

## REVIEWS

### Books and other publications

**Peter G. Xuereb (ed.). *Migration and Asylum in Malta and the European Union: Rights and Realities*. Malta: Malta University Press, ISBN 978-99909-45-65-2, 2012, 340 pages.**

Maltese Prime Minister, Joseph Muscat, is on record as having described the Mediterranean as a 'graveyard.' This captures the tragedy surrounding the subject of this book as migrants from Africa, especially Sub-Saharan Africa, but more recently also including people from the MENA<sup>1</sup> area, attempt to cross over to Europe to flee various hardships partly attributed to the legacies of Eurocentric colonial and neocolonial politics. Tragedies lead to further tragedies as this book indicates. Thousands of people lose their life when making the journey through deserts and across the sea in what is a desperate attempt to live a decent life. It is estimated that, during the last two decades, around 20,000 people drowned when being smuggled over. The European Union, through its 'fortress' politics, centering on the notion of 'security', is the target of current protests regarding this human tragedy.

This volume, put together by University of Malta Law professor, Peter G. Xuereb, covers the issue of migration and asylum in Malta from a variety of

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<sup>1</sup> Middle East and North Africa

angles. The sixteen chapters, including Xuereb's editorial introduction in which he discusses some of the finer legal points and provides summaries of the various papers, are well researched, some more than others. The tone throughout is very much restrained, as one has come to expect from conventional academic discussions, with some papers marked by 'legalese'. Given the tragedy that has been unfolding for years, I would have expected to come across a tone of anger attesting to the authors' indignation with respect to the great carnage continuing to unfold before us. Meanwhile, political intransigence, with a greater concern for issues of 'security' rather than the loss of precious human lives, seems to have gripped the 'fortified entity' that is the European Union.

There are exceptions of course. Maria Pisani writes passionately about the plight of immigrants especially rejected sub-Saharan female asylum seekers and demonstrates close sociological cognizance of and engagement with the kind of scenario these women face as a result of their vulnerability exacerbated by their rejection. She points out that 'illegal immigrant' is a non-existent 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 (a person's right to asylum). It has unfortunately become part of the popular *doxa*. She reminds us of the 1951 Geneva Convention that recognizes this specific human right, and which allows for possible instances of 'irregularity' in recognition of situations that lead to 'forced migration.' This point is made by other authors in this volume.

One other point stressed by Pisani and echoed by others - Rizzo, Suban and Debono – concerns jobs. She pours scorn on the inane statement that ‘these migrants take our jobs’ reminding the reader that, in 2007, the then Maltese Minister of Education, Youth and Employment stated that there is a shortage of labour supply because certain jobs are unattractive to Maltese workers and therefore labour 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, I would argue that the target of any anger, where vulnerable working class employees are concerned, should be those unscrupulous employees who prey on a destitute ‘reserve army’ to considerably cut down labour costs.

The suffering continues among the survivors of the hazardous voyage. They have to put up with appalling conditions as they face mandatory detention, conditions which, as many of the authors indicate, have been denounced by both Maltese and international observers.

Isabelle Calleja Ragonesi highlights the issues and prejudices affecting immigrants’ chances to integrate, also discussing in the process the strong connection between integration and employment. The model which seems to apply to Malta is a very selective, differential and exclusionary one. Others such as Daniela Debono shed light on the form which racism and xenophobia take in Malta, indicating the double standards involved, as people often cling to a view of culture couched in monolithic terms. Paul Pace,

drawing on a series of reports, many commissioned by the Jesuit Refugee Service, also sheds light on the traumas faced by migrants some of whom would have lost friends and family on the way and then are detained in places where privacy is denied and where one's health, physical and mental, continues to be jeopardised.

These situations are rendered more desperate by the failure of Malta's fellow EU partners to assist in responsibility sharing. This micro-island state (population circa 400, 000) is left to cope with the disproportionate demands (in relation to size and population density) placed on it as first port of call for migrants who cross over from North Africa with a view to reaching Italy or other places in Europe. Alison Gatt calls for a comprehensive responsibility-sharing mechanism among the EU member states in general. This is a global situation which requires international and not national solutions, a point underlined in several chapters. Possible solutions include, as indicated in a newspaper interview by a Maltese lawyer-activist (Neil Falzon), issuing international humanitarian visas to ensure that people can safely exercise their right to asylum.

Constant reference is made, throughout the various chapters, to the Dublin II Regulation according to which immigrants are to have their asylum seeking application evaluated by the state through which they first entered the EU –hence the pressure on Malta, a frontier country with respect to North Africa. Patricia Mallia asks the pertinent question regarding the EU and its 'Fortress Europe' politics: Where is the much spoken of (in EU discourse) 'solidarity'?

It is impossible in such a restricted space to do justice to all the book's sixteen chapters. One chapter worth mentioning, however, is that penned by Derek Lutterbeck. It certainly captures a sense of the tragedy surrounding what I would call, following Zygmunt Bauman, 'the human waste disposal industry.' He traces, through many interviews with Somali immigrants, the various steps in their journey from Mogadishu to Malta via the Sahara, Libya and the Mediterranean. These are vivid accounts of not only the hazards encountered when crossing the desert and rough seas in rickety boats but also the callousness of people along the way. Included here are people, either acting alone or through smuggling organisations, on both sides of the North-South Mediterranean divide, who traffic in human misery, hardly caring a toss for the sanctity of human life.

What I found missing, viewing the book from this journal's perspective, is a systematic postcolonial take on a situation that, as some of the authors rightly point out, has the legacy of colonialism at its core.

As with the US-Mexico border, the immigrants discussed in this book are, for the most part, fleeing an unjust colonial /neocolonial system and structural legacy which is mainly of the Western powers' own making. This represents yet another case of the Empire striking back, though certainly not on level terms given the subalternity and vulnerability of those involved; the vast majority are asylum seekers in need of protection (over 80 % of arrivals in Malta 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 which persists till the present day: 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 during the 1948 'Nakba' and later with Puerto Ricans during 'operation bootstrap.' It continued to happen throughout modern history. It certainly 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 labour to accommodate western imperial capitalist interests; these include depressing local wages and therefore labour costs. Europe has a lot to answer for this state of affairs but has hitherto remained passive, despite its moral obligations, while human tragedies continue to occur on land and at sea.

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