and reveal to the ears of pitying indignation, the secrets of the prisonhouse’ (Drew [1856]2008, 29<sup>1</sup>).

The practices and experiences of fugitive slaves in the U.S., supported by the legendary abolitionist network of the Underground Railroad, are fascinating and they continue to inspire many instances of border activism today – as I mentioned above regarding the ‘Alarm Phone’ project. The passage from Drew’s book, *The Refugee*, definitely resonates in our present, particularly for the reference to the ‘natural desire of freedom’ and its triumph ‘in spite of all opposition, in the face of torture and death.’ ‘Emigration,’ which means the movement of flight from the plantation facing obstacles and risks that were no less scaring than the ones haunting migrants today in the Mediterranean or in the borderlands between Mexico and the U.S., is directly politicized by Drew. This is a gesture that we should repeat today, following Charles Heller, Lorenzo Pezzani, and Maurice Stierl in their invitation to take the ‘very real experiences of migrants and their disobedient movements’ as a thread that allows to materially reframe the notion of freedom of movement (see Heller, Pezzani, and Stierl 2019, 61). Freedom of movement and open borders are today at the center of a lively debate among scholars and activists (see for instance Bauder 2018, Aksan and Bailes 2019, and Jones 2019). While a unilaterally normative approach, effectively instantiated by the rigorous and influential work of Joseph Carens (1987 and 2015), has long prevailed in the discussion of the topic in political and legal theory, we are currently witnessing a shift toward more nuanced approaches. The point is not to deny the relevance of normative orders, but rather to emphasize at the same time the roles played in conflicts surrounding borders by material practices and interests as well as by a panoply of heterogeneous actors. Far from being imaginable as the result of the smooth development of a normative logic, freedom of

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<sup>1</sup> I owe my friend Federico Rahola the reference to Drew’s book. Federico is currently writing a book with Luca Palmas, tentatively entitled *Underground Europe* (forthcoming from Meltemi press, Milan), where he follows Drew’s lead to investigate movements of migration in contemporary Europe from an abolitionist perspective.

movement emerges as a field of struggle and contestation, where its practical appropriation by migrants offers for many scholars and activists the necessary point of departure.

While I emphasize the prominent roles played by migrant practices of freedom of movement, I am far from celebrating the isolation of migrants or from contending that freedom of movement is an issue that only regards them. The opposite is the case, and it is for this reason that the question of solidarity as a stake, as an outcome of struggles, with which I opened this article, is so important. Going back to the history of abolitionism in the U.S. can help us once more to discern the stakes of the struggle for freedom of movement and to forge political tools to tackle them. In an extraordinary book published in 1935, *Black Reconstruction in America*, the great African American scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois challenged the prevailing historical commonsense of the time and emphasized the relevance of the slaves' practices and struggles during the Civil War in the process that led to the abolition of slavery and therefore to their liberation. Du Bois went as far as to speak of a 'general strike,' brought about by the combined effect of sabotage in the plantations and multiplication of slaves' flights to join the Union's army, that paralyzed the economy of the South and decisively altered the balance of forces in the war (see Du Bois [1935]1998, 55-83). The autonomous action of the slaves was for him a crucially important movement, capable to open up new political spaces. The 'general strike' nurtured and radicalized what Du Bois called 'abolition-democracy' (184-185), a *coalition* that involved both labor and capitalist interests in the struggle against slavery and for full citizenship rights for the emancipated former slaves. I will not follow Du Bois here in the detailed analysis of the metamorphoses and radicalization of 'abolition-democracy' after the end of Civil War. What is important to note is that according to him it challenged and started to renew and reinvent the very basis of democracy in the U.S.

An autonomous act of insurgency and refusal by the slaves (the 'general strike') and the formation of a powerful coalition ('abolition-democracy'), laying the basis not only for the abolition of slavery but also for the advanced democratic experiments that characterized the age of Reconstruction: this is what we can extrapolate from Du Bois' work. I am convinced that such a framework is not only valid for the historical interpretation of the tumults and upheavals of the 1860s in the U.S. (see for instance in this sense Lipsitz 2004). While it inspires struggles against the 'prison-industrial complex' in the U.S., following the lead of Angela Davis (see for instance Davis 2005), it is of obvious importance also for border activism and for the forging of a *politics of freedom of movement* (see again Heller, Pezzani,

and Stierl 2019 and Rigo n.d.). Such a politics should rely on migrants' practices and should aim at building coalitions among heterogeneous actors, acknowledging that even beyond solidarity with migrants and refugees a society that affirms freedom of movement is a free society, where happiness and wealth are easier to fulfill than in a society huddled in fear behind walls with militarized defenses.

A politics of freedom of movement emphasizes the moment of struggle and claim, it does not envisage as its goal the opening of borders by decree but it rather agrees with postcolonial feminist thinker Chandra Mohanty (2003, 2) that there is a need to 'acknowledge the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent' in order to articulate struggles across all these lines of demarcation – with the aim of reinventing 'solidarity' (7). Important as it is to intervene along international borders and maritime frontiers, border struggles are far from over once they are crossed. A politics of freedom of movement must take seriously the proliferation of borders beyond territorial demarcations. As Suzy Lee (2019) convincingly argues, crucially important battles for freedom of movement and open borders are fought in the field of labor. This is the point where the reference to the understanding of solidarity within the diverse traditions of the labor movement at the beginning of this article becomes particularly important. To put it clearly, there is no politics of freedom of movement today without a reinvention of solidarity along the lines of that tradition. But continuity must go hand in hand with discontinuity, since the very subject of solidarity ('class') has changed dramatically over the last decades. Border struggles open up a particularly effective angle on those transformations.

Struggling for migrant workers' *rights*, which means contesting the capitalist attitude to consider migratory movements as mere *flows* to include in the calculation of labor supply, implies both the specific mobilization of migrant workers and the opening of new spaces of action for labor writ large – it implies a new class politics. In North America, for instance, 'worker centers' have in this sense paramount roles to play in what I call a politics of freedom of movement (see Apostolidis 2019). Moreover, while border activism is usually confronted with national (or supranational, for instance in the European case) laws and regulations, a wider understanding of freedom of movement leads to combine resistance against such normative orders with different spatial scales of action. Cities are particularly important in this respect, and the variegated experiences of 'sanctuary cities' and 'solidarity cities' on both sides of the Atlantic are definitely inspiring, notwithstanding their limits and contradictions,

for anybody interested in understanding the complex interplay between social mobilization and institutional dynamics that can lead to provisional instantiations of a politics of freedom of movement (see for instance Mancina 2019 and Augustín and Jørgensen 2019, chapter 5).

It should be clear by now that the politics of freedom of movement I am outlining is an ambitious project that aims at combining established forms of border activism with a broader social and political engagement. Multiple levels and multiple scales of action are required if we are to politically respond in creative and productive ways to the challenge raised by the daily and stubborn practices of border crossing and freedom of movement exercised by migrants. Inspired by radical abolitionism, such a project is definitely predicated on a notion of solidarity very close to the one I have discussed at the beginning of this article with respect to the history of the labor movement and to the experience of the City Plaza Hotel in Athens. It is shaped by an awareness of the current conjuncture of criminalization of humanitarian intervention and of the radical challenge posited by the emergence of the 'human as a battlefield' in borderlands and along maritime frontiers. The politics of freedom of movement envisaged here also attempts to reflect important aspects of contemporary forms of border activism at sea, from the 'Alarm Phone' to 'Mediterranea.' Needless to say, its further development and accomplishment cannot be can only be a collective task and endeavor.

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