

Moral bankruptcy in the Mediterranean

by Arianne Shahvisi - 27/08/2018 19:07



In June and July of this year, 721 people [died](#) attempting to cross the Mediterranean into Europe, raising the odds of death en route to an alarming 1 in 16. This rise is the result of an [active crackdown](#) on rescue efforts. Around 1500 people have drowned this year, as boats have capsized or sunk due to perilous overloading or treacherous conditions at sea, bringing the total body-count since 2014 to over 12,000. Those 12,000, who now rest in shallow mass graves, could have joined hands and spanned the sea that killed them.

Metaphors of hostility have long been apt at Europe's Southern border; it is now standard to speak of "Fortress Europe," whose drawbridge is firmly bolted and whose moat is the expediently lethal Mediterranean. Even so, this hostility has risen to fever pitch this summer. Italy's [new far-right government](#) announced its refusal to assist in sea rescues and has closed its ports to migrants attempting to disembark. As a result, rescued migrants have been left stranded at sea with limited supplies, waiting to see if any European country will offer help. [In June](#), an overloaded boat containing 629 migrants, including 100 unaccompanied children, was flatly denied entry to Italy,

then Malta, and was finally forced to sail for a further four days in poor sea conditions to Spain. At the [end of July](#), an Italian oil rig support vessel collected 100 people in the Mediterranean and returned them to Libya, where they are at risk of torture in detention centres. This is currently being investigated as a violation of the principle of *non-refoulement*: that no-one should be returned to a place where they may be at risk of human rights violations. Dangerous precedents are being set.

While it is hard to empathise with the brutality of the Italian government's stance, it is harder still to countenance French president Macron's hypocrisy in [accusing Italy](#) of "cynicism and irresponsibility" when France is [yet to accept](#) the share of migrants it pledged to resettle in 2015, is almost bottom of the table in its acceptance rates for [asylum applications](#), has turned away [unaccompanied minors](#) at the border with Italy, and [has this year introduced](#) a punitive new immigration law. Italy's barefaced lurch to the right should not be seen as exceptional: France, [Britain](#), and other [European countries](#) have long promoted less candid forms of racist populism.

The states of Southern Europe who are the first destination of crossing migrants should not be singled out for their cruelty: they are right to expect reliable pledges of assistance from the North. If theirs is the duty to ensure that migrants reach land safely, Northern Europe must rise to task of resettlement. Physical geography cannot be used to moderate one's moral responsibilities. Yet Europe seems determined to do just that. At an EU summit in June, it was suggested that "migrant processing centres" be established in North Africa, whose aim would be to sort refugees from other migrants, with only the former being permitted to proceed to Europe and seek asylum. (Libya, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia have already [refused to host](#) such centres.) Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, has pointed out that this strategy would amount to "dumping desperate people somewhere like toxic waste that no one wants."

The right kind of suffering

There are many reasons for the empathy failures endemic across Europe. Key to dredging up sufficient mistrust to muddy the normal operation of our collective moral instincts is the idea that only some of those entering Europe are deserving of help: the "genuine" refugees. The rest are "economic migrants:" charlatans who at once steal jobs and refuse to work, whose decision to board a dinghy with a 1 in 16 chance of dying is motivated by greed, and who must be kept out at all costs. The cost of this myth is high indeed: it has tilted the stakes of border control so that it is less important to save lives than it is to ensure that no such people are admitted. Few are imprudent enough to say it out loud, but deaths in the Mediterranean are not a

tragedy, they are business-as-usual.

The definition of a refugee is a person whose migration stems from a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” Asylum-seekers are those who have applied for refugee status and are awaiting a decision, a process which is lengthy, **onerous**, and traumatic, leading to an outcome that is often **arbitrary**. By contrast, a migrant is **someone whose** “decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned, for reasons of 'personal convenience' and without the intervention of an external compelling factor.”

Those who are at risk of persecution (and can prove it) are afforded protection in another state. Those who are instead fleeing poverty or environmental destruction have no legal right to enter Europe, and must do so as criminals. Why should persecution be favoured over poverty or environmental destruction as a harm worthy of an asylum? One argument is that governments have failed to protect persecuted people, so they must be granted asylum elsewhere: there is no other solution to their particular predicament. Yet the argument assumes there *are* other in situ solutions available to those who are fleeing poverty and environmental destruction. I’m sure economic migrants would be eager to see them. Consider that 87 million Nigerians live on less than \$2 a day, topping the world’s **extreme poverty rankings**, yet 75% of the **nearly 38,000** Nigerian migrants who travelled to Libya to make the crossing in 2017 are “economic migrants” and therefore disqualified from claiming asylum.

That economic motivations for migration are so widely portrayed as *merely* economic is revealing. It tells us something about how we think about poverty: as a natural condition of certain world regions, as a form of suffering for which no-one (except perhaps the poor themselves) can be blamed. While persecution is seen as aberrant, so that succour is offered and perpetrators sought, poverty is supposed to be endured. In Thatcher’s words “there is no alternative.” To open that can of worms would be too damaging to the global economic system.

Earlier this summer, French president Macron said: “If it’s an economic migrant who doesn’t face danger in his country, then it’s not France’s responsibility to take him.” If only Macron would reflect on *how* France came to have the wealth that others now seek to share: consider the French economy’s ongoing economic reliance on its **former colonies**. This is part of a broader trend: the wealth of European nations is an endowment from **colonialism**, protected by the same **rigged trade rules** that keep Global South nations poor.

Is it any wonder then that those escaping poverty should sometimes present themselves as refugees? What choice do they have but to shoehorn their suffering to

appeal to the sliver of hope the law allows? For reasons that are never properly spelled out, other forms of misery are insufficient to ground the right to resettle. The desperation that leads a person to exchange their lifesavings for a few inches on an overcrowded boat has no currency, nor the kind that leads migrants to [burn off](#) their finger-tips to avoid being identified and sent back, or [self-inflict](#) serious injuries leaving visible scars in order to improve their chances of asylum. It is a deeply sinister system that requires vulnerable people to conform to its own arbitrary definitions of anguish.

As philosopher [Michael Dummett](#) contends, “all conditions that deny someone the ability to live where he is in minimal conditions for a decent human life ought to be grounds for claiming refuge elsewhere.” Such a definition might be seen to reverse the current burden of proof. We must challenge European states to provide evidence that (a) minimal conditions for a decent human life are possible for migrants in their home countries, and (b) they had no part in the conflict, poverty, or environmental destruction that have rendered the regions in question unable to provide the minimal conditions for a decent life. Let us stop asking migrants to prove their right to decent living conditions, and instead ask our governments to show some decency.