On the Borderlands of Humanity

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Eurocrisis in the Press

By Henry Radice

The current crisis in the Mediterranean reminds us of what should be an obvious truth, but is too frequently forgotten: the European Union (EU) is a humanitarian space or it is nothing. If there are any criteria according to which Europe as a political project deserves to succeed or fail, they surely lie in upholding the centrality of notions of humanity within politics, not least because the need for the EU stemmed from the ultimate example of inhumane politics three-quarters of a century ago. As such, the EU can congratulate itself on its ability to function today as a humanitarian space for most of its citizens, most of the time, but recognise that a persistent failure of humanity on its borders calls into question that achievement.

The idea of 'humanitarian space' comes from the emergency aid world and conventionally refers to a safe operating environment for the delivery of relief, or to the creation of 'safe areas' amidst conflict in which vulnerable civilians might find shelter (both enterprises, it should be noted, are fraught with difficulties and tensions). Current events remind us both that Europe cannot isolate itself from the humanitarian crises taking place on its doorstep, and of the ability of the EU to serve as a genuine safe haven for many, at relatively little cost to itself.

For both of these reasons, Europeans should prioritise the saving of life above all else in this crisis. Inhumanity on Europe's borders is an existential threat not just to those who might fall victim to it but also to the identity of Europe as a political space in which humanity is upheld. The corrosive effects of creating 'Fortress Europe' lie not just in the risks to the lives of the (forced) migrants in question, but in the erosion of any meaningful notion of common humanity, a notion that supposedly lies at the heart of our political systems. In *The Guardian* yesterday, Polly Toynbee powerfully underscored the fact that this crisis is a test of humanity and of what being European means.

Of course, much as we might like humanity to be a clear, simple notion on which we can ground morality and politics, we know that acting with humanity across a complex global political landscape throws up many hard cases and humanitarian dilemmas. But preventing easily avoidable deaths on Europe's doorstep is not a hard case, nor is hospitable treatment of a manageable (if fairly distributed across the EU) number of potential migrants.

True, acting 'in the name of humanity' can often be hubristic, involving the projection of one's understanding of one's own humanity on to the other. But the least controversial humanitarian acts concern the immediate saving of life, and the clearest threats to common humanity are policies that overtly sub-divide the category into those whose lives deserve to be saved regardless of circumstances, and those whose lives do not, or whose lives are negotiable. Ruben Andersson has written eloquently about the paradoxes of 'humanitarian' policies with regard to the current crisis and of the ways in which European responses have at times slipped into a 'politics of death'.

Of course, Europe needs to be engaged in the Mediterranean region, not shielding itself from it, for reasons of security and for reasons of global influence, as well as for reasons of morality. This engagement is most likely to be coherent and effective if it reflects the kinds of liberal, humane concerns that Europe has been rather less successful at promoting abroad than at institutionalising at home. In this sense, reinstating an improved, burden-sharing version of *Mare Nostrum* would be a good start, removing the carrier sanctions that push people onto the boats and into illegality might be better still.

Despite Europe's political and economic crisis, its persistent attractiveness should remind us of exactly how much human security we all enjoy, of the sheer safety of daily life for most of us. Of course, the erosion of social safety nets across the continent has been a troubling fact of recent years, especially in places like Greece, but that only underscores the importance of remembering that the endgame of our politics should be about humanity.

The generation of 89ers, who have benefitted from Europe at its most secure, would do well to fight for this vision of political Europe.

Finally, we should remember that humanitarian spaces are supposed to be porous and welcoming to those in need, and to provide protection from those who threaten them. Just as xenophobic discourses erode the safety of the European public sphere, so should we be wary of any discourse that seeks to paint those risking their lives to find a safe haven here as a threat. The only real threat here is faced by the many millions across the globe at daily threat of violence or displacement, of which a tiny minority are knocking at Europe's door inviting us to live up to our own ideals.

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