

## NARRATING THE HUMANITARIAN BORDER: MORAL DELIBERATIONS OF TERRITORIAL BORDERWORKERS AT THE EU'S MEDITERRANEAN BORDER

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The European Union's external border regime in the Mediterranean is the classic 'humanitarian border'. It is presented and performed as a humanitarian and caring enterprise, but conceals strong elements of exclusionary border control. Important actors in its daily social construction are territorial borderworkers who are tasked with the implementation of the laws and policies underpinning the humanitarian border. Their narratives are passionate and articulated using emotive language and expressions denoting an intensity of personal feelings, while the moral framing of the issues indicates a moral discomfort. Drawing on multi-sited and long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Lampedusa and Sicily, situated on the external Mediterranean border of the European Union, this article explores the key themes and form of the personal narratives of territorial borderworkers who discuss border processes and deliberate their own roles within it. Their narratives reveal insights about their worldview, and add empirical depth to our understanding of the humanitarian border and the enterprise of constructing it.

**Keywords:** European Union, Italy, humanitarian border, Mediterranean, moral framework, narratives, territorial borderworkers.

### Introduction

This is not a nice field (immigration) to work in. We are constantly torn between politicians, politics and *poveracci* ('poor migrants'). Between papers, pointing to the rough piles on his desk, and persons, gesticulating towards the window from where migrants could be seen huddled waiting to be called in. Between the Europeans, the Italians and the locals. But the worst thing of all is that we have lost sight of what is good or bad. Was Mare Nostrum a good initiative, or did it provoke more deaths? Is it good to save migrants at sea, only to let them rot for years in the CAS (emergency reception centre)? Is it right to raise their expectations by giving them accommodation and free food, when they are in for a life of exclusion, at best *capolaroto*? What is good, what is bad? Is it my problem if their governments have pushed them to leave their countries? In my daily work, how should I act to ensure I can live with my conscience? I am no Mother Teresa mind you. But I still have to live with my conscience. (Ottavio, Agrigento, immigration police, April 2016).<sup>1</sup>

Ottavio was working with the Immigration Police in Agrigento. He was regularly present at the disembarkation of migrants and he was responsible for the initial interviews and the fingerprinting that generally took place at a first reception centre (or as popularly referred to, the hotspot). Ottavio was mid-career and had worked in other parts of Italy on, among other things, the illicit trafficking of drugs and domestic abuse. His narrative characteristically oscillated between reflection on political issues and personal

retrospection. And despite his broad experience in the tumultuous field of organised crime in Sicily, he repeatedly expressed discomfort with his job in the immigration field. More specifically, this discomfort is framed in moral terms. This, I found, was to a greater or lesser degree, a typical approach among territorial borderworkers.

Why is this surprising given that we are dealing with the subject of humanitarianism? Isn't humanitarianism moral? While orthodox humanitarian philosophy was driven by the moral concern to improve the welfare of others, 'new' or contemporary humanitarianism is driven by other interests (Chimni 2000; Fassin 2007). Fassin, for example, argues that rather than being based on egalitarian principles, contemporary humanitarianism, through its focus on the saving of lives, produces a hierarchy of life. His explanation is poignant: humanitarian government, beyond the value of life as sacred and suffering, lacks a recognition of the Levinasian Other, of the 'face', that denotes shared humanity (see Fassin 2007; Levinas 1969/1991). In a similar vein, the EU's humanitarian border, as exemplified in the borderisation of the Mediterranean border (see Cuttitta 2014a; van Houtum & van Naerssen 2002) poses migrants as threats to national security and as victims of smuggling and trafficking, thus '(de facto) dispossessing them of the (legal) agency and (full) rights that come with the lives supposedly saved' (Morena-Lax 2018: 120). At the same time, states and other powerful actors have managed successfully to avoid being blamed for failing to fulfil human rights obligations by exploiting accountability gaps and staging a formidable blame game (Ripoll Servent 2017).

The humanitarian border refers to the intertwining of humanitarian and security issues and to the proliferation of migrant aid organisations and humanitarian services, offered also by security and/or border control entities present in borderlands as a response to the nature of contemporary border control policies (Andersson 2014; Panebianco 2016; Perkowski 2016; Vollmer 2016 & Walters 2000). Rather than being built on the recognition of shared humanity, the humanitarian border produces zones of humanitarian government (Tazzioli 2016; Walters 2000) where care functions as a technology of border enforcement thus increasing the state's power to govern more bodies and more spaces (Williams 2015). In a Foucauldian sense, humanitarianism is an intrinsic part of security as it relates to the necessary conditions for life. This is what Pallister-Wilkins demonstrates in both her work on the Greek border police and Frontex, and her later work on non-state actors in the humanitarian borderscape (Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 2017). The contradictions and tensions within the humanitarian border are rife and yet they are themselves constitutive of that same border. As Perkowski (2016) observes, the border projects a 'false dichotomy' between humanitarianism and securitisation (334).

The EU's external border regime, as epitomised in the hotspot approach implemented in the Mediterranean, is a classical example of a humanitarian border, presented as addressing humanitarian needs but in essence driven by security interests. For example, the aim of the hotspot approach (an EU action initiated during the so-called refugee crisis in order to support Member States) is to identify, register and filter migrants who have entered irregularly. In Italy, the case study used in this article, the hotspot approach starts at disembarkation and ends in a Centre of Extraordinary Reception (*Centro di Accoglienza Straordinaria*, popularly known by its acronym CAS) (European Commission 2015).<sup>2</sup> Spaces of first reception are officially securitised, and migrants are detained: there is no civilian access to disembarkation and accommodation in the first

reception detention centres, some of which are officially hotspots.<sup>3</sup> These processes and activities are tellingly referred to in Italian law as ‘prima accoglienza’/ ‘first reception’, rather than as the border regime.<sup>4</sup> By doing so, the external border control aspect — which remains the constant goal with interdiction as a means to attain it (European Council 2017) — is downplayed, whereas the portrayal is that of a humanitarian and asylum system concerned with saving lives, with interdiction as a necessary life-saving device (Pallister-Wilkins 2017). This rescue-through-interdiction changes the nature of human rights, which, rather than functioning as a check on interdiction and border control, are co-opted as another securitisation / humanitarianisation tool (Moreno-Lax 2017).

In practice, therefore, there is very little humane reception or human rights checks of the sort promoted by human rights scholars in border zones, who argue that first reception on the southern external border of the European Union (EU) is ‘in defiance of the reception logic’ (DeBono 2018). Reception is limited to managing issues related to the irregularity of the entry, and only as a last instance during this process is the application for asylum made possible (DeBono 2018). In spite of the acclaimed ideal of constructing a migrant-centred humanitarian border, research reveals systemic border violence, dehumanisation in spaces of detention and exposure to death in hostile environments (DeBono 2013; Vaughan-Williams 2015b).

Humanitarianism goes hand in hand with crisis (Mainwaring & Silverman 2017). Crisis construction has been a tactic used by the European Union (EU) and several EU Member States over the last twenty years, in order to govern and control mobile populations through humanitarian activity and the creation of spaces of exception like camps or detention centres (see Campesi 2018; Mainwaring 2014; Mountz & Hiemstra 2014). Crises at the borders, in particular at the external borders of the EU, are often conveniently presented by authorities as situations of humanitarian emergency brought about by irregular migration flows without reference to the actual EU policies that are directly or indirectly creating these crises. For example, although irregular migration to the EU is largely a result of EU visa and border policies, it is presented by authorities as a natural calamity (Düvell 2011). Whereas the disturbing death toll of migrants crossing the Mediterranean is portrayed as a tragedy by the authorities during ‘border spectacles’ staged in key locations such as Lampedusa (Cuttitta 2014). One of the key outcomes is that the EU’s Border Agency (Frontex) is entrusted with migrant rescues at sea, thus becoming a key humanitarian actor, while non-governmental organisations (NGOs) conducting search and rescue operations are increasingly criminalised (Andersson 2016; Heller & Pezzani 2017). Irrespective of how they come about, crises in borderlands generate the need for humanitarian activity and/or the creation of spaces of exception set up for this reason. But instead of opposing the securitisation logic, humanitarianism at the border intertwines with the production of a new form of ‘ethical policing’ that both ‘cares and controls’ (Pallister-Wilkins 2015, 2017 & Ticktin 2011).

State authorities are not alone in enacting contemporary humanitarianism. Intergovernmental and international organisations have become a constant presence in key nodes on borderlands. And since the start of the so-called 2015 refugee crisis we have witnessed a proliferation of humanitarian Search and Rescue (SAR) NGOs operating in the Mediterranean, which persist despite systematic criminalisation by states and remain,

to date, still present. These non-state organisations have also, primarily out of necessity, fed the humanitarian narrative (Stierl 2018). Of course, one cannot reduce the ethos of humanitarian activity and border policing to the same thing, however they do belong to the same order of meaning because they take place in a humanitarian space governed by exceptionalism and emergency (De Lauri 2018). In other words, non-state entities engaging in humanitarian activity are also involved in the construction of the humanitarian border, even if the motivation and purpose, namely of saving lives at sea, is very different to state security or militarisation.

The blurring between humanitarianism and securitisation implies the obfuscation of the distinction between the person identifying as the humanitarian agent and the securitarian. The humanitarian by virtue of their work is upholding securitarian aspects, and the securitarian has to feign or become humanitarian in order to carry out their job. This article turns the spotlight on the self-identified humanitarians and securitarians working on the territorial border and asks: how do these people, involved in the daily enactment of the humanitarian border, think, define and make sense of the system within which they act and operate?

The moral discomfort of territorial borderworkers, as testified in the opening quote by Ottavio, reflects the tensions inherent in the concept of the humanitarian border. Although the humanitarian sentiments of these borderworkers might be a form of self-legitimation, the gravity and compassion underlying these narratives points to something more complex. These narratives challenge Fassin's analysis of contemporary humanitarianism as impersonal, inegalitarian and as being anything but humanitarian. In particular, as will be demonstrated in this article, the recognition of the migrant as human, or what Fassin refers to evocatively as a Levinasian Other, can be found, to varying degrees, in the personal narratives of these borderworkers, thus denoting meaningful encounters.

This article uses material from the Italian sites but draws on larger research carried out in the EU's borderlands and border zones in southern Italy and Malta, both EU Member States responsible for the SAR and first reception of irregularly-arriving boat migrants. During the period in question the main country of departure on this route was Libya and the country of destination was Italy. This route, following the 2015 EU-Turkey agreement, has been the principal entry point for irregular Mediterranean maritime arrivals which were 181,436 in 2016, and 171,635 in 2017. The risks of this journey are high: it is enough to mention that in 2016 and 2017 there were 4,579 and 3,116 recorded deaths (IOM 2018). People entering through this route have often endured long and difficult journeys, which generally include the crossing of the Sahara desert and/or spending time in Libya where detention, corruption and torture are rampant, and have been made worse by the Libyan conflict (OHCHR 2016 & MSF 2017). The last leg of the trip involves the sea journey across the Mediterranean for which the current *modus operandi* involves the use of an unseaworthy vessel, generally a cheap rubber dinghy, and the sending of distress signals, in the hope that rescue arrives on time. These sea trips are a common cause of trauma for migrants on account of the high level of risk involved. Regardless of the weather conditions, due to the overcrowding and low quality, these boats are considered officially 'unseaworthy', and therefore 'rescuable' immediately by the Italian Maritime Rescue and Coordination. Upon arrival the toll of the hardships of

the journey on land and sea are often immediately visible as newly-arrived migrants bear visible signs of physical violence and psychological trauma. A Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) study, *Neglected Trauma – Asylum seekers in Italy: an analysis of mental health distress and access to healthcare*, conducted among migrants who sought its help between October 2014 and December 2015 found that 60.5% showed signs of mental health problems, 42% of the patients had complaints compatible with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 27% with anxiety and 19% with depression (MSF 2016).

Drawing on long-term and multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2015–2019 in four locations on the islands of Sicily (Siculiana/Agrigento, Milo/Trapani, Palermo) and Lampedusa,<sup>5</sup> I analyse territorial borderworkers' personal narratives on the 'first reception' processes at the border. In these narratives, the humanitarian border is explained, discussed, debated and challenged with reference to their own personal experiences, and within a moral frame that allows them to voice their personal difficulties and reservations. The ethnographic field was delineated by the border zones and borderlands in Western Sicily and Lampedusa where first reception, or the hotspot approach, was being carried out. Border zones are the securitised areas in borderlands where first reception is carried out and constitutes both designated wharfs and first reception centres where territorial borderworkers lived, socialised and worked. Ethnographic material collected was possible with a vast amount of 'hanging out' (Geertz 1998) time spent with different territorial borderworkers such as immigration police, national police, health authorities, NGOs offering special services, activists, journalists, migrants and others at disembarkation wharfs, centres where the hotspot approach was being implemented, in their respective offices and in social spaces. Communication took place in several languages (Italian, English, French, and with the help of interpreters, Arabic). Data generated from this project is in the form of detailed ethnographic fieldnotes and over 100 recorded indepth interviews ranging from 1.5 hours to 6 hours. Contact was maintained throughout the project through phone calls and electronic media, and followup visits and interviews were conducted with select fieldworkers of different professional profiles, working for different agencies.

### **The Frontliners: Territorial Borderworkers**

Territorial borderworkers are the frontline fieldworkers who work in first reception (i.e. on or close to the territorial border). 'Territorial borderworkers' is not a legal category. It is not even a homogeneous group. Although, as will become apparent during this article, there are grounds for treating this group as one, notwithstanding its inherent heterogeneity. In this section, I will limit myself to describing their roles within the system. However my choice of focus on 'territorial borderwork', as well as the choice of the term itself, is deliberately informed by the concept of 'territorial' but also draws on their unique position within the system, at the tail end of the construction of the humanitarian border, designed by the EU and Member States.

Territorial borderworkers are people engaged in activities with newly-arrived migrants in nodal and porous points of the geopolitical border. They work for a vast array of entities: from various police departments and medical services, to people involved in the management of the process, local non-state actors, international organisations, and EU agency workers. They also include some journalists, researchers and other categories

of workers such as drivers and cleaners. On the EU's external border in Italy, first reception processes take place in spaces which are controlled and securitised (border zones), and therefore territorial borderworkers meet in these exclusive places where, bar a few exceptions, only they are authorised to enter. They therefore share direct and regular experiences of border zones and border activity, and unlike other people they have first-hand experience of first reception and newly-arrived migrants which is not mediated by the mass media or politicians.

Territorial borderworkers form part, but also bear the brunt, of the staging of 'political' and 'border spectacles' involving 'illegal aliens' (see Andersson on the border spectacle on the EU's external border in Spain, 2014: 137–173; De Genova 2002: 436 & Cuttitta 2014, on the border spectacle on Lampedusa). These border spectacles are just an indication of the 'borderization process' carried out by policies and discourses (Cuttitta 2014: 200), of the securitisation and humanitarianism (Campesi 2015) or the border's 'militarisation' through the use of military strategies, culture and technologies (Andersson 2016; Jones and Johnson 2016: 188).

Territorial borderworkers are similar to street level bureaucrats who 'make policy' through varying degrees of discretion that they enjoy (Lipsky 1980). Like street level bureaucrats they are in daily contact with migrants and have a significant impact on their daily life. They can enjoy quite a high degree of discretion on how to enforce the rules, policies or laws, and in practice therefore they are also 'making policy' (Lipsky 1980: xiii). Territorial borderworkers differ from Lipsky's street level bureaucrats because they could be working both with the state and also with non-state organisations. At times this is not a significant difference, in part because the nature of some non-state organisations today often resembles that of the public services in terms of hierarchy, accountability and control. The category of territorial borderworkers also has similarities with Rumford's 'citizen borderworker', which refers to 'ordinary people (citizens, non-citizens) (who) are increasingly active in constructing, shifting, or even erasing borders' (Rumford 2013: 170).<sup>6</sup> They experience and share with other 'citizen borderworkers' the influence of their daily bordering practices and the construction of the border regime. In practice, what brings them together are three factors: a) the experience of work in one of the border zones where first reception is carried out; b) their daily life in the borderland with, or as part of, the local border town community; and c) their direct contact with migrants at arrival.

### **'First Reception' in the EU: A Typical Humanitarian Border**

'First reception' operations at the Italian border fall legally under the responsibility of the Italian Police Prefecture, which has to implement EU, national, regional and local legal and policy frameworks. At an EU level, first reception is part of the fast developing common EU legal framework of the Common European Asylum System, but also part of the external border management of the EU and migrant crisis management. The 'first reception' system is at an acute interface of security and humanitarian needs because of the phenomenon of mixed migration flows. Therefore we find two forms of activities that are carried out by the authorities in the shortest period of time possible from when the migrant enters the territory. First are the procedures related to *irregular entry and border management*, which include whether a person expresses the wish to apply for asylum. In

Italy, part and parcel of this process is the aforementioned EU's 'hotspot approach', which refers to the operations that ensure that irregularly entering migrants quickly undergo registration, identification, fingerprinting, that adequate debriefing of asylum seekers takes place, and that people subject to return are swiftly repatriated. It also includes a medical check prior to disembarkation and an initial medical triage to address any health security risks. Second is *humanitarian treatment*. The medical triage also covers any personal medical condition needing immediate treatment. However, humanitarian issues include simple medication, hydration and mental health support, especially in the case of recent trauma, the most common being deaths at sea. These processes include various 'information sessions' taking place mainly on the wharf where the migrants are disembarked and in the first reception centre where migrants are initially detained during the hotspot process. Some processes also take place on the ship right before disembarkation, such as the medical check by the public health authorities and provision of food and water, or at the Regional Hub or the CAS where it is possible for an asylum seeker to lodge an application.

This border regime has developed in such a way as to ensure the involvement of some non-state actors. International organisations, such as UNHCR, Save the Children, UNICEF and MSF, work in these areas subject to the terms of previously established Memoranda of Understanding with the Ministry of the Interior. They generally provide a service on behalf of the authorities, and are not recognised as working in an independent manner. Access and permission to act is dependent on the authorities since most of the areas of 'first reception', except the CAS, are securitised areas. As a result, very few local NGOs have been granted access. For example, in Lampedusa and in Trapani, the Italian NGO Misericordie assists the Prefecture's management at disembarkation. In Lampedusa, a small organisation called Mediterranean Hope, a project of the Evangelical Churches of Italy, has the authorisation by the Ministry to provide drinks and sometimes snacks at disembarkation. Whatever their role in the system it is often the case that frontline fieldworkers — what I refer to as territorial borderworkers — need to collaborate efficiently and effectively in order to ensure the smooth running of the system.

The EU's porous external border can best be characterised as securitised, controlled and managed by the state and supported by EU actors. The perennial culture of emergency in Italy (and the EU) informally creates a justified suspension of laws. The hotspot approach in itself is critical to understanding how the first reception system is imbued with this emergency culture because it is itself a measure triggered by a call for help to the EU by a Member State that cannot cope with the flows. Campesi rightly argues that the hotspot approach should be viewed as a continuation of the experimentation undertaken by the EU in the sphere of border control and migration policies in the Euro-Mediterranean region, which has been taking place since the early 1990s. The real, underlying motivation for this is security, but it is presented as humanitarian activity and in terms of neoliberal efficiency and efficacy (Campesi 2015).

### **Narrative Oscillation on First Reception by Territorial Borderworkers**

Territorial borderworkers' narratives on first reception are a reverberation of the humanitarian border. The continuous oscillation between humanitarianism and securitisation portrays a 'false dichotomy' because at a personal level, those identifying

themselves as humanitarian are also securitarian, and vice versa. This, often contradictory, duality is a common theme. It is evident, for example, in the way migrants are presented in polarised dualities as saints or sinners, heroes or villains, by the same borderworker. In the case of newly arrived migrants this is replicated as victim or potential terrorist, attuning respectively to the humanitarian and security moral frameworks. This was presented differently by territorial borderworkers. Francesca, a professional, middle-aged woman working for an international humanitarian NGO, who had previously worked in the migration field with other agencies, was adamant that newly arriving migrants need care. This is what 'first reception should be all about'. And she chose to highlight the migrants' wish to establish contact with relatives/friends. She lamented the fact that this was often seen as a luxury, not as something essential for their wellbeing. She confided in me that there have been occasions when migrants were so distressed that she allowed them to use her phone. This was not a practice allowed by her employer, but 'what would you do in such situations?' Often at the wharf, at disembarkation (which can last hours), there are no opportunities for calling. She put forward strong, well-informed arguments on the importance of phone calls for migrants themselves, their families and communities. She presented an extremely humane perspective on migrants, and was well informed of the characteristics of irregular journeys across different countries.

I shared with her that some security officers had told me that phone calls might constitute a security risk. Security, she explained, was extremely important. Migrants needed to be identified and checked, and it had to be ascertained that they were not terrorists. But should this be done at disembarkation or at a later stage, I asked? 'No, it should be done right away'. I persisted: at the wharf? 'Yes, yes, for reasons of security it has to be conducted before, and it has to be done well'. I struggled to understand how this could be carried out in practice. The approach during migrant processing (identification, fingerprinting and so on) is very different to that of medical and care workers, because it is conducted by the police who have very different skills and training. My perplexed look seemed to be interpreted by Francesca as an affront to her narrative. She looked at me straight in the eye:

I have been working with these *ragazzi* (guys) for a long time. Among my closest friends there are asylum seekers, even they arrived through 'alternative routes' to Italy. And I can tell you that I am happy that they are here in Italy. And it never occurs to me to ask why they left and such questions. There must be a reason for their move, and I can tell you that I have heard many. I wouldn't ever dare judge them. But I also understand, because I have seen a lot, that security ought to be taken seriously. These are people, who are not identified, unknown, could be anyone. No risks should be taken in this field. And it is important that it is done right away, at disembarkation while first aid is being administered by the Red Cross or there is an intervention by MSF or other humanitarian agencies, that the authorities take security issues seriously. If it were up to me I would immediately start the security checks, even if the migrants have to be kept at the wharf which is not an ideal reception spot. (Francesca, Trapani, wharf and hotspot, February 2017)

At disembarkation migrants are generally tired, if not traumatised, and overwhelmed by the various procedures they need to go through, which often consist of simple procedures such as the medical triage, waiting for transportation, given some little snack

or hydration. Francesca was not oblivious to the fact that migrants experience these two sets of processes in very different ways, but she felt that addressing security risks was more important. Francesca's stance towards first reception can be summarised as critical towards security, and indeed she finds no problem with undermining it in practice, but at the same time validates the prioritisation of security which she perceives to be in her own personal interest.

This account is in direct contrast to another narrative by a police officer. Dario has been working with security and immigration issues for 'over twenty years' and in his words, has seen it all. A person who emits self-confidence and a self-assuredness about his work, and himself. Apart from the high position he occupies, his experience and personality earn him a lot of respect from his peers and other territorial borderworkers. Being in charge of security aspects, I expected him to prioritise such aspects in line with Francesca above. But to my surprise he espoused a completely different approach. Migrants in the first 24–48 hours are so:

...exhausted and tired, that if it were up to me, I would just give them a number, food, a bed and the essentials to recover. (Dario, police, Trapani, March 2017)

Other forms of registration, fingerprints, asylum seeker or not, details of the journey, should wait until they have recovered, he told me. I understood that this was partly a criticism of Frontex activity on the wharf, an activity which is very visible. Frontex conducts debriefs right upon disembarkation in order to collect intelligence on the modality of the journeys. They base this activity on the conviction that debriefs, the systematic extraction of information for intelligence purposes from migrants willing to cooperate, need to be conducted as soon as possible to lessen the risk that migrants change their versions. Similar debriefing and interrogation at the first possible moment is generally conducted separately by, other police authorities, which is why the police presence at disembarkation and hotspot/first reception centres is always so numerous. The police interrogate a few migrants, and they are trained to collect information which might arise during registration regarding criminal activity such as smuggling, or abuse during the journey. Dario nodded when I challenged him with this.

Yes, you're right. If interviews do not take place immediately, versions could change. But take my word for it, they will not change if we wait 48 hours — maybe if we wait a week. Interviewing a person who has suffered multiple layers of abuse at the time of their arrival also has its disadvantages. My men tell me: 'but these are assholes, they're taking us for a ride. They gaze (*fissano*) at me as though they are not understanding, and all this while there's the interpreter. I tried the tough approach and the gentle one, but it does not make a difference. But what the hell should I do?' And I respond: 'what the hell do you have in your head? Don't you read the newspapers? What are you waiting to inform yourself better?' The truth is that we should not be doing these interviews right away, in fact my expectations from these interviews are very low. For me it is enough if they give me their personal details. I am obliged to ask them for the reason of illegal entry, for information on smugglers and to describe their journey — but I feel that all this should be done a couple of days later. Unfortunately we are under pressure to conduct these procedures quickly so the migrants may be transferred from the hotspot to the hub or the CAS. (Dario, Trapani, police, March 2017)

For Dario the suffering migrants take the form of a moral compass, and compassion underlies the approach to his work. The ‘suffering migrant’ is what compels him to criticise the system which he feels should be designed in order to meet their psychological needs. Interpreting behaviour, however, is subjective and culturally-determined, and this, he explains, is why he is a strong advocate for cultural and psychological formation of officers working on the frontline, and in the rest of the reception system. No such training takes place for any of the different branches of the police or paramilitary forces working on the border and in immigration.

Noemi was also very much concerned with the migrants’ wellbeing. She had worked in other first reception and expulsion centres before working at the hotspot of Trapani. Although the hotspot is a first reception centre, as defined by the Italian Roadmap, it is also a detention centre. Hotspots are robustly guarded and heavily gated. The authoritarian structure did not prepare me for the caring and casual attitude that Noemi, a professional worker in the hotspot, adopted towards the ‘guests’.<sup>7</sup> Noemi had a hands-on approach to the ongoing activity in the centre buffering the security activity of the police through every means possible. Some of her colleagues told me how she was often found in the children’s room, or the nursery, or even just talking to residents on the premises. As Noemi was explaining her role within the first reception system, she kept repeating the importance of prioritising care. ‘All migrants arriving here are to be considered vulnerable.’ Although she understood that there were individuals who needed different attention or other services, she felt that calling them ‘vulnerable’ often resulted in the rest being incorrectly viewed as ‘non-vulnerable’. The role of the hotspot, and the reason why it is a detention centre, is to make sure that all migrants are registered, fingerprinted and undergo the necessary security checks, she explained. But, she placidly continued, this cannot be separated from the care needs that these people have. ‘For me they are all “guests” who need to be showered with care.’ I asked whether she finds this to be a challenge in a structure which was built to be a high-security prison surrounded with iron gates, where people were not free to leave, very few people were given access and where security officers and police could be seen everywhere.

Frankly, I don’t think this is an issue for our residents. They know only us. They need to rest and regain their strength. In the first days when they are here they do not question their detention, but are just happy to be safe. It is easier to take care of them when detained than if they were free. (Noemi, Trapani, hotspot, March 2017)

Similarly to Dario above, Noemi cannot comfortably reconcile working in a security institution without taking into account the ‘suffering’ of the migrants. In her zeal to address such suffering, she is ready to keep migrants in detention. It is akin to what Vaughan-Williams (2015a) has presented as characteristic of Europe’s border crisis which poses the figure of the ‘irregular’ migrant as *both* a potential threat *and* a life that is threatened. Noemi searches for a means to retain control and authority over migrants, and finds it rather easily in the system. Her intention is to offer them much-needed comfort and professional care, and to protect them from other parts of the reception system where the service is less professional. This gives her a sense of fulfilment and purpose. More importantly, it pushes a radically different perspective to the human-rights approach that no one should be subjected to arbitrary detention — in this case, she deems it is in the migrants’ best interests.

While Noemi sees detention as a means to care for migrants, Nina, a volunteer with a church NGO supporting activities at disembarkation, interprets state security as

important for the migrants themselves. Nina has a background working professionally with international humanitarian organisations in developing countries, and describes herself as being driven solely by migrants' welfare. She is sensitive to migrants who have been trafficked, coerced or end up in prostitution circles against their will. She strongly feels that Italy should offer them a way out of these networks and feels that first reception is the right space. The border is therefore conceptualised not as a risk to migrants due to border control, but as an opportunity for migrants to access a human rights area and free themselves from these exploitative and/or criminal networks. Therefore state security procedures takes on increased significance for her:

Security remains the most important thing at first reception. The state has every right to conduct the necessary checks on these migrants who, let us not forget, cross the border without documents and without the authorisation to enter. The role of the state is to protect. And it is only the state that can have the necessary infrastructure to protect all. (Nina, Palermo, wharf, April 2017)

The underlying sentiment here is fear: fear for herself and/or the host community and fear for the migrants' wellbeing, evoking what Ulrich Beck maintains is an outcome of modern risk societies. When dealing with the notion of controlling state borders, the concept of risk plays a large role. It implies a mode of operation where decisions are taken that attempt to make the unforeseeable consequences of civilisational decisions foreseeable and controllable. A vicious circle is created, whereby fear that is essentially manufactured serves to further legitimise draconian measures by the state. An element of fear is common in spaces that are controlled and where threats are likely to be at a minimum. These places, and the border zone is one such good example, tend to both generate fear and concurrently create a sense of safety. This contributes towards broader social and political processes taking place in modern societies. For Nina, the border constitutes a set of risks and threats to her/host community and to migrants/migrant communities. But, equally strongly, she feels that the border is a unique opportunity to identify potential threats to the host community, to identify members of exploitative and criminal networks, and to offer a way 'out' to people who have already been trapped. With this context one can understand better her main criticism of the first reception system, namely that the state is failing to implement security by not addressing the vulnerability issue. Migrants, she felt, are not being offered a way out at first reception, and worse still, are sometimes recruited into prostitute networks during first reception, also driven by a sense of vulnerability and lack of care.

This sentiment, that first reception fails to address or produces vulnerability among migrants, is echoed by Ernesto, an infectious disease professional in a first reception centre. As is normal practice, the Ministry of Health assigns these resident professionals to hotspots and first reception centres which are designated as areas with a high risk of infectious diseases. This is generally framed as both a personal and public health risk and a health security risk for the wider population (in the centre and/or the host community). Ernesto had been working in this centre for almost five months, but had prior experience in other migrant centres. He told me that during this period he had identified only one case of *mycobacterium tuberculosis*, commonly known as TB. Ernesto came back to the centre, after some ten days of vacation, to find that this case had not yet been processed and the migrant had not started treatment. Why was no action taken? Ernesto's

explanation was that the managers did not take the matter seriously because they did not understand the potential health risks for the individual and the other residents of the centre. Acquired knowledge among migrant centre workers is common, but, he explained, TB was a rare occurrence. Most of Ernesto's clients are not people with infectious diseases but have mental health problems or digestive ailments. He was very frustrated and disillusioned:

The problems that I end up seeing are often the result of the poor sanitary and care conditions in the centre. I can tell you in confidence that I am a political prop. I meet people who have travelled across entire countries, crossed continents, risked their lives several times, endured harsh living conditions. Nature does not save the weak ones, only the stronger ones. The people I meet are healthier than the average Italian. But they are in prison. Where tensions rise high. Stress and anxiety is felt all around. Where there are institutional rhythms rather than natural ones, including institutional menus and food. And where there is almost always overcrowding. And then they put professionals like me to make sure that the system does not collapse. I can only think that I am here to cover up for politicians and bad management in case something goes wrong. In the meantime, I am not allowed to criticise the system, because my role is that of 'treating ill people', but I can see around me that people are getting 'ill' because of the system. Isn't that nice?! Do you think this was the reason I studied this profession? I want out. Just as much as those migrants. And then I will join them in protesting their situation on the streets, but here I can do nothing. So if you ask me how 'first reception' should work, I will tell you that they should make all the necessary security checks on migrants, register and fingerprint them, immediately at disembarkation and set them free. Then they will be free to take care of themselves, or find organizations that will support them. (Ernesto, Sicily, hotspot, September 2016)

Ernesto's is a reaction against the detention of migrants. Concurrently however he does not put forward an argument for personal and public health security checks. His explanation thus denounces the official approach of the Italian health authorities. Of greater interest is the fact that Ernesto, who apparently has little in common with poor, unemployed and undocumented migrants, nevertheless identifies strongly with them. He depicts himself as a victim of injustice, as helpless, like the migrants in his centre. Strongly evocative of Feldman's (2015) critique of the condition of modern life in contemporary neoliberal societies captured in his notion of 'migrant-hood', whereby he claims, 'we are all migrants' — rootless, uncertain, atomised, disempowered — and therefore the root causes of the hardships migrants face potentially degrade the lives of citizens as well. Ernesto's narrative encapsulates this, partially, if not entirely. Clearly borderwork in a hotspot/detention centre imposes more restrictions than other jobs; however, just like the migrants detained in his centre, Ernesto will not be able to fulfil 'the drive to play a constitutive role in the world' (Feldman 2015: 7). The border for Ernesto is a mechanism of control that extends beyond border crossers to include also border workers.

Giovanni, also, discusses humanitarianism. He works for a humanitarian organisation in Lampedusa which in the course of its operations has established good connections with the authorities and the local community. The aim of the organisation is entrenched in a human rights, social and global justice framework, although their activities are very local and generally low key. He claims, making reference to postcolonial innuendoes, that the

reception system is a continued process of subjugation of migrants, but like Ernesto, the feeling of subjugation and powerlessness is also extended to his own situation:

Once irregular migration is the only entry for asylum seekers, then we end up in this catch-22 situation. Of course this is a security threat. Europe is paranoid about security and entry points. This point is clearly the weak spot. And very visible too. Our organisation is strictly humanitarian, but we know we are swimming in security waters. Not only, we are also helping it. So for me the ethical question to ask is not how should first reception be conducted, but why do we have this inflow of people into Europe? Europe has a big role in producing these flows: without legal entry points for people from conflict areas, with growing global inequality. Therefore what would be the right way to receive/welcome (*per accogliere*) migrants? The least that can be done in this case is not to treat them as enemies of the state, but to welcome them, give them the care and help that they need. That is what we try to do, in our own small way. We do it to give an example. I wish I could tell you that it has an impact on the system, because it does not. We, Europeans, have to be good hosts, if anything because of our guilt in being accomplice to all that has happened to them on the way. And unfortunately, security checks need to be conducted as well because you never know. And so even the best case scenario is a terrible one to imagine: while the host is receiving and pampering the guest, at the same time it lets the security dogs lose on them. The reception process is therefore a process of subjugation, a subjugation that starts way before, in the reasons that produce first reception. (Giovanni, Lampedusa, wharf, October 2016)

This feeling of powerlessness within the system is a strong theme which prompts different ideas of how first reception should be conducted. Another example is Roberto who has a long and distinguished career with the police and as a result is often assigned delicate tasks. In line with Dario, the other person with a police background cited above, in his narrative he prioritised care of the person. That, he said, is what we should be focusing on, adding that ‘unfortunately’ the emergency culture does not allow this. He insisted that what they need is better preparation, resourcing and planning to have adequate facilities on the wharfs, medical staff and accommodation. But since ‘policy makers insist on treating this as an exceptional activity, a crisis, an emergency – all we can do is operate as though it was an emergency’. But what about security, I asked taking a spin from a previous group discussion, isn’t it true that you are on the alert for terrorists and criminals? Roberto shrugged and with a half a smile told me:

Don’t believe all that you hear. Of course, we will try to catch criminals — we might be able to get information on some smugglers, but the vast majority are and will remain in Tunisia or Libya so we cannot prosecute them. It is even unlikely that we will have enough details to recognise them if they come on the next boat! In the case of violence on board, we investigate, but these are very few instances. And stories of what happens on board, in such situations of tension and stress, do not always amount to criminal behaviour. And terrorists? Ha! There is no way of catching terrorists in this way. What we do, most of what takes place in the name of security, is just a *messa-in-scena*/staged. It is all done for Italians and Europeans to feel safe. I can tell you, that we, the police, know all this. The hardest thing about this job is not that it’s an office job but it’s a fake job. (Roberto, Agrigento, police, March 2016)

Roberto’s account ties a number of issues together. It reminds us of the strength of the fear politics in modern societies, of the power of ‘border spectacles’ and the essential role of the state in constructing and maintaining this situation. Roberto’s plight is not

something that anyone envies. Eighteen months after this conversation I was in Agrigento again and was not surprised to receive the news that Roberto was not working in that department any more.

### **Morality as Power, Resistance in the Search for an Emergent Moral Framework**

These narratives are self-portrayed as a critique of the system and framed in moral terms, but they are not simply the result of the internalisation of a set of contradictory policies — they also denote power and produce power relations. Michael Gilsean, who conducted fieldwork among large landowners in Akkar, north Lebanon, argues that moral narratives signify power relations and produce them. Narratives and violence both stem from and provide the material for narratives, which in turn reproduce the structures within which power is given meaning and retained. Narratives are constituted and constitute knowledge, and knowledge confers power. Territorial borderworkers' narratives produce knowledge which confers power. These narratives shows that territorial borderworkers are asserting themselves in defiance of the humanitarian border as an established system. By extension theirs is an act of defiance against policy-makers and politicians, the designers of the humanitarian border.

Territorial borderworkers present their attempts to 'balance' references to humanitarian and security concerns as radical and critical, but in fact they are merely reproducing the inherent tensions in the humanitarian border and the 'false dichotomy' it portrays. They replicate among others, the 'care and control' approach, the hypocritical presentation of humanitarian interests to cover security ones, the othering and de-humanisation of migrants.

What may be considered radical in this situation is their reference to the 'other', the migrant, as a human being, albeit often a suffering one, by showing elements of compassion or empathy. It commonly manifests itself in an approach that insists that 'we know better, because we meet them', 'we know what it is like, because we see them with our eyes'. This challenges directly those who claim they know but are not 'there', that is not sharing the same space with migrants, not having the opportunity for 'encounter' (in its various ramifications). The overall conflicted narratives shared by territorial borderworkers in confidence, and their actions in practice indicate that this is not a performance of compassion, or plain humanitarian rhetoric. In those situations where encounters take place, the migrant is not referred as a number, as a figure or an abstraction but as a human being. Comments such as 'can you imagine what it is like to see your children drown?', 'I cannot turn the other way when he implores me to wait', 'he cannot answer questions now, he has been through too much', 'poor things (*poveracci*), they went through such hardship and they will have to endure more here in Europe'.

The politics of compassion, however, as Fassin (2012) argues, is a politics of inequality. Indeed by expressing compassion towards the poor and powerless, territorial borderworkers are also consolidating their own privilege in relation to them. Such consolidation of inequality is neither radical nor defiant. But Fassin does not stop there. Even if the politics of compassion is a politics of inequality, insofar as it entails the recognition of the Other, it is also a politics of solidarity (Fassin 2012: 3). This affords us a deeper understanding of the tension and discomfort lived by territorial borderworkers. Territorial borderworkers are afflicted not simply as a result of their encounter and

recognition of the Other in the incoming migrants, but they are simultaneously grappling with the structural politics in which they are located. During their work, territorial borderworkers feel responsible — guilty, ashamed, proud — for the activity they are engaging in, but also for their behaviour towards the migrants since this is often conditioned by the structures in place (outside their control). A classic example is Roberto's comment on the controversial issue of using force to extract fingerprints from migrants, a policy that even the Police Union reacted against (COISP 2016). He repeated over and over again, 'They are not the ones who have to look into the eyes of the people they restrain. And all this for what?' Adding,

'At the end of the day, I thank God that I have my job and my family, but they have nothing. I cannot offer them anything, I also have to protect my family. But its difficult. (Roberto, Agrigento, police, March 2016)

In other words the recognition of the Other is coupled with the recognition of the migrants' powerlessness, their location within the system and by extension their own privilege.

## **Conclusion**

Territorial borderworkers' strategic location within the border system affords them unique insights into the humanitarian border regime. Their narratives, as shown above, are a continuous oscillation, to a rather unexpected degree, between humanitarianism and state securitarianism. Contrary to their self-portrayal, this does not amount to anything radical or revolutionary. Instead, their narratives provide further evidence of how humanitarianism and control, in this case manifested through the 'humanitarian border', have developed as two symbiotic sides of the same coin.

The tensions that can be identified are similar to the ones identified by scholars looking at the concepts of 'contemporary humanitarianism' and the 'humanitarian border'. Foremost is the false idea that humanitarianism is interchangeable with human rights or person-centred approaches. Another false idea is that humanitarianism is a civil society operation, arising from a critique of state authorities' management: but as Cuttitta (2017), for example, has shown through the case study of Mare Nostrum, humanitarianism in the Mediterranean has been largely (re-) appropriated by state power.

Of particular interest is the moral framing of territorial borderworkers' narratives. This can partly be explained by the mere fact that territorial borderworkers, being frontline workers, are directly exposed to migrants. Their narratives show that due to this contact with migrants at a very vulnerable stage, territorial borderworkers find it difficult to indulge in 'moral blindness' (Donskis and Bauman 2013). There are moments when humanity 'creeps up' on territorial borderworkers and they come to recognise that migrants are human beings 'just like them', despite at times, fear, contempt, prejudice and racism (Hall 2010: 894). The close, even if brief, encounter with migrants at their most vulnerable leaves, to some degree or another, an imprint on borderworkers' experience. It is not a given that this translates into humane treatment of migrants, but it nonetheless remains an indication of compassion.

Territorial borderworkers' narratives expose how they try to make sense of a difficult situation and, in particular, justify their role within it. The frustration, evident across the

board, is accompanied by a defensive attitude denoting helplessness. The rapid changes to the Italian system of reception, including changes in terminology that amount to little change on the ground, have certainly contributed to such feelings. And while some discretionary power they hold allows them to tweak aspects of the system (this explains some significant differences between the operations and treatment of migrants in different localities), they are often not given the opportunity to compare or share experiences with others working in the same field in different localities.

Territorial borderworkers are not perceived as a group which can contribute towards the design or reformulation of the system, and therefore they rightly feel that they have little influence on political change. Their isolation and marginalisation, both in the system and territorially, adds to the delusion, frustration and helplessness. Territorial borderworkers invest a lot of time and energy into trying to find a comfortable moral spot from which to operate, but they have not devised an alternative moral framework of reference. They are not in a position to do so due to the politics of the humanitarian border.

## Notes

1. Care has been taken to anonymise all informants and names are fictitious. Gender is left unchanged. Their role within the system is given to as precise a denomination as possible, as well as location of interview or conversation. When either are vague (ex. Sicily instead of Lampedusa, security officer instead of immigration police) this is to protect the anonymity of the interviewees. The quotes used in this article are originally in Italian with a free translation into English.
2. In practice, the hotspot approach has also been applied in other places, like the wharf or other centres, depending on availability of space.
3. Most of the first reception centres are popularly (though not in policy) called 'hotspots'. It is to be noted that there are five hotspots in Italy. For logistical reasons, Italy started employing a diffusion of the hotspot approach. This means that the hotspot approach takes place in other centres which are generally a relocation hub, or a CAS. Migrants being processed under the hotspot approach are not free to leave the centres.
4. Which in effect it is. This is in contrast with Australia and the United States for example.
5. Although this article is based on material collected only from the Italian/Sicilian fieldsites, the larger project also included research on Malta. Malta is also on the Central Mediterranean Route and has the capacity to conduct 'first reception' and process migrants in a similar way. Malta, at the time, was also hosting the vast majority of Search and Rescue NGOs who played an important role in both constructing and contesting the humanitarian border, and are an important stakeholder in 'first reception'. In addition, the author has over fifteen years of research experience on the Central Mediterranean Route.
6. This is the term used by Chris Rumford (2013) to refer to citizens' bordermaking processes and practices in everyday life. Rumford uses 'citizen borderworkers' to refer to all people engaged in such activities within the 'diffused borders approach' within border studies. Territorial borderworkers are therefore just a small group of citizen borderworkers which does not challenge the 'diffused borders approach' but deliberately draws attention back to the territorial border as a necessary epistemological complement to the 'diffused borders approach'.
7. On the pervasive use of hospitality and hospitality-laden language, and its implications in the EU's border regime see DeBono 2019. Plastic hospitality: the empty signifier on the EU's Mediterranean border, *Migration Studies*.

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