



Europe's Shame: Death at the Borders of the EU

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We start with some figures. About 2 million people live on the Canary Islands. On average, the islands handle about 9.5 million tourists per year. This substantial tourist industry contributes over 32% of the Islands' GNP. The entire accommodation sector consists of roughly 172,000 hotel beds and roughly 242,000 overnight places other than hotels. These figures represent interesting multinational flows, links and connections, but seldom determine the media coverage.

What has come to determine the news are the following figures. In the last few years, between 20,000 and 30,000 boat people have come to the Canary Islands from various parts of Africa and increasingly from Asia. Estimates differ, but a few thousand people are thought to have died in their attempt to reach the Spanish islands. And the Canaries are by no means an exception among touristically popular southern European shores in being increasingly a destination for travellers without papers these days. In the Mediterranean the Italian authorities intercept 20,000–30,000 people annually. The majority arrive in Sicily and on the island of Lampedusa. Others become stranded in Calabria, Puglia and Sardinia. In recent years the shores of Greece have seen a growth in the number of travellers without papers as well.

Now we ask the following. On what grounds do we make a holiday camp for the tourists and a deportation camp for the boat people? Why do we erect a monument when tourists die—the monument constructed for the Dutch fatalities of the 1977 air disaster on Tenerife is a good example—and not for the African and Asian travelers *without papers* who died on their journeys? What legitimizes this different valuation of human lives?

What is at issue here is the problem of classification and purification based on a consensus view of non-egalitarian political difference. The distinctive factor here is interest (Badiou 2005a:97). Interest has nothing to do with equality or indifference, but in the political context

is largely concerned with non-egalitarian protection. This political difference is ethical since it has split people coming to the islands into those identifiable as tourists, and those who are a priori recognized as uncivilized, subhuman boatpeople with an unclear and undefined status that threaten our interest. These people have been referred to as illegal, undocumented or irregular immigrants, the *Sans papiers*—the people without a name. In this context, Badiou (2005a) refers to the *Law*, by which he means the state of the situation, as a “prescription of reasonable order”. The difference between the subsets of tourists and illegal migrants is the result of an obstinate ideology of “ethics” (Badiou 2005b:28, 29). According to Badiou, this ideology of the Law decides which parts are accepted as normality under the predicative order and which parts are forbidden—considered abnormal and un-lawful, illegal. Recently, Agamben has similarly explained the working of this inclusive exclusion in the normalization process of the sovereign (Agamben 2002). Earlier, Schmitt made a comparison of the construction of the exception, which, in his words, is a consequence of the processes of *Ortung* (claiming a location) und *Ordnung* (bordering and ordering) (Schmitt 1950). The political classification has nothing to do with any political truth based on justice (= equality). Equality can only exist if all subsets, all possible constructible subsets, are equal under the law.

Under the predicative order of the European Union the ethical *difference* between these two subsets is the a priori recognition and consensual identification of evil vis-à-vis the good. The difference between the good tourists and the evil illegal migrants on the southern shores of the EU is seen as normal and immanent. Tourists are short-stay travellers, who come to enjoy the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. By contrast, illegal migrants are seen as barbarians who are suspicious and *not* of interest, who allegedly come in large numbers and threaten public order and security. In the media coverage of migration there is a citing of *floods, streams, masses*, and even *tsunamis* against which *embankments* have to be erected in order to prevent *flooding*.

In a similar vein, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has in a commanding way argued that the construction of fear has to be explicated from a feeling of being deluged by *unnamable*, potentially immense hordes, masses and streams of “others” who threaten to negate the existing and familiar world, or worse, to make it disappear (see Harari 2001; Lacan 2004; Zizek 1997). This influx of “others” is considered overwhelming when there is an apparent shortage of space for identity construction. The influx of the unnamable is considered and imagined to be dangerous for the fulfilment of being “European” in terms of authority, citizenship and identity, and for the economic well-being and public safety (protection) of Europeans. Moral panic incited by the media is the general factor for the imagined lack of space which makes people feel uncomfortable and the familiar alienated. The erection of a border is an often used strategy

when the sequential “threat” of the unnamable increases. Installing a border is basically saying, keep your distance.

If we look more closely, however, we can recognize that the hordes of tourists are as “strange” as the illegal immigrants. They escape cold European winters, or save their last pennies to escape the drag of daily life, for their annual discount holiday to Tenerife. Just to escape from the stuffiness, from commands and demands, competition and the routine. Many escape from their work, for their boss only grants them a few weeks off for the perverse reason that “time is money”. In this sense, tourists are also refugees, yet their lawful classification is radically different.

It is worrying that the moral panic is far removed from any scientific knowledge of contemporary global migration. Despite the often relentlessly used conceptualization of “floods” and “tsunamis”, only a fractional subset of the whole of humanity are migrants. Among travelling people the majority make up the subset of tourists. Hence, the constructed moral difference between subsets is based on a dubious sequential representation. The media cry out for help for the south European islands without mentioning the millions of tourist refugees. This media attention has forced European politicians to anticipate the fear of the namable masses, a fear of a flood of nameless boat people. They have fortified the imagined longitudinal watershed to a considerable higher level. The EU’s external borders surrounding the Mediterranean have literally turned into a *deadline*. This politics of difference demands a horrifying toll. The boat people are seen as, to use the words of Sibley, the “filth”, the “impure”, the “disordered” or what Bauman called the “wasted lives” (Bauman 2004). They are regarded as inevitable and acceptable waste in the conveyor belt production of our European prosperity. The wasted lives have no faces and no names. They are numbered, “received” in camps, the human dumping sites for the civic dead, and subsequently deported. Hence, the representation itself has become a harsh reality. Over the years, installing external borders around the EU has resulted in an appalling human cost, especially in and around the Mediterranean, and since 2005, the Atlantic, although not solely in these areas. Many of the migrants have died because of drowning and hypothermia; others have died because of suffocation and asphyxiation during their journey in ships or trucks. Also, a significant number of people have committed suicide while waiting for citizenship or deportation, that is, in the detention and deportation centres.¹

We conclude. Let us hold the maxim that human multiplicities of any kind consist of the *same* in at least three ways: all people are of equal moral worth; people should have a say over policy principles that have an effect on them; and a policy principle that is based on a person happening to be born in a particular place or with a particular religion is a discrimination against the equal moral worth of human beings. When

we hold this maxim and apply this to the bordering practices of the EU, we can see that the EU violates all three egalitarian principles of a just moral border regime. The EU makes a moral distinction between people; the EU does not include people in their bordering practices who are affected by them; and the EU unjustly politicizes people's faith according to their origin. To this end, the EU has made two lists, a negative list containing all those countries of the world whose natives have to apply for a visa to get to the EU, and a positive visa-free list. This latter list contains mostly highly industrialised, non-Muslim countries. Hence, travelling to the EU without papers is largely self-provoked, since opportunities for citizens of countries on the negative list to travel regularly to the EU are very restricted. The EU thereby makes a distinction between namable and unnamable refugees; in other words, between welcome travellers and political enemies on the basis of their origin and economic value. This leads to a subhuman burden and redundancy rhetoric which provokes racist populism. It results in an absurd maxim: if you have escaped a position out of necessity to increase your social status or even to save your life by risking your life, you are categorized as disposable. At the same time, we must not forget that most of the so-called illegal migrants, once they make it to the domains of the EU, find work. They build, cater, clean and nurture the houses of the working EU population. And, lest we forget, besides the "illegal migrants" there are other unnamable subsets of the European neoliberal factory of progress; that is, the beggars, the homeless, people who fall under the moral rubric "victims" instead of barbarians. They also come to the boulevards and beaches of tourist islands in order to survive.

It is the politics within the EU that creates its own strangers and eventually its own wasted lives. The consequence of such a production of the eternal desired "we" and the eternal undesired "they" is an increased agitation of moral panic on which some politicians thankfully seize in their competition for more votes (Sibley 1995). This unjustified moral fear of a liminal drift of the world creates a harrowing situation of irregular travellers to the EU. It is the inequality of a politics of difference of which the people in their fragile ships, who "en masse" threaten to flood "our" territory are victims. They are forced into the category of immigrants with no name. The tourists belong to a category of interest and the sorrow of the unnamable bad, the illegal migrants, is thought to be a result of their own backwardness. The border of the EU discriminates unjustly and unfairly between people on the basis of their country of origin and on the basis of papers. The result is a shameful difference in the colouring of the seas off Europe's southern shores. Whereas for some—the tourists—these seas are pure and shiny and blue in colour, for some, allegedly redundant, others, the colour of the sea is bloody red.

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Endnote

¹ On <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/cartes/mortsauxfrontieres> one can see the geographical variation in the death toll as a result of the closure of the EU borders.

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