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Beyond Emergency.
The Roots of Dangerous Mediterranean
Routes towards Italy


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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The centrality of anti-immigration parties and beliefs in the Italian political landscape incites a reflection on the influence of Mediterranean migration in the Italian public sphere. Indeed, no sector in Italy has been left untouched by this migration 'problem,' from politics to literature. In eight years, this topic of immigration went from being one of many issues within Italian political debates, to becoming its most central question and shaping political identities. In other words, lacking clear elements of political differentiation between political parties, immigration has acted as a factor to distinguish diverging political orientations. While there is little to no public reflection on the concept of '*migrazione*' (migration) and how it is used in the public sphere, I posit that the decisive factor in migration's centrality as a topic stems from the way in which migration is presented and depicted, rather than from its everyday unfolding. The way in which migration is addressed in the public arena depends on the ease with which it is tied and interconnected with other political issues, for example, diplomatic relations between Italy and the European Union, or Italian economic and domestic security policies. Furthermore, migration is never just '*migrazione*,' but always '*emergenza migratoria*' (migration emergency), or '*crisi migratoria*' (migration crises), and it is this sense of urgency and immediacy that contributes to consolidating the issue of migration as an absolute political priority. American sociologist Craig Calhoun frames emergency as a cultural construct, a key to read what is happening in different contexts. Following Calhoun's argument, this paper offers a re-examination of recent Mediterranean migration events which goes beyond this notion of 'emergency,' and presents alternative ways to grasp developments in the Channel of Sicily's recent history.¹

The depiction of migration in terms of 'emergency' goes back to 2010 when Italians feared that the events unleashed by the Arab Spring—the Tunisian revolution and the outbreak of the Libyan civil war in particular—would have caused an epochal exodus. However, while revolutions and wars in North Africa and the Middle East did determine a sharp increase of asylum seekers coming from Libya through the Central Mediterranean passage after 2011,² what made the situation into an 'emergency' was not so much the high numbers of migrants, but rather how these migrants arrived in Italy. It was reported that, between 2014 and 2016, more than 500,000 people crossed the Central Mediterranean, many on makeshift boats, which caused almost 11,000 people to lose their lives during the crossing.³ This tremendous tragedy, which has turned the Mediterranean into the 'migrants graveyard,' rarely leaves room for reasoned and objective analysis. For instance, we rarely pay attention to the countries of origin and nationalities of people who risk their lives to cross the Mediterranean and yet, these are fundamental starting points to go beyond superficial representations of the migration phenomenon. A closer look at the ethnic and national composition of migration flows shows a significant degree of fluidity, highlighting the vast range of political and social questions which lie behind the continuation of irregular Mediterranean migration. For example, in 2014 the largest group of Mediterranean migrants consisted of Syrian refugees, whereas in following years this balance shifted with the growth of migrant populations coming from Sub-Saharan countries like Eritrea and Nigeria, or from the Maghreb region, like Tunisia.

The aforementioned national origins of many asylum seekers provided the ground for the Italian extreme-right to claim the illegitimacy of those migrants, whom they did not consider 'refugees' fleeing persecution and wars, but '*migranti economici*' (economic migrants) not entitled to any relief or humanitarian aid. Even though these right-wing ideologists and commentators never explained their understanding of a 'real refugee,' or why an 'economic migrant' should deserve public contempt, *la Lega* – the strongest right-wing party in Italy – was extremely successful in riding this wave of anti-immigration sentiments. The party increased its votes from 12% in 2010 to 34% in 2019, to more than a third of Italian voters. In just a few years, *la Lega* went from being a regionalist player on the verge of dissolution, to a nationalist party aspiring to lead Italy, by exploiting the coexistence of economic crises and the increase of Mediterranean migration flows to promote its political agenda. After the 2018 elections and *la Lega's* alliance with the



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'Movimento 5 Stelle' (5 Star Movement),⁴ party leader Matteo Salvini used his position as Minister of the Interior to further his anti-immigration rhetoric, directing the Italian public opinion on stopping irregular migration through the Channel of Sicily. Salvini's hammering of anti-immigration propaganda tied the concepts of '*migrazione*' with Mediterranean flows, and '*migranti*' with African immigrants, in turn promoting misguided ideas not only about Italian immigration as a whole, but also about the fundamental specificities of Mediterranean migration. In this narrative, the 'emergency' was not the numerous deaths of migrants at sea, but rather the migrants' impending invasion of Italy. In addition, by denouncing NGOs operating in the Channel of Sicily –accusing them of doing business with human traffickers– Salvini was able to order a complete shutdown of Italian ports for boats carrying irregular migrants. In many instances, this policy materialised into dramatic situations in which Italian authorities refused to allow migrant boats to dock for weeks, forcing distressed and sick migrants to stay on rescue ships not adapted to the transport of high numbers of people. Salvini's hardline significantly reduced the number of irregular migrants undertaking the dangerous journey in the Channel of Sicily, but the figure of migrant deaths at sea did not show a similar decrease. In the years of peak migration in the Mediterranean, there was a ratio of one death for every forty migrants, this proportion doubled in 2018.⁵

Parallel to the assertion of a securitarian narrative was the creation of a Mediterranean humanitarian discourse. While the presence of some forms of humanitarian action in the region dates back to the early 2000s, it was only in 2013 that the central Mediterranean region really began to be understood as a humanitarian space.⁶ This re-invention of the Mediterranean was put forward by three actors: the Italian authorities, international organisations, and NGOs. One example of this was Mare Nostrum, the largest search and rescue operation ever conceived in the Channel of Sicily. Launched in 2013 by the Italian government of Enrico Letta, the goal of this operation was to respond to the increase of Mediterranean migration flows following the Arab Spring. Mare Nostrum's dramatic enlargement of rescue missions in the region included the Sicilian Channel and went as far as Northern African shores. This enlargement contributed to scaling up both the legitimacy of humanitarian action and irregular migration. Indeed, while organizations like IOM showed enthusiasm over Mare Nostrum and claimed that it did not represent a pull-factor for further migration, it is hardly deniable that the broadening of its search and rescue activities did interplay with irregular migration.⁷ Hence, because of the rise of a securitarian discourse in Italian politics combined with Mare Nostrum's unpopularity in the public opinion, a new role for humanitarian NGOs emerged. In 2014, when Mare Nostrum was shut down by the Italian government to make way for the less ambitious operations of Frontex, other humanitarian actors began to intervene more directly in the Central Mediterranean.⁸ NGOs like Migrant offshore Aid station (MoAs), Médecins sans Frontières, Seawatch, Watch the Med, and SOS Méditerranée set up their own search and rescue activities in the Mediterranean in an attempt to continue Mare Nostrum's original operation. This context helps explain why in the past few years, the growing role of humanitarian actors in conjunction with the popularity of securitarian positions among Italian voters, renewed strong tension over irregular migration and the Mediterranean question in Italy. Both the securitarian approach of Italian right-wing parties, and the humanitarian stance of NGOs and international organisations, contributed to framing the issue of irregular migration in terms of 'emergency,' even after the number of migrants crossing the Mediterranean began to decrease. While apparently opposed, these two narratives converged to make a major point: migration in this central area of the Mediterranean should be understood as a distortion, a temporary anomaly that must be fixed.

After eight years of endless 'crises,' the Italian public debate continues to revolve around questions of legitimacy and the role of humanitarian action in the Mediterranean, while the underlying reasons that turned irregular migration into a structural emergency remain overlooked. How is it possible that one of the most important migration corridors between North Africa and Europe consists mostly of highly dangerous routes and requires the constant mediation of humanitarian actors? An answer to this question requires taking a step back chronologically. While the phenomenon of irregular Mediterranean migration only made European headlines in the 2010s, the developments of these routes in the Channel of Sicily find their roots in the construction of a 'European Fortress' in the 1980s, when European governments decided that a shared stance on immigration policy would be more effective than a cacophony of national legislations.⁹ In fact, the use of different restrictive migration policies had developed side effects, including the opening of *back doors*, irregular paths to migration meant to replace traditional systems. At the same time, the sudden compression of established migration systems between European countries and countries of origin resulted in a reorganisation of migration flows, scaling up the importance of these irregular routes. This explains why European governments conceived the idea of a free-movement zone with a reinforcement of common external borders. However, while the Schengen agreement, initially signed by Belgium, France, West-Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands did eliminate internal frontiers, it rested on the construction of a new security system preventing extra-European immigration.¹⁰ In fact, while commentators welcomed Schengen as the latest step towards



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European integration, few noticed that the central object of Schengen was not the removal of internal border control, but rather the externalisation and subsequent creation of a 'super-border' between Europe and its 'poorer' neighbours. Italy was the only European Community member state left out from the Schengen agreements because of the government's unwillingness to impose Visa requirements for Maghreb countries, despite the pressure of its European partners. This refusal in the 1980s surrounding Visa policy between Italy on one side, and France and Germany on the other, became a major point of dispute in the path to Schengen. These different views concerning the external frontiers of the EEC derived from a different vision of Italy's role in the Mediterranean.

After decolonisation, successive Italian governments had been convinced that the country was in the best position to assume a new geopolitical function in the region. Indeed, the growth of the Italian National Hydrocarbons Authority (ENI) and its operations throughout the Mediterranean had opened a key role for Italy in the Euro-Mediterranean energy market.¹¹ The Italian governments' need to maintain good diplomatic relations with the Maghreb also stemmed from the thick web of transnational relations linking Sicily and Tunisia, which had led to the creation of a Tunisian community in the island. Tunisians in Sicily formed the very first foreign community in post-war Italy, preserving the tight relationship between Sicily and Tunisia which had formed in the 19th century.¹² For example, since the early 1970s the Sicilian fishing fleet of Mazara del Vallo, the largest in the Mediterranean, operated mostly in Tunisian waters, assuring a significant presence of Maghreb workers in return. If this economic and cultural relationship between Italy and the Maghreb had required the maintenance of good relations, the imposition of Visa requirements implied a sudden loosening of these ties. In the 1980s, the imposition of Visa requirements on migrants coming from the Maghreb would have endangered Italy's economic role in the Mediterranean, risking a sudden reorganisation of traditional migration routes. Thus, this historical context helps explain the reluctance of Italian governments to externalize European borders. Nevertheless, Italian authorities knew very well that the country did not have a 'Mediterranean alternative' to the European project: to refuse Schengen was to choose uncertainty over thirty years of pro-European relations. Despite its Mediterranean centrality, Italy had too much to lose from a Schengen exclusion, especially since past Italian governments had always welcomed new steps toward European unification, convinced of the importance of European control over the country (*vincolo esterno*). The country had, still in the 1980s, a heavy migration culture, so the elimination of internal borders would have greatly benefited both Italian industries and the economic activities of Italian diasporas in Belgium, France and Germany. Thus, in 1990, after harsh disagreements and with some reluctance, the Italian government imposed Visa requirements on Maghreb citizens, effectively closing these migrants' last 'open gate' to Europe. While the construction of this European Fortress dismantled the web of formal connections between the continent and the Southern Mediterranean region, it could neither erase its long history of transnational relations, nor erase the informal connections between the various shores of the Mediterranean. This recent history illustrates why the 'back doors' of family reunification, asylum, and irregular border-crossing, gradually grew in importance from the 1990s onward.¹³ This story also shows that the depiction of Mediterranean migration as an 'emergency' is not only linked to the instability of African and Middle Eastern countries, but finds deeper roots into the history of Mediterranean migration systems and European migration policies.

Hence, the foundational characters of the Mediterranean 'emergency' are to be found in the reorganisation of European and Italian Visa regimes. Getting a Visa, even a touristic one, now implies a long and complex bureaucratic procedure, for which the applicant must meet a series of very selective economic requirements. This process is all the more daunting for applicants since refusal can happen without any formal justification from the embassy of the destination country. Recent studies have shown how criteria to get a European Visa, even for a Short-Term Visa (STV), follow geopolitical considerations independent of the formal requirements explicitly stated by legislative regulations. If Eastern-European countries benefit from a 'mild' migration regime, making the acquirement of a Visa relatively easy, African citizens are much more penalized. Between 2008 and 2011, Schengen embassies in Africa received only 13 per cent of STVs requested globally, but they accounted for more than 40 per cent of visa refusals.¹⁴ If Schengen built Europe as a fortress, the Mediterranean became its most impenetrable barrier. This new visa regime has pushed, for three decades now, many migrants coming from so-called developing countries and especially from Africa, to undertake dangerous irregular migration routes, oftentimes managed by smugglers. Far from being 'just an emergency', an *«unpredictable event emerging against a background of ostensible normalcy»*, this new irregular migration system is the direct result of an established European order of mobility.¹⁵ Furthermore, the expansion of these routes is also a great waste of resources for all the countries involved, since families often use international migration channels as a strategy for investment diversification. For example, while a person in possession of regular documents can arrive from Addis Abeba to Rome in six hours, spending more or less 400 euros, a migrant without a Visa is forced to embark on a journey, which –if not fatal– can last several years and cost thousands of euros. Via regular migration channels,



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these financial resources could be used to support the costs of migrants' insertion in the destination society; however, in the Mediterranean case, this financial cost often falls on destination countries since irregular migrants often spend a majority of their available funds on their journey to Europe. As a consequence, financial means coming from both ends of the migration channel end up flowing towards organisations that manage these irregular routes, preserving and financing this perverse system of mobility.

Presentism pushes politicians, the media, and humanitarian actors, to frame the question of migration in the Channel of Sicily according to the latest news, which oftentimes show massive disembarkations, tragic shipwrecks or refoulements of migrants at Italian borders. This framing of migration can be traced back to the categorization of migration as an 'emergency.' And yet, by looking at the historical precedents of what is considered 'unprecedented,' namely the gradual increase of irregular migration routes during the 1990s and the 2000s, we come to realise that the structure of European migration governance implies recurring tragedies. Continuing to use 'emergency' as a category able to explain what has happened to migration in the Central Mediterranean, especially depicting recent events as transient crises needing urgent *ad hoc* responses, is to miss the point entirely. If it is true that migration saw a sharp increase following the Arab Spring, this should not divert our attention from the fact that the European migration regime is largely responsible for the current state of irregular Mediterranean migration routes. Only the comprehensive re-examination of this regime will allow for the elaboration of alternative migration systems and prevent further human tragedies.

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- 2 Libya was not in itself a source of immigration into Italy, but the more instability reigned in the country, the more Libya turned into a haven for human traffickers and smugglers, hence becoming a point of departure for migrants wishing to undertake this Mediterranean crossing toward Italy. The evolution of the foreign population residing in Italy may be consulted in the annual statistics produced by The Italian National Institute of Statistics: Istat, *Bilancio Demografico Nazionale Anno 2010-2018*
- 3 The most complete estimate can be found in the reports of the IOM and the UNHCR . Both organizations created *ad hoc* web pages tracking the evolution of the Mediterranean situation : <https://missingmigrants.iom.int> and <https://data2.unhcr.org>
- 4 The *5 Stars Movement* is a populist party founded in 2009 by the comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo. In 2018, thanks to its anti-establishment stance and its rejection of the traditional left–right paradigm, the Movement became the largest individual party in the Italian Parliament.
- 5 Own Elaboration of data from UNHCR and IOM
- 6 UNHCR, *Italy: UNHCR Rome granted access at Lampedusa centre, but not in Libya*, Press Releases, 08/10/2004
- 7 IOM, IOM Applauds Italy's Life-Saving Mare Nostrum Operation: "Not a Migrant Pull Factor", 10/31/14
- 8 N.Perkowski, Deaths, Interventions, Humanitarianism and Human Rights in the Mediterranean 'Migration Crisis', in *Mediterranean Politics*, 21:2, 2016
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by Russell King (Editor)
- 10 Eni is an Italian multinational company and one of the seven largest oil and gas companies in the world. ENI established itself as an important actor in the sector between the 1950s and 1960s, mostly thanks to the concessions obtained between north Africa and the Middle east.
- 11 An excellent analysis on the role of the 'Mediterranean question' in the process leading to the Schengen agreement can be found in Simone Paoli, The Schengen Agreements and their Impact on Euro-Mediterranean Relations. The Case of Italy and the Maghreb, in *Journal of European Integration History*, 21:1, 2015, pp.125-145
- 12 J.W. Holmes, Italy: In the Mediterranean, but of it? In *Mediterranean Politics 1:2 Western Approaches to the Mediterranean*, 1996
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- 14 An in-depth historical study on the the expansion of migration routes in the 1990s remains to be done. For a sociological introduction P. Cuttitta, *Lo spettacolo del confine. Lampedusa tra produzione e messa in scena della frontiera*, Sesto San Giovanni, Mimesis, 2012
- 15 C.Finotelli and G.Sciortino, Through the Gates of the Fortress: European Visa Policies and the Limits of Immigration Control, *Perspectives*, in *European Politics and Society*, 14:1, 2013, pp. 80-101
- 16 C. Calhoun,(2010) The idea of emergency in *Contemporary States of Emergency*, New York, p.30