

MIGRANT BODIES – MOVING BORDERS

BASSANO DEL GRAPPA, 20 FEBRAURY, 2018

WHO AM I AND WHAT DO I DO?

Hello everyone, I have been asked by Operaestate to **share with you my professional and personal experience with** the so called “migrant question”, a question that, as you know, is a burning issue in Italy.

Words are my work, and they have not ceased being so, throughout all the jobs and activities that I have aggregated. Over the last ten years, I have experienced and toyed with many different situations that have had something to do with “migrants bodies”.

I had the pleasure of taking part in the first edition of Migrant Bodies (2013), in the multiple roles of writer and intercultural mediator, which is what I still do, in parallel with my journalistic activities. I would like to share with you some of the stages of my professional career, because they correlate with things that most immigrants in Italy have had to or still have to face.

This is not a lecture but a testimony, concerning crucial years (2005-2011) in terms of migrant legislation in Italy.

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The so-called “migrant problem”, from a legal perspective, is very complex and **subject to continuous updating**, so I will spare you the technicalities. After all, as I said, this is not a lecture but a testimony. Through the narrative of my biography, personal and professional, **you can get an idea not only of the geographical route** (that is the land and sea routes on which these people choose to embark to reach Italy) **but also of the toponyms and topography of new places and physical spaces** - schools, old military barracks, reception centers, sometimes even prisons - **in which these people have to stay**, more or less by force, **to be able to regain their fundamental rights**, guaranteed through securing documentation.

I like to use **Zygmunt Bauman’s** provocative expression of “new barbarians”. Barbarians are not the foreigners, as the original Greek use of the term might imply, but we Westerners who, through a range of power relations (economic, political, social) implement **a suspension of the law, of legality, in favour of an unjustified and unjustifiable exceptionality, invoked to help civilisation evade the rule of law.** (*The spectrum of barbarians. Now and then*, 2010)

Today, with the **Italian-Libyan memoranda** (2017), the number of disembarkations has fallen significantly. I urge you to see an extraordinary Italian film by Andrea Segre entitled *L’ordine delle cose* (2017, *The order of things*). It denounces in a blunt yet (unfortunately) truthful way what has also been reported by a recent CNN documentary regarding the abysmal conditions of foreigners in Libya. The Libyan

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question pinpoints a bitter truth underlying globalisation. As the legal academic **Paolo Cuttitta** writes:

“The reconfiguration of traditional boundaries inherited from the modern state has thus far only produced an **apparent augmentation of global mobility**, effectively **excluding the rest of the world**. [...] *Status* plays a fundamental and discriminating role in the reconfiguration and reorganisation of world borders: something personal, individual, atomised, just like an individual; the apparent opening of the borders thus corresponds to a tightening of the criteria of individual *status*, **the new border: both super-territorial and immaterial**. [...] In this sense, the frontier becomes mobile: it is not activated if those who cross it possess the ‘right’ *status*. It is the individual who activates the border: **the foreigner meet, activate, operate the frontier** and the related control devices, **already in advance, starting from the moment they initially decide to go on the move**”.

I. WORDS OF “WELCOME”

A glance at a map shows that **Italy is a natural stepping stone between Europe and the rest of the world** (via Africa and the Middle East). The little island of **Lampedusa** has become synonymous with the migratory sea crossings towards Europe. This diminutive island, only 20 square kilometres with 6,000 islanders, has not only attained **notoriety as a landing destination** for hundreds of thousands of migrants, but has become **emblematic for the dramatic conflict between Italian frontier security and the safety and survival of the people** who manage to land on its shore.

In addition to Lampedusa, the geographic position of which makes it the initial gateway into Europe, there are many other places of entry for migrants, scattered throughout Italy, from the south right up to the north, even in Veneto. Furthermore, there are many structures that channel these people, institutions that we generally call “reception centers” but which are further distinguished from each other by **convoluted acronyms: CARA, CIE, CAS, SPRAR**. By the way, if any of you are interested, there is an online updated glossary of these acronyms: *Glossary - Open Migration*.

Here is a passage from a wonderful Italian book by magistrate and writer **Gianrico Carofiglio**, called *La manomissione delle parole* (*The setting-free of words*, Rizzoli, Milan, 2010). In my opinion it gets to the very heart of the problem: **the use and the abuse of words**: “A certain level of complexity (and therefore harder to understand by non-professionals) is inevitable in legal discourse [...] And yet, in reality, the language of legal practitioners is (and always has been, with rare, praiseworthy exceptions) a **priestly language** rather than a technical one, in which unnecessary obscurity is a stylistic code, a **denial of language and its communicative function** and, above all, a **subtle, initiatory, authoritarian form of exercising power**. [...] The words of lawyers, more than others, are not limited by the description of facts and behaviour: they themselves invoke them. **Legal language is powerfully creative, since it generates norms**, administrative acts, contracts and sentences: in short, **it directly impacts on people's lives, modifying them**.”

I point out the existence of a magnificent Italian text, known as the **Charter of Rome** (*Carta di Roma*). It is a set of stipulated rules drawn up in 2011 by a handful of

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journalist activists, in particular to promote the correct use of terminology regarding the “migrant question”. This charter has been innovative in its referral to the 1948 *Declaration of Human Rights*. Beyond its professional advocacy, it has a wider public merit, because it reminds Italians that classifying an undocumented immigrant as “**clandestino**”, as introduced in 2009, is actually illegitimate and runs contrary to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In fact, this document compels us to conclude that, until proven otherwise, all migrants that entered Italy (or continental Europe) without an entry visa are technically “**asylum seekers**”. Only after an assessment by the Territorial Commission is it then acceptable to **distinguish between “migrants”, “refugees”, “irregular migrants”, etc.**

II. “WELCOME” CENTERS

This long jargon-rich preamble is to tell you that, back in that ominous and significant year of 2009, I was in a CARA in southern Italy. **What is a CARA?** The acronym stands for “reception centre for asylum seekers” (*Centri di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo*). In fact, it is a **concentration camp**, in the literal sense of the term, where “irregular migrants” are sent pending the decision of the Territorial Commission.

At the time **I was rather shocked by the individual, physical and psychological conditions** of those detained within. I speak of detention because in all respects it amounts to an incarceration, albeit an administrative one. In fact, these people, stripped of their original status, awaiting adjudication from the Italian authorities, **living in a (hopefully temporary) suspension of their rights**, is soul-destroying. In practice, they can not move away from the reception centre because they can not work, and they can not travel freely around the country or to elsewhere in Europe.

That CARA is in a former military barracks. **People were housed in containers** without air conditioning or a bathroom. The area was **manned by armed soldiers**. Inside the camp, there were people of all nationalities, of all religions, of every social background, of every kind and age, forced together in an indiscriminate way, **for a wait of between one to three years**. Unfortunately, pressed into that reception centre were **many women and many children as well**.

The peculiarity of that CARA is that it not only housed people in transit into Europe, but also people waiting expulsion. So, in addition to the usual scope of a CARA, it also performed the function of **CIE** (*Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione* — “Expulsion and identification centre”). Most people awaiting repatriation were so-called “**Dublin cases**”.

As you know, the issuance of a residence document falls to the first state in which the foreigner enters. Translated simply: if a foreigner first arrives in Italy (which is highly likely) they may not move on to another European country. **They must remain in Italy** until the requisite documentation is obtained. The requisite documentation means a Carta di soggiorno —a permanent permit of stay). Indeed, **even after obtaining a residence permit of stay, they are not allowed to work in another European country**. So, and that’s still the point, Europe and its Schengen area **do not exist for migrant people with an Italian permit of stay**.

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IV. “IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD AND THE WORD WAS MADE FLESH”

Another place, another physical space that is **an obligatory stop** for immigrants is **the immigrant help-desk**. This is an office that, as the name implies, is reserved exclusively for issuing documents to immigrants. What struck me most during my work here was a realization of **how much weight words have in real life, what repercussions words had on flesh and blood human beings**.

Every day I wrote down hundreds of names, addresses and personal data.

Every day I filled out dozens of request forms on the computer for; work permits, renewals of permits for the family, the issuing of residence cards, visas for family reunification, etc.

Every name I typed echoed a world of sounds that were utterly unfamiliar to my own native phonology, because people from all over the world gravitated to that tiny crowded office; from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe.

Every single letter I inserted was decisive. If I made a typing error, it invalidated the request for the document, disrupted lives, sapped hope, tested the patience of people who had to go through the slow and tortuous meanderings of bureaucracy in order to find security and shelter.

Every word was a lifeline. There, in those offices, I toiled away for three long years, and despite myself, became enthralled by the many stories that the immigrants had to relate to me to justify their requests; support or legal assistance. From these anecdotes I wrote and published two stories: *In viaggio verso dove* (2014) and *La bicicletta* (2017). Both of them are dedicated to the life of two immigrant women in Italy.

V. ITALIAN LESSONS

I began to deal with the migrant issue in 2005, shortly after the implementation of **the Bossi-Fini Law** (2002), which by 2009 generated a great deal of controversy when **clandestinity actually became a crime** in Italy (an amendment to Article 10 of the Italian Constitution by the Berlusconi Government). I became aware of this problem via working with immigrants who are often deemed “illegal” — a word that has fortunately fallen into disuse today, thanks also to the awareness campaign by the signatories to the Rome Charter (2011) in favour of less detrimental word use in the media, and thanks to the **subsequent decriminalisation of clandestine immigration** (2014).

In that time I taught Italian every Saturday to adult immigrants, both men and women. Every week I armed myself with books, study cards, suitcases full of images and flashcards, songs by Gianna Nannini and Domenico Modugno, geographical maps and evaluation tests, and I entered a classroom full of people. **The whole world was there**: Asia, Africa, South America, Eastern Europe, The Middle East. **Everyone had a story of uprooting and forced migration** behind them: some fled away from wars, some from famine, some from dictatorial regimes, some from poverty. There were **Christians and Muslims** in the class; English speakers, French speakers,

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Spanish or Chinese speakers; **from the illiterate to extensively qualified; men and women of all ages.**

Some of them had a residence permit; others were “illegal”. Many of the “irregulars” had arrived in Italy many many years ago. They had obtained a work permit valid for two years, renewable, but **due to the economic downturn they had lost their jobs and, consequently, their documentation, sinking into a legal and existential limbo from which they found it hard to breakout. Together with their work they had lost their home address, thus their residence status, then their identification papers and finally any medical health cover too.** In that dark and distressing historical period, I was fortunate to encounter **a number of doctors** who kept to their Hippocratic oath and **organized free medical assistance and guaranteed emergency care to undocumented immigrants** that, in public hospitals, would otherwise risk being reported to the public authorities as illegal immigrants, as required by law.

In addition to courageous medics, at that time I remember meeting many **elementary school teachers** who told me that they **feigned ignorance to the fact that some of the children’s parents were “clandestini”**. Otherwise they would have been obliged to report them and, as a consequence, they would be effectively barring their own pupils from school. I am describing these things in order to paint you **a picture of the climate of fear throughout those years, in which anyone could potentially be an informer.**

In any case, most of the immigrants that I was teaching Italian to were professionally employed, especially the women, mostly as carers. By the way, the Italian neologism **“badante”** (domestic worker) commonly signifies all those women from Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Moldavia, Romania) who leave their own families at home and come to work for Italian families domestically, caring full-time for their infirm and elderly family members.

In those years there was much discussion about a proposed inclusion of a **compulsory Italian language test for those seeking a so called “Carta di Soggiorno”** (“permanent resident card” - the equivalent of a green card in the USA). Thus, in those classes, there was much more at stake than merely learning Italian. Teaching Italian did not only mean **helping them to pass a test**, it also involved **helping them to get through the bureaucratic barriers that partitioned them off from so-called “civil European society”**.

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