

Migration Across the Mediterranean: When Will Europe See That Too Many People Have Died?

Monday, 09 December 2013 09:39 By [Hrvoje Simicevic](#), [Truthout](#) | Interview

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An aerial view of the island nation of Malta, Aug. 21, 2012. Malta has the highest ratio of immigrants per capita of any European Union member, but it lacks the resources to house them and cannot let them move off the island. (Photo: Gianni Cipriano / The New York Times)

The Mediterranean has been described by Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat as a "graveyard" as migrants from Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, seek to cross over to Europe to flee various hardships partly attributed to the legacies of Eurocentric colonial and neocolonial politics. It is estimated that over the last two decades, around 20,000 people drowned while being smuggled over. The European Union, through its "fortress" politics, centering around the notion of "security," has much to answer for in this continuous human tragedy. Maltese scholar Peter Mayo, author of, among many

other books, The Politics of Indignation (Zero Books, 2012), discusses these and related issues in an interview with Croatian journalist Hrvoje Šimičević.

Hroje Simicevic: What is the current situation regarding the immigrant/refugee issue in Malta?

Peter Mayo: Malta is witnessing an influx of immigrants mainly from sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, including the Middle East (the third highest group of arrivals were Syrians this year) with tragic consequences. While many make it to our shores and others are rescued off our shores, a number drown in the process of crossing over from North Africa in rickety boats, which are often overcrowded. They are all placed in detention on arrival as they await decisions as to whether they have been accepted or rejected as refugees. This takes a very long time - with a maximum of 18 months - and the conditions inside some of these centers have been described by observers as appalling.

HS: How do you comment on a statement of your prime minister, Joseph Muscat: "We've been left alone. We need a coherent EU policy. Empty talk on solidarity is not enough"?

PM: As a frontier island and country, Malta faces an influx of immigrants, who, according to the Dublin II Regulation, are to have their asylum-seeking application evaluated by the state through which they first entered the EU. They are therefore forced to remain on this very small island state where they originally disembarked. Malta is a densely populated island and requires "responsibility sharing" (the Maltese government uses the term "burden" sharing) with its fellow EU members. This has, for the most part, not been forthcoming. The EU's fortress policy with respect to denial of visas and travel opportunities is compelling immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, and more lately, from Egypt and Syria fleeing the situations in their countries to pursue some of the most hazardous routes to get to Europe. Parallels with the Mexico-USA border situation are invited.

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While people from South and Central America use sewers to cross over to the USA, people from Africa are risking their lives by selling all their possessions to make the journey, in the case of SSA migrants, across the Sahara to Libya and then be crossed over by unscrupulous "coyotes" - who apparently do not care a toss about human lives. And in both cases, immigrants are fleeing an unjust colonial /neocolonial system and structural legacy mainly of the USA's and Europe's own making (and now China has got in on the act big time!). It is a case of the Empire striking back - certainly not on level terms, given the sub-alterneity and vulnerability of those involved: The vast majority are asylum seekers in need of protection (over 80 percent of arrivals in 2013 were granted a form of protection).

Moreover, the North-South structural imbalances, which are a feature of a perennially colonial capitalist system predicated on uneven levels of development, lead to the shifting of populations in the South. It is a common feature of European imperial politics that persist: Southern and oppressed populations can be moved at will to suit imperial interests. It happened with Africans during the period of slavery and the slave trade; with Palestinians with the 1948 Nakba and later; it happened, for example, with Puerto Ricans during "operation bootstrap"; and continued to happen throughout modern history . . . it happens with people from sub-Saharan and North Africa today. This is standard European imperialist policy. The interests today are many, including primarily the ready availability of an underpaid and grossly exploited reserve or alternative army of labor to accommodate western imperial capitalist interests - depressing local wages and therefore labor costs. Europe has a lot to answer for this, but has remained passive, despite its moral obligations, while tragedies continue to occur at sea and elsewhere, not least when crossing Africa itself, as different forms of smuggling mafias emerge on both sides of the Europe-Africa divide. The Guardian [reported](#) on October 3, that over 20,000 people died during the last 20 years, trying to cross from Africa to Southern Europe.

Yes, how many deaths will it take for an ostensibly oblivious and fortified Europe to know that too many people have died (due apologies to Bob Dylan)?

HS: What do the citizens of Malta say about immigrants and refugees? What about political parties?

PM: The funny thing about Joseph Muscat and his one-time socialist party is that they have done nothing over the years to broaden the meaning of international as opposed to national solidarity, since "socialism," the appropriate word in this context, has become passé in today's Labor discourse.

No attempt was made over the years to raise consciousness in the rank and file regarding the pitfalls of racism and a comprehensively inclusive, including gender inclusive, notion of workers' solidarity. The term "working class" has also become passé despite the presence of whole swathes of societies worldwide suffering from precarious living conditions rendering many sectors *déclassé*. With many members of what I would call the new working class (including those *déclassé* sectors) feeling vulnerable in this age of constant layoffs, and downsizing and economic meltdowns it is likely that they misguidedly pursue the route of xenophobia and racism.

It is not surprising to see racism toward people of color and Arabs being rife in this country. The swing to the right is symptomatic of many countries worldwide, including larger ones in the context of increasing immigrant labor, including the *gastarbeiter* (guest worker). It would be writ large in small countries such as Malta, with a small land mass and around 400,000 inhabitants. And once again, mainstream political parties do nothing to confront the situation through educational means for fear of losing electoral votes.

HS: On the other hand, we are witnessing the present rightist discourse of the "foreigners who will take our jobs" and parties that built their identity and

electoral success on fear of foreigners. How dangerous is this phenomenon in Europe, given the voting trends in Greece and France (and the recent success of Marine La Pen in local elections)?

PM: The criminalization of immigrants serves to fan the flames of racism and xenophobia. The marginalization of immigrants with no access to citizenship rights and social benefits, especially rejected asylum seekers, leads them to eke out a living at the very margins of society, in the "underworld" if need be. This furthers the construction of irregular migrants as given to criminality, promiscuity etc. rather than being victims of a systemic oppressive and ultimately racist structure that encourages abuse of their vulnerability.

In the case of one specific country, Malta, the number of SSA migrants in the country is considerably smaller than that of other non-EU residents whose presence does not lead to similar exaggerated reactions in the media, which often take the form of a potential Armageddon. As for jobs, Maria Pisani reminds us, in one of the papers, the Minister on education, youth and employment stated in 2007 that there is a shortage of labor supply because certain jobs are unattractive to Maltese workers and therefore labor needs to be imported. And it is in these kind of jobs, which Maltese do not want to carry out, that many migrants from SSA are employed. If anything, as stated earlier, the target of any anger, where vulnerable working-class employees are concerned, should be those unscrupulous employers who prey on a destitute "reserve army" to considerably cut down labor costs. If one goes by hearsay, they often completely do away with these costs, at best paying the migrant a pittance.

But unless these aspects of the migration issue are tackled systematically and backed by robust research by those whose historical function was that of leading the working class through a sustained process of an inclusive workers' education program spanning different media and settings, we are more likely to see a swing toward the right. And by this, I mean not only the emergence of right-wing parties, but also former leftist parties veering towards right of centre.

HS: How do you comment on the fact that the issue of refugees and migrants is predominantly mentioned in the context of "security" and not human rights? This is also evident from the very institutional framework within the EU (such as the agency Frontex), and in policies of most of European countries, since they are further militarizing borders and criminalizing undocumented immigrants.

PM: Indeed, the dominant discourse centers around "security" on the grounds of the threat of international terrorism rather than foregrounding a person's right to seek asylum and protection, especially in cases where her or his existence is very much in jeopardy as a result of the many causes I outlined above and others. The enforcing of such boundaries in what is a "fortress," emblematically captured by the visible physical fortifications surrounding entrance by sea to the two natural Maltese harbors (erected in the 17th century to ward off any attack by the Ottomans), has led to the discarding of the human

rights of people outside these borders and rendering their lives disposable and expendable.

In the majority of cases, we have bona fide breathing human subjects being criminalized for sins not of their making - sins for which Europe itself has a lot to answer. All this attests to the legacies of colonialism in Africa and the Middle East and the Western powers' collusion in the creation of situations characterized by the presence of client tyrannical regimes, not least through the supply of arms by a western-driven arms industry, and, in one specific case, a direct colonial/apartheid regime.

HS: What do you think about refugee/"illegal immigrant" policies of rich European countries, especially Germany?

PM: Once more I refer to what Maria Pisani writes in some of [her papers](#). She points out that "illegal immigrant" is a nonexistent term in international law. It is bandied about by politicians to justify "illegal legalities," that is to say, the trampling over human rights, basic ones at that. It has unfortunately become part of the popular doxa. She reminds us of the 1951 Geneva Convention that recognizes a person's right to asylum and which allows for possible instances of "irregularity" in recognition of situations that lead to "forced migration." Once again, these policies should be international since we are dealing with international, global phenomena and should therefore not be allowed to be guided by the selfish interest of political and economic powerhouses in Europe and beyond.

HS: After recent tragedies in the Mediterranean Sea, the editor of *Suddeutsche Zeitung* wrote that the "mass death before Lampedusa is part of the EU refugee policy; it belongs to the deterrence strategy" and that "the outer limits of the Nobel Peace Prize have been made so thick that there is no way through for humanity." Do you agree with this?

PM: Actually, I can do no better than quote what a local lawyer and activist with regard to immigrant rights, Neil Falzon, said in a recent newspaper interview in [Malta Today](#). He highlighted that there are no legal means that allow "bona fide asylum seekers" to make it to Europe without placing their lives in jeopardy. He points out that flying is out of the question since no visa would be made available by any European country. He suggested the idea of humanitarian visas in this context so that people can safely exercise their right to seek asylum. This is a global situation that requires an international solution and not individual country solutions, as colleague and good friend Maria Pisani argues in a number of papers she published on the issue!

HS: Recently we have been witnessing mass protests in Italy and France over immigrant issues, among other things. Can you comment on these events, and do they have potential to sensitize European citizens toward the plight of refugees and immigrants?

PM: Anybody with a modicum of human compassion and who values human life dearly should be outraged by the events occurring at Europe's doorstep. Protesting is the least one can do in these circumstances, which call for a proactive politics of indignation targeted at something of which this human migrant tragedy is symptomatic - the current politics of human disposability. It was Zygmunt Bauman who used the term "the human waste disposal industry" in a book concerning *The Globalization of Racism* (Panagiota Gounari and Donaldo Macedo eds., Paradigm 2006). This is what this situation regarding the hazardous shifting of southern populations represents. So I am not surprised by these protests.

Hopefully, these protests will highlight the continent's shameful past with regard to treatment of ethnic minorities and sensitize other Europeans to the danger of seeing complex global imperialist issues in myopic nationalistic and mono-cultural terms. Hopefully it would sensitize other Europeans to the complex set of factors that compel people to leave the contexts in which they are rooted, and possibly love dearly, to seek a different life abroad. The reasons for doing this are many, but I would mention some here: civil wars fueled by a Western-based arms industry and exacerbation of tribal conflicts often resulting in rape and being disowned by family; the attempt among women to avoid female genital mutilation; evading religious fundamentalism; the negative effects on African farming of subsidies provided to farmers in other continents; the negative effects of climate change; an impoverished environment (the ransacking of Africa); and a colonial ideology which presents the West as the Eldorado and a context for the "good life," structural adjustment programs, the quest for better employment opportunities . . . and one can go on, perhaps falling prey to western stereotypes and constructions of "Africa."

There is however one major global reason, namely the quest for low-cost labor by corporations and other businesses alike that serves as a "push-and-pull factor." As David Bacon argues (see *Illegal People. How Globalization creates Migration and Criminalizes Immigrants*, Beacon Press, 2008), hegemonic globalization necessitates migration, but it is the same victims of this process who are rendered "illegal" and criminalized as a result, often victims of the "carceral state." By carceral state, I mean the state that punishes as part of its function in dealing with the excesses of hegemonic globalization, that is neoliberal capitalist-driven globalization or "globalization from above." Detention centers such as those decried by international and local observers over here and Fabrizio Gatti in Lampedusa are institutions that reflect the presence of a carceral state, to borrow Henry A. Giroux's term.

HS: So you think that the current and dominant economic/political system is also to blame for deaths of many thousands in the Mediterranean Sea in the last 10 years?

PM: Neoliberal politics with their structural adjustment programs in Africa and other parts of the "majority world" have exacerbated the disparities between South and North. Colonialism has not gone away, but has taken different forms, aspects of which were highlighted when I outlined some of the many reasons why people flee their country. And as also underlined earlier, framing the whole discourse of migration within the context of

"security" and the need to provide secure borders, as part of the war on terror and the threat to some kind of "national culture" and lifestyle, makes the right to asylum and mobility (ironically that same right exercised and encouraged within the EU and by globalization itself) difficult to exercise in a safe and straightforward manner. This manner applies only to the mobility of goods... and goods from certain countries. Ask Palestinians seeking to transfer goods from one part of Palestine to another? It does not apply to all people. Some are allowed to be, relatively speaking, more freely and comfortably mobile than others in the same way that some are allowed to live while others are simply rendered disposable. In my view, this is all part of a racist imperialist mindset which still lies at the heart of the, as you put it, "current and dominant economic/political system." There is recent talk about providing the right conditions for "investment" (there's the magic word) in Africa not to compel people to move elsewhere. I can only greet this idea with a smirk on my face. First we ravage a continent and drain it of its resources and now we attempt to resuscitate it - a tall order, don't you think? Also, I am very suspicious of any proposal which has containment as its underlying feature. In fact, I detect racist overtones in this idea, namely that Africans are to remain in Africa and do not belong elsewhere.

Peter Mayo: I am indebted to Dr Maria Pisani, Lecturer in Youth and community Studies and founding director of the Maltese NGO, Integra Foundation, for helping me with the finer details on policy matters. Also indebted to Michael Grech, friend, social activist and lecturer at the University of Malta's Junior College, for some comments on an earlier draft.

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