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**Article:**

Garelli, G, Scirba, A and Tazzioli, M (2018) Introduction: Mediterranean Movements and the Reconfiguration of the Military-Humanitarian Border in 2015. *Antipode*, 50 (3). pp. 662-672. ISSN 0066-4812

<https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12385>

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**Symposium: Mediterranean Movements: Mobility Struggles, Border Restructuring,  
and the Humanitarian Frontier**

**Organisers: Glenda Garelli, Alessandra Sciarba and Martina Tazzioli**

**Introduction:**

**Mediterranean Movements and the Reconfiguration of the Military-  
Humanitarian Border in 2015**

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Mediterranean, 2015 – Four years after the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings, in the midst of economic crisis, and with increasing war<sup>i</sup> and violence in the region, the Mediterranean Sea is both a site of intensified crossing and rising death rates for migrants and refugees trying to reach Europe. This situation is often described as the “migration crisis in the Mediterranean”. In this symposium we try to push the analysis forward: by looking at the spatial politics that produces this migratory situation, we conceive of the Mediterranean as a borderzone of intertwining crises, i.e. the crisis of displaced populations, the crisis of the policies that govern mobility across European borders, and the Eurozone crisis with its effects on migration.<sup>ii</sup>

Migrant deaths in the Mediterranean are certainly not new.<sup>iii</sup> Since the late 1990s, the Mediterranean Sea has been produced as the only route available for people fleeing across shores—an extremely dangerous route indeed—along which more than 3,500 people were

reported to have died in 2014 alone<sup>iv</sup> and where the chance of dying at sea has recently been estimated to be around 4.5%<sup>v</sup> (Fargues and Di Bartolomeo 2015: 3). Likewise, smuggling networks have been produced as the only, most expensive, and extremely dangerous travel option for migrants and refugees, in a situation in which legalized access to the EU for third-country nationals is severely restricted and in which a migrant must enter the EU in order to claim asylum.<sup>vi</sup>

We insist on the notion of “production” here: the production of such a forced and deadly Mediterranean corridor is rooted in the institutional violence that fixes people in places of abjection or leaves them no other option than resorting to smugglers to travel across the Sea. The “migration crisis” in the Mediterranean is best described as institutional violence resulting from EU border politics, e.g. restrictions on access to the EU for third-country nationals (as per Schengen or asylum regulations), the lack of a policy framework for “safe and granted patterns of arrival” across the Mediterranean (Lampedusa Charter 2014; Sciarba and Furri this issue), and the EU border externalization program and migration containment operations on the southern and eastern shore of the Mediterranean (De Genova et al. 2014; Garelli 2015; Heller and Jones 2014; Baird et al 2015; Tazzioli 2015).

The project of turning the Mediterranean Sea into a pre-frontier to the EU for migrants and refugees has long been envisioned and pursued by the EU as a whole as well as by individual member states. However, in the past few years the Mediterranean border-zone has undergone a radical reconfiguration, leading to the new border struggles and technologies of control around which this symposium revolves.

Let us briefly trace this transition. First, the role of the Mediterranean as part of the larger external EU border has changed. In the 1990s and 2000s, in fact, the Mediterranean was a marginal entry point into the EU, accounting for only about 15% of third-country nationals’ crossing into the EU.<sup>vii</sup> Yet, in the past few years, cross-Mediterranean flows into the EU significantly increased, pushed up by rising violence and turmoil in the Mediterranean region and beyond<sup>viii</sup> (Global Initiative 2014; UNHCR 2015a). It is important to adopt a regional perspective when discussing the scale of the “humanitarian crisis” in the Mediterranean, in order to situate these increased cross-Mediterranean flows. For instance, looking at the Syrian refugee population only: on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean, Turkey received two million Syrian refugees and Lebanon over one million at the time of writing<sup>ix</sup>, while on the northern shore, all European countries together received no more than 350,000 Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2015a, 2015b). Yet, within the landscape of the European borderline, the crossings (or attempted crossings) at the Euro-Med border dramatically increased in the past few years.

With the consolidation of the Mediterranean as this massively pursued route with over one million sea crossings in 2015 (UNHCR 2015c), a new stage of border struggles and

border spectacles (Cuttitta 2012; Sossi 2007) has also entered public debate. The composition of migrant populations crossing the Mediterranean has also changed, adding to the dramatic scene of the so-called “migratory crisis”: no longer a defined group of young, male migrants seeking employment and/or international protection, but rather mixed groups of men and women, entire families, elderly people, children...actual national populations crossing the Mediterranean, fleeing war and violence. In light of this changing composition, the securitarian spectacle of a border violated by criminals invading Europe—the border spectacle which dominated public discourse in the past two decades—could no longer hold. Or, at least, it had to be re-worked somehow through another spectacle, a humanitarian border spectacle of vulnerable populations and migrant-victims: the shipwrecked, the abused, those at risk of death, or actual dead bodies of people forced to flee across the Mediterranean. Moreover, the scene of rescue also took center stage, completing the display of a humanitarian border spectacle with scenes where coast guards, military officials, and even volunteers were enlisted in search and rescue missions, “saving” migrants from rough waters and bringing them to land.

In short, the Mediterranean shifted from being spectacularized as the European border crossed by migrants allegedly invading Europe, to the European frontier haunted by refugees seeking rescue. In governmental terms this shift resulted in a policy impasse. As the Mediterranean frontier has become the entry point for a population of refugees, the EU politics of migration management struggled to restructure in order to manage these migrants’ arrivals, particularly in light of the fact that most of these migrants will likely become a population to stay in the EU (Eurostat 2015),<sup>x</sup> either as recipients of some type of international protection,<sup>xi</sup> as over-stayers of a temporary protection status, or as illegalized presences by status rejection. In short, this is not a migrant population that can be easily targeted for criminalization or deportability (De Genova 2010) processes.

It is in this scenario—and in the context of rising shipwreck rates and an increasingly litigious landscape of reception across European member states<sup>xii</sup>—that the evolution of a “military-humanitarian frontier” in the Mediterranean can be traced.

### **Humanitarianism and the Mediterranean: From Alleviating Suffering, to the Politics of Rescue, to the War on Smuggling**

Before presenting this symposium’s research into the military-humanitarian frontier in the Mediterranean, let us briefly situate humanitarianism as a technology of government.

Humanitarianism is certainly an emerging technology of migration management (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013; Vaughan-Williams 2015; Walters 2011; Williams 2015). Since migration is not an autonomous field of governmental intervention, though, it is important to situate the emergence of a military-humanitarian approach to migration management also in relation to

other fields where humanitarianism is a governmental asset.

Humanitarianism officially became part of governmental rationales at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In that context, and up to World War Two, humanitarianism comprised interventions geared toward the alleviation of human suffering, where the neutrality of the intervening actor was an asset (Barnett 2011; Calhoun 2008; Fassin 2011; Redfield 2012). Starting from the 1970s and especially in the 1990s, a major shift occurred whereby humanitarianism took center stage in developmental politics and became the supporting rationale for economic projects aimed at enhancing capacity building in states and local communities in developing countries (Barnett 2011; Chandler 2001). In this context, humanitarian actors began to play an important political role, which led commentators such as David Chandler (2001) to talk about a “military humanitarianism” in relation to the political implications of the right to intervention asserted by NGO’s like Médecins Sans Frontières.

In the past few years, humanitarianism has become an explicit and persistent flagship of governmental intervention in the context of Mediterranean migration, as rising violence in the region has led to increasing numbers of people fleeing across the Mediterranean Sea, as well as to increasing numbers of shipwrecks and border-deaths. While the Mediterranean Sea has long been the deadliest border in the world (IOM 2014) and Schengen visa policies the triggers of these dangerous crossings on ill-equipped boats, the deployment of military apparatuses with humanitarian tasks is a development of the past few years. The notion of deployment—and a massive deployment indeed—is important here: these military missions are specifically tasked with search and rescue operations. Hence they perform a humanitarian task beyond the standard international regulations that oblige any seafarer to rescue a boat in distress in its vicinity. This military-humanitarian deployment started with the Italian operation “Mare Nostrum”<sup>xiii</sup>, launched in 2013, which consisted of naval and air forces performing search and rescue missions in the central Mediterranean.

“Rescue” in this case meant a military-humanitarian intervention at sea, i.e. intercepting boats in distress, not letting people die, and bringing them to safety on land. The Mare Nostrum operation came to an end in 2014 and was replaced by the border security operation “Triton”, which allegedly also included a humanitarian aspect. The rescue operations that the navy has always carried out in compliance with maritime law became part of a governmental approach whereby military forces are in charge of performing humanitarian actions (Carrera and Den Hertog 2015; Tazzioli 2015). The military-humanitarian technology recently came to the apex when the EU launched a military operation to “destroy” the smuggling industry in the name of protecting migrant lives (for an overview of these different episodes, see the counter-map in Garelli et al. this issue a).

Ultimately, more than representing a transformation of humanitarianism itself, the

politics of rescue performed by Mare Nostrum marked a change in the relationship between militarism and migration management, suggesting a humanitarianization of military interventions and the marginalization of the role of traditional humanitarian actors (NGOs and UN agencies). These actors remained in the background, whilst national military forces and, later on, EU military forces took on a protagonistic role.

The latest evolution of the Mediterranean military-humanitarian frontier is represented by the EU Naval Force's EUNAVFOR MED "Operation Sophia" against migrant smuggling networks in the central Mediterranean, a mission launched with the formal aim to disrupt "the business model of human smuggling and trafficking" while "protecting life at sea". In this capacity, the military-humanitarian approach to migration management results in a blockage of migrants and refugees in transit (Garelli and Tazzioli this issue) and pertains to the larger EU rationale of spatial containment of migrants and refugees.

The military-humanitarian frontier in the Mediterranean has evolved from rescuing migrants at sea to attacking the maritime fleet they use for crossing. This involves the simultaneous military intensification and humanitarian abstraction of this governmental technology: a rescue mission whereby military actors performed the humanitarian task of actively saving lives at sea has escalated into warfare within a humanitarian framework whereby EU military forces are deployed against the entire business of migrant travel across the EU. In other words, a military-humanitarian frontier where the military deployment becomes more specific while the humanitarian framework becomes increasingly diffuse.

Let us be clear on military-humanitarianism. The assemblage between military force and humanitarian ends is nothing new (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010) and certainly military actors have been involved in rescue missions involving migrants in the Mediterranean, in compliance with international regulations. What is happening at the moment, however, differs from this history with respect to the marginal role played by traditional humanitarian actors and with respect to the protagonist role of military forces deployed to manage transnational movements of large groups of people, rescuing and/or blocking them in their attempt to reach Europe.

But what do these evolutions amount to in terms of migration management? What are the specificities and transformations of the humanitarian government of migration and in its articulation in military and security concerns? Should we speak about a militarized humanitarianism or, rather, is it more a question of a humanitarianized militarization of the Mediterranean seascape? These critical questions are rooted in an understanding of technologies for migration control as processes. In other words, there is no military-humanitarian blueprint in the field of migration, nor is there a shared and homogeneous governmental rationale that applies in the same way in different contexts and that deploys the same technologies of control and containment. The collection of articles in this symposium

reflects the protean and manifold set of humanitarian-military practices at play in the Mediterranean these days, amounting to a series of mobile military-humanitarian borders which are put into place for channeling, monitoring, and even blocking migrant movements (Jeandesbodz 2015). By highlighting this heterogeneity in mixing humanitarian and military techniques for managing migration as well as the versatility of these assemblages, we propose to reverse the gaze on migration controls and on the government of mobility and suggest that the constantly evolving border-work—in its securitarian, humanitarian, and military-humanitarian overlapping configurations—is the outcome of the incessant reinvention of strategies of mobility to escape controls (Mezzadra and Neilson 2014; Walters 2015).

Coming back to the significance of the evolution of military-humanitarian technologies in terms of migration management, what seems to characterize these operations is the crafting of a new field of intervention for military and humanitarian forces as well as for migration management, i.e. the emergence of the biopolitical problem of governing transnational populations on the move. The current “migration crisis” and the interventionist moves to govern the migratory emergency in the Mediterranean revolve around the “motley crowds” (Linebaugh and Rediker 2007)—people fleeing in large groups, across national, generational, and gender profiles—whose circulation and movement towards Europe become the target of operations of containment by EU states. In this sense, the humanitarian-military frontier is an instrument to govern the mobility towards Europe (and access to Europe) of the growing crowds of refugees and displaced populations across the Mediterranean.

### **Overview of the Symposium**

The symposium opens with a conversation between Sandro Mezzadra and Toni Negri that focuses on the politics of Mediterranean boundaries, situating migratory movements across the Mediterranean in the geo-political context of the Eastern and Southern shore (Garelli et al. this issue b). Looking at the proliferation of wars in around the Mediterranean region and reflecting on the legacy of the Arab Uprisings, Mezzadra and Negri revisit the concept of the “autonomy of migration” and critically interrogate its possible contributions to the field of migration and in terms of the current “refugee crisis”.

Paolo Cuttitta’s contribution focuses on the military-humanitarian operation *Mare Nostrum* as a lens into what he calls the “humanitarianized European migration regime” (Cuttitta this issue). Cuttitta, reflecting on the relationship between humanitarianism and human rights, and building on the work of Didier Fassin and Miriam Ticktin, contends that a normative framework for humanitarian inclusion may in fact contribute to enforcing their rights despite being based on migrants’ victimization. The key question, Cuttitta argues, is not so much whether human rights are part of humanitarianism or not, but rather which understanding of humanitarianism is dominant and which human rights are invoked and

enforced under a humanitarian framework.

In “Human Rights Beyond Humanitarianism”, Alessandra Scieurba and Filippo Furri explore the historical entanglement between human rights and humanitarianism, map the inadequacy of the European regulation of migration and asylum in light of the current developments in the Mediterranean area, and rethink the analytical and interpretative categories that underpin the right to asylum. Looking at the policies and rhetoric of the current humanitarian regime, they contend that a clear distinction between human rights and humanitarian regimes is urgently needed and posit that human rights are a complex, articulated, bi-univocal, and open system that go beyond its humanitarian instrumentalization. To support this argument Scieurba and Furri illustrate the case of the Charter of Lampedusa, a radically alternative normative instrument on migration and asylum issues, which resulted from a constituent grassroots process involving activists and migrant-rights associations between 2013 and 2014.

Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli engage with the first military operation of migration management that the EU launched in 2015, EUNAVFOR MED “Operation Sophia”, which targets the smuggling and trafficking of people from Libya to the EU. Looking at the operation from different angles—its logistics, the subjectivity it posits as a target of intervention, its epistemological terrain of operation, and its geopolitical outcomes in the region—Garelli and Tazzioli illuminate the productivity and transformations of this military-humanitarian juncture of the “Mediterranean crisis” and clarify the politics of migration at play within it, its humanitarian economy as well as its border violence.

The conversation between Imed Soltani and Federica Sossi revolves around the campaign for missing Tunisian migrants, “From One Shore to the Other: Lives that Matter”, which was started in 2011 in order to demand that Italian and Tunisian institutions be held accountable for the disappearance of young Tunisian migrants who crossed the Mediterranean into Italy (Tazzioli this issue). The campaign brought together the families of Tunisian migrants and the Italian feminist collective “Le Venticinqueundici” as part of a migration struggle that involves the entire region but is rarely taken up as a cross-shore, militant campaign. The conversation between Soltani and Sossi illustrates the strengths of the campaign, the difficulties that arose in running it across shores, and offers a theoretical reflection on the notion of political recognition in an effort to decolonize the gaze on what counts as political subjectivity and political struggle.

Maurice Stierl’s article focuses on three non-state interventions in the context of border-deaths in the Mediterranean of migrant mobility: the Migrant Offshore Aid Station, Médecins Sans Frontières, and Sea-Watch. Stierl (this issue) illustrates how these operations, while sharing the aim of alleviating the suffering of migrants and performing or supporting rescue operations, actually conceive the politics of their interventions in radically different

ways. By studying how these actors conceive of their humanitarian practices, the subjects of sea-migration, and Europe's role in shaping borderzones, Striel argues for a radical critique of contemporary migration governance that, while working within the wide spectrum of humanitarianism, would break its selective focus and work toward a "politics of connectivity".

Barbara Pinelli's contribution focuses on the workings of humanitarian borders after rescue at sea and on the mainland, directing analytical attention to the government of migrants and refugees after the moment of landing, and contending that migrants are the objects of constant monitoring and abandonment while at the same time having access to humanitarian procedures on land. This double move of both not letting people die and blocking them in place is the result of asylum policies and administrative procedures, Pinelli (this issue) contends, focusing on the Dublin III regulations in particular. The paper reflects on the various forms of institutional violence refugees are subjected to once in Italy and documents their struggles and survival strategies.

The conversation between Étienne Balibar and Nicholas De Genova engages with the Mediterranean of migration as a multifaceted, productive, and contested viewpoint, which can represent a counterpoint to a deep-rooted Eurocentric imaginary (Garelli et al. this issue c). Looking at the Mediterranean as a space produced by the mobility of bodies crossing it and a combination of different struggles, Balibar and De Genova comment on some of the political movements that have taken center stage in the Mediterranean region in the past few years and suggest that the most important challenge today is the mobilization of a "Mediterranean point of view" whereby the political borders of Europe and its self-centered referentiality could be challenged.

The symposium closes with a counter-mapping project that aims to document the military-humanitarian frontier in the region by illustrating the areas of intervention of different rescue and enforcement operations launched in the central Mediterranean Sea, i.e. the Italian Navy's Mare Nostrum search and rescue mission, the EU border agency Frontex's "Triton" enforcement operation, the humanitarian interventions of commercial vessels, and the action of civil-society rescue vessels such as those operated by Doctors Without Borders (Garelli et al. this issue a). The project offers a spatial understanding of the Mediterranean border-scape, the practices of rescue and enforcement that occur within it, and the risk of sea-crossing at this particular moment. Through these maps, the central Mediterranean Sea emerges as a striking laboratory from which novel legal arrangements, surveillance technologies, and institutional assemblages converge.

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i

As stated in a recent report “war is one of the main reasons of the migration process” (Global Initiative 2014).

ii

According to a recent OECD (2014) report, following a steady trend that has been recorded since 2008, the entry of non-EU migrants in the EU has decreased by 12%. This reduction is mainly related to the southern European countries, with Spain and Italy in the lead (in 2012 entries to Spain reduced by 22%; to Italy by 19%), but also to the UK (in 2012 entries were down by 11% to under 300,000 people, the lowest figure since 2003).

iii

The topic has recently been at the center of a growing engagement on the part of a wide array of epistemic communities, e.g. from IOM (2014) to the New York Times. Yet, activists have

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denounced the production of the Mediterranean as an open air cemetery for many years now—see, for instance, Gabriele Del Grande’s “Fortress Europe” blog (<http://fortresseurope.blogspot.co.uk>).

iv

Data on Mediterranean border-deaths are underestimates based on reported deaths only.

v The estimate refers to the first four months of 2015.

vi

Quota for the resettlement of UNHCR-recognized refugees from their country of origin or transit into Europe are extremely low, practically linking the possibility to deposit an asylum claim to presence in a European country.

vii

Official data about migrants’ arrival in Italy via the Mediterranean Sea confirm this trend (see Ministero dell’Interno 2005: 41-44).

viii

The Mediterranean Sea is the corridor into Europe for migrants and refugees fleeing from the Middle East and North Africa but who often originate from countries that are further away from the Mediterranean shoreline, e.g. Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, Sudan, Nigeria, etc.

ix At the time of revising this paper for publication UNHCR date reports over 5 millions Syrian refugees in the MENA region (e.g., 3 millions Syrian refugees in Turkey, over 1 million in Lebanon, over 650,000 in Jordan) and less than 1 million in the entire European region (UNHCR 2017).

x

The year 2015 marked a peak in asylum applications: the second quarter of 2015, for instance, was characterized by an 80% increase in the number of asylum claims filed, compared to the same time-frame in the previous year, with 213,200 applications (Eurostat 2015).

xi

European protection frameworks for migrants include refugee status, based (after the 1951 Geneva Convention) on a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership of a particular social group”, and subsidiary protection for people who are not qualified as refugees on the basis of an individual persecution but who would (after Directive 2011/95/EU) “face a real risk of suffering serious harm” if returned to their country of origin or residence.

xii

In September 2015 EU Ministers agreed to the “Commission’s proposal to relocate 120,000 people in clear need of international protection during the next two years” (European Commission 2015). This result—which is modest, if compared to the numbers of refugees hosted in countries like Turkey or Jordan—has been presented as an important progress within the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). During the same period, EU member states like Hungary and Greece implemented violent anti-immigration policies and enlisted police interventions to enforce them.

xiii

Mare Nostrum is the Italian “military-humanitarian” operation launched by the Italian Navy in 2013 to rescue migrants at sea whose boats were in distress. For an overview on the operation, see the counter-map in Garelli et al. (this issue a).