On board the quarantine-ship as "floating hotspot": Creeping externalization practices in the Mediterranean Sea

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Abstract

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, migration was framed in Italy as 'the emergency within the emergency', leading the Italian Government to declare that its ports were not ''safe places' for people rescued from boats flying a foreign flag to disembark.' As a result, under this guise of health and safety, in Italy migrants are now held in cruise ships repurposed as quarantine-ships for their sanitary isolation. We take this space as our analytic lens and draw on the experiences of the first author whilst working as a caseworker for a humanitarian organization on board. In our analysis of the interactions of those working on board and the social relations produced therein, we unravel how these ships function as a form of Goffman's totalitarian institution, where bio-political techniques are adopted that act on the body and mind of all on board, limiting access to asylum and functioning as a form of externalisation.

Key words

Mediterranean Sea; migration; quarantine-ship; hotspots; COVID-19; externalization; asylum; Italy

Introduction

Defining migration means drawing a line between states and agreeing that that is the border that has been crossed: whether by migrants, asylum seekers, tourists, vagabonds or travellers. Those *imaginary lines*, that outline the borders of Fortress Europe, mark the logic of inclusion and exclusion of those defined as outsiders. How and why some outsiders remain stranger than others (Ahmed, 2000) is, however, intricately linked with race. As critical migration scholars have shown, rather than mobility, the figure of the migrant relates more to race, gender, class and nationality. Within Europe, it is a construct that is inherently racialized, deriving from European border controls, themselves based upon historical colonial frames of reference and cultural norms (Anderson, 2013; Sharma, 2015; De Genova, 2018). For the writer Alessandro Leogrande (2015), the border is 'a line made up of infinite points, infinite knots, infinite crossings. Each point a story, each knot a handful of existences. Each crossing is a crack that opens'.

In this piece, we explore those cracks, delving into their deepest depths in the time of COVID-19. While many studies are emerging on the impact of the pandemic on borders at the sub-national and national levels (see e.g., Kenwick and Simmons 2020; Wolff et al. 2020), less attention has been paid to practices applied during these times on illegalized crossings. This paper examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Central Mediterranean Sea, one of the most spectacularized and, at the same time, contested borders of recent years. A border which also reflects the racialisation of Europe's border regime as the mobility of those from formerly colonized countries has been progressively illegalised (De Genova, 2018). We take as our analytic lens the Italian quarantine ship, understanding this space as a totalitarian institution (Goffman, 1961) and build upon literature exploring quarantine spaces as part of border control (Lozanovska *et al.*, 2020; Baldacchino, 2021; Cresswell, 2021; Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021). We agree with Martina Tazzioli (2020) who argues that such spaces reveal how the pandemic has worked as an accelerator of 'ongoing escalating politics of containment', which go beyond enforcing a state of exception via *hygienic-sanitary* bordering mechanisms which enact forms of racialised containment under the guise of health and safety.

In Italy, the treatment of migrants is in line with Triandafyllidou's (2020) analysis at the international level: the pandemic has further strengthened the security orientation of borders and state retreat into national sovereignty. In this process of protecting a select group (national citizens) from outsiders, migrants and refugees remain framed- even in this pandemic - as a threat to national well-being. The pandemic emergency is then 'an additional link in this chain of securitization' (Triandafyllidou, 2020, p.1).

Using this space as a lens, via our analysis of (1st author)'s ethnographic study whilst working as a caseworker on board two quarantine ships, we shed light on the contradictions of the humanitarian element of the ship's space. We reveal how these tensions and ambiguities produce certain subjects and b/ordering effects through the spectacularisation of the ships themselves. This focus on the productive nature of the space draws attention to a hidden element of the pandemic and the creeping externalisation of border controls that occur in times of emergency. Our analysis contributes to knowledge of these often invisibilised spaces to show their productive capacity and how the social relations therein contribute to enhancing externalisation practices.

Alison Mountz's excellent documentation of the genealogy of externalisation has shown the historical repetitions in the way moments of crisis have been instrumentalised for ad hoc policies that are then formalised into new legislation, increasingly restricting access to mainland territories (2020). The externalization of border controls has been identified as policy tools such the (im)possibility to acquire a visa (Infantino 2019; Laube 2019), the external processing of asylum claims (Frelick et al. 2016), extra-territorial surveillance, and patrolling (Dijstelbloem et al. 2017), and offshore detention facilities (Flynn 2014). We show in this paper how the depoliticised and dehumanised policies and practices on board the quarantine ship are part and parcel of such externalisation, restricting and delaying access to asylum rights through *ad hoc* practices, likely to become normalised as per Mountz's analysis (2020). In the depoliticised onboard space, and symbolic separation from the mainland, these ships bear uncanny resemblance to Foucault's (1971) Ship of Fools as they carry their contemporary outcasts across the water.

The paper is organised as follows. First we set out the methods adopted by the first author and provide some ethnographic detail of the quarantine ships on which she carried out her dual role as caseworker/ researcher. We then briefly outline migration control in the Mediterranean and its production as 'crisis'. This is followed by the background to the Italian context and further developments following the COVID19 pandemic. We then turn to our analysis of the professional figures and practices onboard using excerpts from (1st author)'s field diary reflecting her ethnographic observations whilst on board, analysing the productivity of the ship space itself. We set out how, within this space, the actions of the humanitarian actors are inadvertently harmful, reducing access to asylum and an essential part of ongoing creeping externalisation policies. We conclude by presenting likely scenarios for future migration policies in Italy

Methods: an ethnographic study of the quarantine ship

Our contribution examines the space of the quarantine ship and draws upon data from an ethnographic study carried out by (1st author), the first author, a white Italian woman in her late twenties, whilst working onboard a quarantine ship as a caseworker in Italy in December 2020 and March 2021. (1st author) worked as a Restoring Family Links (RFL) caseworker in two missions in two (Azzurra and Excellent) of the five different boats designated as quarantine-boats for migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Whilst working as a caseworker, she simultaneously carried out covert ethnographic research to observe and analyse the power dynamics onboard the ship and the social relations produced therein. Focus was placed upon those working on the ship and their

interactions with the migrants on board which were observed and recorded in a field diary. The research was underpinned by an activist stance, reflecting the need to shed light on these invisibilised interiors of the border regime and some of their hidden practices. These spaces are highly protected and there is limited information about practices on board. Hence, from a research-activist perspective this was the only way to gain insight into the interior space of the quarantine-ships.

To paraphrase Comaroff and Comaroff (2003, p. 164), (1st author)'s ethnographic practice was derived from the situated effects of seeing and listening based upon her prior conceptual scaffolding. A scaffolding constructed from some years' working as an activist academic in the asylum sector. To this we add the analysis and 'scaffolding' from (2nd author)'s prior work analysing spaces of detention and reception and the interactions therein with those who work there ((2nd author). As such, we maintain that the ethnographic study of the everyday may make visible the invisible and enable us to study what may not be conscious or previously narrated and what is done, rather than said (Duneier, 1999; Silva and Bennett, 2004).

As other critical ethnographers have shown (Coutin, 2000; Hall, 2010; 2012), in relation to migration systems, ethnography can be a useful means to explore the lived realities of state power and ways and means marginalised groups negotiate or resist their subject positions. Ethnography enables parts of society and politics to be reached in a manner that other methods may not. It captures the individual and collective experience of everyday life to identify what we cannot understand and analyse on our own, or with other kinds of approaches, and to (re)question what seems 'natural' and taken for granted. The ethnography carried out on board the ships was involved and engaged, and ongoing reference was made to the Bourdieusian balance between the localized perspective (field of study) and the global breadth (analytical of the power structures and economic, political and structural relations that condition and are reflected in the work of asylum reception). This then allowed for an understanding of the wider systemic dynamics in macro contexts (Wolf 1990; Friedman and Friedman 2008), while considering the typical passion of ethnography towards what is considered 'micro' (Marzano, 2006). This approach enabled the construction of a more complex, more comprehensive, and multi-dimensional view of the humanitarian workers on board.

However, these multiple positionings led to difficulties and moments of explicit (or implicit) conflict between the dual roles of 1st author. Conducting ethnographic research in such a power-dense setting (Halme-Tuomisaari 2018) makes it difficult to balance the roles of both researcher and caseworker. Distance (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999) was made possible through (1st author)'s position as a tactical subject, possessing 'an intense understanding, mastery and indeed sense of the social field she or he occupies, and the relations he or she entertains in such field' (Kyriakides in Halme-Tuomisaari 2018, p.3) and through the adoption of several strategies: the daily writing of a field diary (when alone in her room to avoid replicating practises of surveillance of the migration system), in which observations and informal conversations with fellow workers were recorded after they took place; the use of two email addresses, one for work issues and one for research purposes; finally, a careful analysis of the macro context in order not to be overwhelmed by everyday life and to be able to consciously and evaluatively analyse the daily micro-activities.

During her research, (1st author) was cognisant of her privileged positionality of 'whiteness' (Frankenberg, 2000), citizenship status and researcher power in relation to the migrants on board. (1st author) engaged in constant self-reflection on her positionality, an ethically essential requirement when conducting this kind of research (Kirmani, 2018). The juxtaposition of the 1st author's biography with that of the other workers, particularly with respect to her experience on the quarantine-ship allowed for the sharing of a universe of reference and the establishment of a sympathetic relationship. This was possible due mainly to the familiarity with the socio-cultural

context and the existence of different ties of solidarity, allowing a 'frank sociability' (Bourdieu, 2015: 813) during the informal conversations. In the close connection between field research and theoretical construction - an important characteristic of participant observation - (1st author) could detect from within the instances of the community in which she found herself working, living, and researching, thanks to her commitment, both political and social. This does not necessarily mean distorting or adopting a non-neutral look at the object of study, but rather being able to observe it in a more conscious way, trying, as Montaldi (1971, 1994) proposed, to make explicit one's involvement in what in this case is the social, political and economic context of migration.

Context: migration control in the Mediterranean and the effects of the COVID19 pandemic

State based understandings of migration are rooted in 'emergency' discourses. As Geddes and Hadj-Abdou (2018) argue, this feeds into the security-driven perspective underpinning European migration governance which seeks to deter migrants from reaching Europe's shores. As legal channels into Europe are ever more restricted, making the dangerous crossing over the Mediterranean Sea increasingly becomes the only alternative for those seeking a better life (Ticktin, 2016; De Genova, 2017, 2018). Many critical scholars have challenged the 'crisis' narratives of the liberal European state (Bhambra, 2017; De Genova, 2018; Rigo, 2018; Tazzioli and Garelli, 2018). Instead, as Agier suggests, the crisis should be understood as a 'crisis of nation-states faced with mobility' (2019, p. 10). Arrivals by sea are, as Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley contend, spectacles that work as border events in a show of strength and control against unwanted 'flows' of people (2011, p. 133).

The Central Mediterranean Sea is now one of the most dangerous maritime migration routes, with 1,553 migrants recorded as dead or missing in 2021.[1] These deaths need to be understood in the context of the politics of abandonment and European border controls which subject migrants to increasingly more dangerous routes. Something Forensic Oceanography's compelling 'Left-to-die boat' shows as the deadly natural forces of the sea must be faced by this vessel.[2] As much research has evidenced, border controls have, in many cases, simply rerouted migrants towards alternative, often more dangerous routes (Ticktin, 2016; Squire, 2017; De Genova, 2018). According to the UNICEF, since the EU-Turkey deal dramatically reduced the flow of refugees and migrants into Europe through the Eastern Mediterranean, the Central Mediterranean from North Africa to Italy has become the main route for those fleeing war, persecution and desperation, as well as the longest and most dangerous. And yet as Enrica Rigo (2018) has shown, still people embark on this journey more than once, knowing full well the risks that await. This has not changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Mediterranean Sea, as Einashe reminds us, is 'a sea which the European Union has militarized as its member states squabble over the legality of search and rescue missions' (2018 np). This amounts to the reterritorialization of the Mediterranean Sea as a European border space, as '*Mare Nostrum*' (Musarò, 2017). *Mare Nostrum* ('Our sea' as the Romans christened it) was an Italian military and humanitarian operation set up in October 2013 to rescue migrants at sea and feed them into a national dispersal system so that arrivals were not held in the disembarkation points in the South of Italy. It was set up in response to public outcry following the deaths of more than 500 people who drowned off the coast of the Italian island of Lampedusa attempting to reach Europe. Many of the rescued migrants were held in detention centres on the island (Musarò, 2017). This was a controversial operation involving both search and rescue at sea intertwined with bordering through

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[1] IOM (2021) *Missing Migrants Project.* Available at: https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean
[2] https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-left-to-die-boat

control and containment (see Tazzioli, 2016). It was disbanded after a year, replaced by other more explicitly military control operations (Tazzioli, 2016).

Van Houtum refers to this as a process of 'ouring', of marking out ownership: ''Ouring' the territory in this way communicates the making of a place, in order to classify what is within and what is beyond' (Van Houtum, 2010, p. 126); thus separating off (Black) Africa from (white) Italy. Borders, then, 'create a space of legitimate withdrawal, where actions need not be justified, where the beyond-space is morally emptied, neutralized, tranquillized, made indifferent' (Van Houtum, 2002, p. 45). As is tragically evident in the many deaths at sea and further, as we argue here, in the containment of unwanted migrant 'others' onboard ships deemed unsuitable for their tourist counterparts.

Whilst a 'crisis' response lens (Tazzioli and Garelli, 2018) has underpinned the European migration regime long before the pandemic arose, we suggest here that the Gramscian interregnum (chiaroscuro) of the COVID19 pandemic opened space for additional restrictive measures to be implemented. Gramsci affirmed 'the crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear', as explained by Bauman (2012, p.49), Gramsci's 'interregnum' also foresees the acceptance of a more extensive range of the socio-political-lawful requests, while at the same time venturing further into the socio-cultural condition (Bauman, 2012). We turn now to Italy's response during the pandemic to migrants arriving across the Mediterranean Sea.

The 'Italian Solution' for the isolation of migrants during the COVID19 pandemic

In Italy, measures implemented by the Italian government towards migrants arriving at sea following the onset of the COVID19 pandemic were immediate. First, ports, declared to be 'unsafe', were closed, search and rescue vessels were reduced, and then the 'quarantine-ships' were devised. On 7 April 2020, an inter-ministerial decree declared that as a result of the COVID-19 emergency, Italian ports are unable to meet requirements as a Place of Safety whilst the pandemic continues. The decree was approved the day after the Alan Kurdi ship (flying the German flag), requested to dock in Lampedusa. 150 migrants intercepted in the Libyan SAR (search and rescue) area were on board. For the Italian Association for Legal Studies on Immigration (ASGI), the legitimacy of the decree is questionable, both in relation to international legislation - the principle of *non-refoulement* - and to the Italian Constitution (ASGI, 2020).

On 12 April 2020, under the decree of the Head of the Civil Protection department, quarantine-ships were prepared for containment with the aim of providing accommodation assistance and health surveillance of people rescued at sea. The ASGI has pointed out the flawed nature of this rationale, in that those same cruise ship spaces, now used to quarantine migrants unable to access a 'Place of Safety', were closed to tourists as a health risk due to their spatiality that encourages the spread of disease. Unsurprisingly, this has led to human rights groups and others raising concerns about discriminatory measures and poor sanitary conditions. As scholars have identified: 'cruise ship travel presents a unique combination of health concerns. Travelers from diverse regions brought together in the often crowded, semi enclosed environments onboard ships can facilitate the spread of person-to-person, foodborne, or waterborne diseases' (Tardivel, White and Kornylo Duong 2020).

The language used to describe these ships is also productive. As Di Meo and Bentivegna (2021 np) point out, the label 'quarantine ship' is a misnomer in that the term 'quarantine' refers to the 'separation and restriction of the movement of people who have been exposed to a contagious

disease to see if they become sick.' Instead, these ships are for the isolation of people who have not been in contact with any established case. Plus, 'remarkably', as Tazzioli and Stierl note, 'even migrants who were already hosted in accommodation centres on Italy's mainland, including those who had tested positive for Covid-19, were transferred onto these ships' (2021a, p. 77).

Thus whilst the term quarantine may be a misnomer, this use of language functions to construe those on board as risk, and enhances notions of the necessity, for health and safety purposes, to keep them contained and isolated. In allowing these migrants to be contained in such a way, and in the contradictory action of holding people in conditions which actually enhance the risk of contagion and spread of disease, the securitized border control function of these ships is grossly evident. Indeed, the ongoing Covid19 pandemic has exposed the deep-rooted and racialised global inequalities in health and access to mobility. It is also being used as an exceptional moment for the implementation of exceptional measures. One of which, we argue, are these very ships, which, now devoid of their usual tourist passengers as a result of the pandemic, have been transformed into an extension of Europe's border.

These features are the very same administrative processes that the Italian authorities requested in 2016 under their 'floating hotspots' proposal, whereby asylum processing would take place on board ships. The proposal was rejected by the EU under human rights and administrative grounds.[3] The identification process takes weeks and it was judged that the health care on board would have been insufficient. These same floating hotspots have now emerged under the guise of safety and health concerns during the pandemic and enhance deportation practices, restricting access to protection, temporally, spatially and administratively. Amnesty International (2020) has described them as 'useless and cruel'. 2020 saw the deaths of three young men via these ships. In May, Bilal Ben Massaud, 28 years old died after throwing himself overboard to try and swim to the coast. In September, Abdallah Said, 17 years old, died from Tuberculous (TB) encephalopathy in the hospital in Catania where he was transferred after a period of isolation on board GNV Azzurra. In early October, Abou Diakite, a 15 year old boy died after receiving emergency treatment only several days after being on board the ship GNV Allegra (ASGI, 2020). One, possibly all, deaths which could have been avoided with a mainland stay.

Whilst the purported main purpose of these ships is to isolate migrants for health and safety purposes, and asylum decision making is not conducted on board, there are legal advisors on board and vulnerability assessments are conducted, both of which are part of asylum surveillance. The directional flow becomes increasingly exclusionary. Whilst not explicit, the administrative processes construct barriers and undermine access to legal representation, human rights, and avenues to asylum. Italian policies have sanctioned a state of emergency; legitimate public health concerns are used as an excuse to detain people in poor conditions on the cruise ships and to restrict access to asylum. This is emblematic of the dialectic of care and control that underpins what Fassin (2011) calls the 'humanitarian reason' of the European migration regime, where the pretence of humanitarianism masks the control mechanisms at heart of the regime.

These hybrid spaces are created under the guise of 'safety'. They reflect age-old practices of controlling disease and mobility, the two often conflated as the same issue, as an invasive threat to the body of the nation-state. Mechanisms of care and control that, as scholars such as Miriam Ticktin (2006; Feldman and Ticktin, 2010; 2011; 2016) and Didier Fassin (2005; 2011) have long argued, underpin border controls. More recently, Ticktin (2020), referring to the pandemic in the US, notes these same narratives can be seen as 'immigrants, foreigners, people of Chinese origin, and many others have been implicitly or explicitly rendered 'unsafe.' These others are construed as invaders,

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[3] EU Parliament (2016) Question for written answer P-004213-16:
https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/P-8-2016-004213_EN.htm

and conflated with the virus.' Such notions of safety against 'invasive others' are then used to control and contain.

The term 'pathological' is, as Tim Cresswell points out, itself a metaphorical way of understanding mobilities, which allows certain kinds of drastic action to be taken against mobile people and things deemed as the opposite of 'normal' (2021, p. 54). Pathological means 'caused by disease' and metaphors of disease have long been at the heart of violent reactions to mobility and displacement (Cresswell, 2021). For instance, in her study of the historical antecedents of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), writer Carianne Leung (2004 in Jack-Davies, 2020) found that Chinese communities in Canada were historically constructed as the 'yellow peril' and their presence compared to that of the plague. Chinese settlements in the country 'were regarded with the same hysteria as an infectious disease spreading across Canada.' In the COVID19 pandemic, the links between pathology as a medical term and its application to marginalized groups through control of mobility are strongly evident (Cresswell, 2021).

Historically, quarantine has been used since the Black Death in the 14th century as a means to try and control virus spread. In the repurposed cruise ships, we see a form of 'racial colonial quarantine' (Simpson, 2021) enacted, or what Martina Tazzioli calls '*hygienic-sanitary borders*, the bordering mechanisms which enact forms of racialised containment predicated upon health and safety' (2020, np). This form of what Fassin (2005) refers to as 'compassionate repression' which depoliticises border controls through moral focus upon health, which serves to both obscure and advance inequalities and restrictive control mechanisms, was glaringly obvious to (1st author) during her time as a caseworker for a humanitarian organization on two missions on quarantine-ships between December 2020 and March 2021. We explicate in the below how this is so.

On board the quarantine ship

The quarantine ships are tourist ferries that prior to the pandemic transported passengers back and forth from holiday spots on the Mediterranean Coast in Egypt and Tunisia to Italy. The number of quarantine ships is in constant flux, numerous tenders have been issued by the Italian authorities but data on the exact number and owners of these ships is hard to come by. Data from the Civil Protection is only given for January 2021[4], with no further information since then, despite wide ranging changes to the numbers of ships and their capacity. Further, the costs involved are extremely high, with estimates per month from April 2020 at between Euros 900,000 and Euros 1,080,000 for rent, plus Euros 1,050 per passenger, plus the costs of petrol, personnel, and funding to the Italian Red Cross which, under the agreement with the Civil Protection, amounts to a maximum of Euros 577,600, excluding start-up costs (Roio and Scannavacca, 2021).

According to the season, and therefore to forecasts on the number of migrant arrivals, during the pandemic, the number of quarantine ships has varied from three to seven active ships. During the missions of the 1st author, there were six vessels in operation, all belonging to the Grandi Navi Veloci (GNV) shipping company, the sole company to respond to the tender. One of these ships, the Azzurra, was in operation during the first mission but is currently in a Turkish shipyard undergoing urgent restructuring work. This gives an idea of the poor condition of these ships.   Ships can host from 300 to 800 migrants, depending on their size. Work on the ship is divided into two teams: a health team composed of doctors, nurses, and psychologists and a migration team, consisting of linguistic mediators, Restoring Family Links (RFL) caseworkers - 1st author's role - and legal advisers. The crew varies from 20 to 35 members.

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[4] See:
https://trasparenza.mit.gov.it/moduli/downloadFile.php?file=oggetto_allegati/212410002050O__OELENCO+AG GIORNATO+UNITA%27+NAVALI+ASSISTENZA+MIGRANTI.0001576.19-01-2021.pdf

What was immediately apparent to (1st author) upon boarding the ship, was that these supposed health-centred spaces had become spaces of surveillance and control of unwanted bodies. Migrants were subject to identity checks, assessment of their intention to seek asylum and to the documentation of their vulnerabilities, such as being of minor age, or pregnant. Analysing (1st author)'s onboard diary, the feeling that emerges is of a totalitarian institution (Goffman, 2017 [1961]) that adopts bio-political techniques that act on the body and mind of all on board, both migrants and workers. Ships represent micro 'world-systems', 'total institutions' (Goffman, 1961) in the purest sense of the term. In 'Asylum', Goffman underlined how '[a] basic social arrangement in modern society is that the individual tends to sleep, play, and work in different places, with different coparticipants, under different authorities, and without an overall rational plan. The central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these three spheres of life' (Goffman, 1961, p.5-6). Ships are thus examples of institutions 'detached from the world' (Goffman, 1961, p. 5). It is in this detachment and the restriction of access to asylum that we maintain they act as part of externalisation policies.

Like any totalitarian institution, the ship totalises the bodies of the passengers on board: every activity and aspect of life takes place within it, manipulating human needs and surveying bodies and minds. The two groups of people, those controlled and those they control, tend to form a limited and hostile stereotypical image of the other group (Goffman, 1961: 37). "*Places that de-vitalise*" (diary 27/12/2020) those who live in them, distancing them socially and emotionally and, in the long run, brings suffering. In the words of a colleague, recorded in the diary (27/12/2020):

"*you understand that it is a sick system when, as you board migrants, you no longer think about the people boarding, but about the number of rolls of toilet paper that you will have to buy*."

The quarantine ship is a space that leaves no room for critical thinking, which disables the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes (Arendt, 2009 [1963]). This struggle has been found with many frontline staff working in contentious areas, such as detention (Hall, 2010, 2012; Ugelvik, 2016; (2nd author), return (Koch, 2014;) and in immigration enforcement generally where Back (2007) has evidenced the dehumanising effects of the role. These de-humanizing practices are also seen in the manner in which migrants on board are referred to by number, and not by name. Practices which become routine within this space:

"*First shift of food distribution on deck 8-. 40 people were present: Tunisians and sub-Saharan Africans, all of whom tested negative for COVID-19. I took a walk in the corridors and I found everybody was really nice. It takes very little to shore up this subnormal moment of suspended time with small gestures of normality. I met Mariam, Awa, Aicha and Abdoul and I tried hard to remember their names so as not to call them by the numerical code that was assigned to them. I find it really terrible.*" (24/12/20)

These processes of 'mortification', as Ruben Andersson (2014), drawing on Goffman, refers to them, are an essential part of the migration regime which strips migrants of their identities and removes their autonomy. This dehumanising process makes their control easier. The immigration sector is a delicate policy area which requires clear frames of references. Many of the humanitarian workers on board the ship were completely unaware of the migration phenomenon itself, of what it meant to seek asylum, the meaning and complexity and difficulties of obtaining refugee status, and so on. Neither was there much awareness of the political dimension of migration, the inherent inequalities in the power of the passport (the passport index reveals the global rankings of different countries

based on the number of destinations their holders can access)[5] and different possibilities of border crossings. As a consequence, humanitarian workers on board were unaware of the inherent danger and power held within the onboard space. As (1st author)'s diary reveals:

"those who find themselves in the field without any previous knowledge of migration, confuse categorizing/stereotyping with knowledge. People for whom this is their first experience in the field of migration tend to have a stereotypical idea of the people on board, and not understand certain behaviours. For example, Italy has a repatriation agreement with Tunisia, which causes the Tunisians on board to manifest greater anxiety and agitation with respect to their fate after leaving the ship. It is essential to have an understanding of this contextual background, as otherwise this harms both migrants on board and humanitarian workers". (07/01/21)

Overwhelmed by daily events, while having to engage in resource management and casework, humanitarian workers fail to attribute meaning to their work due to its intangibility. A failure to fully understand the full purposes of their work and, above all, not comprehending the politics of asylum and border controls generates not only frustration and dissatisfaction among humanitarian workers , but also chasms of non / poor information in relation to and for the migrants on board. This is where the responsibility for daily practices comes in. As there are no operational manuals or policies for on board activities on quarantine ships, the decision-making responsibility (Saruis, 2015) remains the subjective responsibility of the humanitarian worker on duty.

As (1st author) writes in her diary on the tenth day: "*In these places you feel a huge responsibility for people's lives, a responsibility that really shouldn't be yours. It doesn't have to be.*" This responsibility, if not knowingly exercised, can lead to contradictory or harmful decisions. In these all-encompassing spaces, responsibility also means transforming emotions into thought, into critical thinking capable of consciously acting on daily practices. The humanitarian workers find themselves having to 'navigate the opaque gears' of an untransparent system (Gallotti and Tarabussi, 2018), often feeling alone and unsupported in their daily tasks, which then imply a high degree of discretion and improvisation.

Here the strategic role played by individual humanitarian workers is of particular importance: they find themselves in a social space (Bourdieu, 2009), more often than not, poorly prepared to assume responsibility and its consequences. Quarantine ships are poorly regulated, spaces where practices go unchecked and unmonitored. The accountability of this new professionalism born in this 'double emergency' becomes difficult to either demand or prove: in this sense the state of emergency justifies the reduction of rights and the lack of accountability for one's actions. This has detrimental implications for migrants on board.

Self-awareness of the role played by humanitarian workers provides added value as it allows the workers to move within the quirks and gears of the system to find creative solutions and effectively perform a role not solely of containment and control, but also humanitarian. Such awareness, however, is difficult to obtain within the everyday practices on board the ship. Daily events and exhaustingly long shifts - on average 30 workers on a ship that can accommodate up to 800 migrants - are overwhelming, and lead to negative consequences, such as burnout (Maslach, 1982). This can be seen in the high turnover of staff on quarantine ships. Importantly, those who work on quarantine ships are social actors that shape the initial processes through which migrants may (or may not) enter the reception system, with a resultantly significant impact upon the life paths and migration projects of migrants on board.

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[5] https://www.passportindex.org/

Quarantine ship staff have immense power and responsibility for the possible life paths of migrants both onboard and after disembarkation. Whilst purportedly conducting humanitarian work, in practice the impacts are that of border controls. Activities such as identification and asylum request procedures, reporting of vulnerability and presumed minor age. By way of example, a report confirming the alleged minor age allowed a young Tunisian to stay in Italy, and thus avoid inclusion on the list of persons to be repatriated immediately. Another example: Failure to report can divide families, as (1st author) notes in her diary

"*Today at the time of landing we realized that a pregnant woman and her husband had not been reported as a couple and therefore were assigned to different centres, she in Ragusa and he in Bari. This should be our job, this is our responsibility. We are playing with people's lives. Lack of awareness hurts.*" (28/12/20)

The work onboard these ships has a political weight as each worker is a social actor, and as such a bearer of values and meanings, as well as subjective and social rights: through their work, social inequalities emerge and may be recognized. In this sense, in a space like the quarantine ship, unawareness and unpreparedness can generate spaces of suspended rights.

Quarantine ships are totalitarian institutions (Goffman, 1961) that adopt bio-political techniques that act on the body and mind of the people on board, such as calling migrants by number. It is tiring to try and see where there is room for manoeuvre, as an entry from the third day in the field diary reports: "*It is difficult to create empathy in a situation where what is required of you is control. The margin of action perceived is still minimal*". The margin of action must be understood as the possibility of carrying out daily practices of micro-resistances in a system that you do not consider as legitimate. Resistance practices capable of providing oneself with 'their own autonomous infrastructures' (Mezzadra, 2019). Even small things, such as the spaces available on the ship must be read with a political lens.

In recent years, migration policies have gone from secondary to 'high politics', promoting emergency and security management (Ambrosini, 2017). Consequently, in migration policy, it is difficult to separate what is technical and/or legal from what is political: talking technically about how the ship-quarantine system works automatically acquires a value and a political reflection. As (1st author) reflects in her diary entry:

"*Quarantine ships are machines with a profound moral ambiguity, they are human disassembly chains, both towards migrants and those who work inside them.*"

"*In the end, this is securitized control disguised - barely - as health control. You can feel it in your body. This is a disproportionate and totally unreasonable health control as migrants with a negative COVID-19 test are also contained. It is also extremely expensive. A time-space suspension, devoid of legal regulation or any human rights guarantees.*" (29/12/20)

The combination of macro (the border regime) and meso factors (insufficient and inexperienced people onboard), particularly when they do not comprehend the everyday responsibilities of being in that context, lead to significant detrimental consequences on the lives of migrants. Consequences we suggest are part of creeping externalisation, restricting access to asylum, and where racialized (migrant) bodies are contained on board cruise ships that were deemed unsafe for their original (tourist) passengers.

Creeping externalization

Given the above, we maintain that quarantine-ships then became another piece of the wider externalization of European borders, facilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These forms of humanitarian borders (Walters, 2004) are mostly organized along racialised, colonial and economic hierarchies (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2012) which manage migrants' bodies and lives (Dadusc, Grazioli and Martínez, 2019). All border control practices, and mobility controls in general, operate through a selection based on inequalities of sex, gender, race and class (Khosravi, 2019). An enforcement archipelago that stretches over land and at sea containing migrants in protracted captivity (Mountz, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has opened chasms and suspended rights. The chasms analysed in this article are floating and of Italian form. In fact, passing through initial 'experimental laboratories' in the governance system of migratory flows (Campesi, 2011), from the North African Emergency onwards, in Italy, the externalisation of the border regime is moving further towards the African coasts. The COVID-19 emergency has allowed for another level of the abuse of rights in the management of migratory flows along the Central Mediterranean Sea border.

Over the years, the entrusting of migration management to the police authorities and executive bodies has suggested the attribution of a perennial emergency character of the phenomenon itself (Basso and Perocco, 2003), this confirms the 'widespread belief about the political nature of this social phenomenon' (Bricola, 1997, p.96). The daily routine within migration policy and practice is transformed into a 'continuous emergency situation', through the progressive and constant normalization of urgency, which makes the problems and the management of daily tasks in the quarantine ship prone to perennial tension and the simplification of the work itself. Quarantine ships are discriminatory tools, born in the Gramscian interregnum (*chiaroscuro*) from whence symptoms emerge, the emergency leading to extra-territorial 'floating hotspots' with the characteristics of border security technology 'charged with governing the future' (Campesi 2015).

Conclusion

The pandemic has then accelerated ongoing trends in the politics of migration containment via narratives of ensuring the safety of both migrants and citizens (Tazzioli and Stierl, 2021b, p. 542). Through ethnographic observation, we have shown how the quarantine ship as a 'non-space' becomes a site for discriminatory practices, justified by the COVID-19 emergency within the 'migration emergency'. Ethnographic observation allowed for more of the 'doing' of social life to emerge, and enabled insights beyond narrative accounts. This shed light on how these ships are frighteningly close to the Foucauldian ship of fools as they exclude society's outcasts both physically and symbolically through containing those unjustly pathologized as carriers of disease. The responsibilities and professionalism of people onboard are difficult to assert, justified by the state of suspension: insufficient and unprepared staff, unable to provide the necessary support to people who have suffered violence and trauma, unsuitable spaces - closed and poorly ventilated - for a pandemic, and inadequate medical care.

Thus, whilst these 'quarantine ships' are purportedly solely for the purposes of health, we fear that they are in effect a creeping extension of Italy's externalisation policies. The geographer Alison Mountz in her recent book *Death of Asylum* (2020) evidences how historical patterns of the production of exceptional sites in exceptional circumstances, *ad hoc* practises that emerge in moments of 'crisis', then become standardised practice. We surmise that this is what is happening here. In this situation, the *ad hoc* to permanent legislation really resonates. The very same proposal to use ships as 'floating hotspots' put forward by Italy in 2016 that was rejected by the EU for violating human rights has now been effectively implemented under the 'emergency' of the COVID19 pandemic. In short, the quarantine ships immediately became hotspots, 'filtering devices' of human

beings, made possible by the double 'emergency' of migratory flows in the emergency of the pandemic. We believe it is likely these practices will remain post-pandemic and become incorporated into standard asylum offshore practices.

Endnotes

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