

## **FOCUS: HUMANITARIANISM AND BORDERS**

### **A Critique of the Humanitarian (B)order of Things**

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**Abstract.** The reification of humanitarian borders generates a politics of crisis that weakens the capacity to produce structural political changes and legitimizes exceptionalism and the reproduction of hierarchized borders. In this article, I argue that a critique of crisis implies the possibility of thinking about migration beyond the limits of humanitarian borders, therefore locating debates about political action and change within the realm of ordinary politics rather than that of emergency and exceptionalism. In contemporary Europe, a critique of crisis is a critique of power. It is thus a way to develop a political vision of borders and mobility beyond the humanitarian order of things.

**Keywords:** *humanitarianism, borders, critique, crisis, political change, exceptionalism, ordinary politics, rescue*

What is a crisis of borders? What forces does it enhance? And what is the role of a critique of crisis? Informed by these questions, this article discusses the notion of humanitarian borders as a dominant discourse used to read contemporary mass mobility through the language of emergency. In contrast to such a discourse, I maintain that a critique of crisis should argue for a political disconnection of mobility from hegemonic narratives of crisis and emergency. Indeed, the connection of migration and mobility with humanitarianism shows historical continuities with the hierarchization of borders and populations on the move. The rise of modern humanitarianism is closely linked to the abolitionist consciousness developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Abruzzo 2011; Ribi Forclaz 2015), which partly consisted of delegitimizing the slave trade (Bass 1989 [2009]; Stamatov 2013). Today that humanitarianism is largely implemented on and between borders, its *raison d'être* remains consistent with modern (anti)slavery discourses. Although humanitarian interventions in refugee camps, rescue practices along the coasts, and the management of migrant “waiting zones” are distinct from the nineteenth-

century claims for the rights of slaves, the focus of humanitarian action remains tied to a victim-centered approach as the core of a complex infrastructure of professionalized and institutionalized practices of aid. We know that humanitarian actions cannot be reduced to the relationship between giver and receiver, but we also know that there is a structural and inevitable correspondence between the figures of helpless victims and their humanitarian counterparts. When combined with border control as it happens in many parts of the world today, the victim-centered approach, instead of enhancing comprehensive political and juridical instruments for legal protection and freedom of movement, inspires and legitimizes a hierarchical stratification of mobility, according to which a small number of “deserving victims” (such as trafficked persons or refugees) are strategically separated from the masses who remain undeserving in their claims for rights and freedom (O’Connell Davidson 2010). One further step in the management of mobility sees the politics of selection and distinction applying, for example, to groups of refugees themselves wherein only certain categories (sick children, women, those who have suffered torture, etc.) are eligible for asylum (Mavelli 2017).

Borders represent a major concern for humanitarian action, whether concerning the disputes and conflicts they generate or simply the mobility of vulnerable people who have to cross them. Yet humanitarian and border studies have traditionally represented distinct fields of inquiry. The literature that directly focuses on and emphasizes the growing overlap of humanitarian intervention with the management of borders is relatively recent, although it is also lively and cross-disciplinary (see, for example, De Genova 2017a; Campesi 2015; Walters 2010; Williams 2015).

This expanding field of research is predominantly marked by a critical approach, at times based on ethnographic methodology that focuses on securitarian regimes, the business of bordering, the temporary extension of crisis, the merging of humanitarian action and policing, and states’ politics of confinement, conservation, and rejection. This article aims to discuss the role that such critiques can play in the context of humanitarian borders. The core of the discussion is not new per se, as humanitarianism has always been characterized by the tension between criticism and the need “to do something.” However, I believe that, given the current scenario where humanitarian crises are proliferating globally, critique can contribute to overcoming the “humanitarian approach” in the management of borders as well as supporting ordinary politics to promote the emergence of different political

subjectivities. Humanitarianism creates new geographies with their specific limits, and through its “humanitarization” of borders—that is, the process through which borders are redefined as spaces of humanitarian crisis and emergency—it has the consequence of obscuring crucial issues of ordinary politics and political action. From this perspective, I envision critique not merely as a counter-discourse but as a form of creative action that can inform our imagination with a different order of things. To support the necessity of a nonhumanitarian understanding of mobility and borders, I build on the notions of ordinary politics, political action, and political change. Invoking ordinary politics here recalls the Gramscian idea of actualizing the possibility for all people to fully express their political personality (Gramsci 1975).

Although I have argued elsewhere (De Lauri 2016) that normalization rather than exceptionalism is the main feature of humanitarian military operations, the current humanitarian management of borders in Europe is protracting situations of exceptionality and thus inhibiting the possibility of political action through the practice of “ordinary politics.” The effect of this protraction is to normalize border crises, usually accentuated by a politics of urgency. Suffocated by the imperatives of crisis, emergency, and declared neutrality, the very idea of political change is anesthetized in favor of humanitarian goals. This provides the opportunity for right-wing, xenophobic, and populist political parties (such as those in Italy and Hungary) to merge their rejectionist policies with ideas of risk, danger, and protection, as defined by the grammar of emergency. I maintain that a shift from humanitarian goals to political change is essential if we want to address the structural causes that produce and exacerbate human suffering for people on the move. Following Antonio Gramsci’s (1967, 1975) emphasis on politics as the expression of a distinctive political will, I see “ordinary politics” as the sphere of action in which different political subjectivities mobilize and advance their demands for change (even radical change). In contrast to ordinary politics, the humanitarian order of things enables contingent forces to be mobilized by political actors who are hidden behind the veil of emergency and crisis.

### **Borders in crisis**

Borders are social institutions (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013) and legal constructions characterized by contested instances of producing and policing territorial integrity (Reeves 2014). As noted by Thomas Wilson and Hastings Donnan

(2012), borders have become a master narrative in public cultures. Borders have canalized the imagination of populations across the world and function as a grand motif in everyday life, everywhere. Critical events and ongoing challenges brought on by increasing regional conflicts, the war on terror, and the new security, environmental, health, and economic problems of world populations on the move all indicate that the related notion of “violent borders” (Jones 2016) remains a major concern for both scholars and policy makers.

Throughout global history, ideologies of protection (of cities, empires, nations) have often translated into the factual construction of border walls and fences, a phenomenon of particular relevance nowadays. At least seventy countries, up from fifteen in 1989, now have border walls or barriers, and these obstructions are springing up at an unprecedented rate. Over 60,000 people have died and far more have been detained while attempting to cross a border in the past two decades (Jones et al. 2017). This is a direct consequence of states expanding the reach of their security and detention practices and attempting to intercept or capture border crossers or intentionally make their journeys more perilous. The global multiplication of border barriers and the intense activity of policing borders (Fassin 2011) are responses to both security claims and humanitarian emergencies. Contemporary walls and fences, notwithstanding the political, geographical, and cultural diversity in which they are inscribed, reproduce a transversal historical feature, that of substantializing political power and, at the same time, protecting its territorial domain. Yet these barriers also stage political performances in a new theater in sovereignty struggles.

Migration, organized crime, terrorism, smuggling, political movements—all subject to the materiality of walls—are today inscribed in a post-Westphalian world in which forms of sovereignty and governance are contested by state and nonstate political, economic, and humanitarian actors. In their declared political intentions and purposes, walls are the factual, material response to the quest for collective protection in a world perceived as destabilized and “under threat.” Through a chemical metaphor, we could argue that the wall is the solidification of the liquid idea of protection, which ranges from geopolitics to biopolitics. Indeed, spatial and territorial control is not the only task ascribed to border barriers, since they also function to discipline populations and extend biopolitical governance to the everyday lives of citizens. The wall is thus a technique of power aimed at governing borders that are differently performed by a plurality of social actors. Of course,

nation-states' exercise of force over the legitimate means of movement does not target all people on the move (Sharma 2017), only those groups categorized according to certain dominant ideas of national identity, religion, gender, and class.

A world without borders has represented the mantra of globalization proponents, whether they be large corporations or humanitarian organizations. And yet the proliferation of walls and fences is not in conflict with borderless discourses and globalized flows. Rather, they demarcate the “fault lines of globalization” (Ritaine 2009), being built both against and along these discourses and flows. Walls and fences exacerbate inequality and symbolize the affirmation of a privileged few who actually live the promise of globalization and defend its privileges through teichopolitics, the politics of building barriers (Rosiere and Jones 2012). At the same time, as objects that reveal contested instances of power and sovereignty, border walls are shaped by domopolitics (Walters 2004): they are physical limits through which notions of home and protection materialize. In the framework of crisis, not only engineered but also natural physical borders (such as a desert or sea) become instruments of “dissuasion and patrol” (Albahari 2006) that allow for instances of separation and privilege (between those who can and those who cannot cross a border).

The crisis of borders in the so-called Western democracies has exploded into the public domain due to their inability to control the flows of migrants and refugees or to stop terrorists. In addition to exacerbating security policies, the crisis has ideologically and politically justified the affirmation of humanitarian borders as zones where practices of aid and rescue have merged with policing and rejection. The 2015 “migration reception crisis,” for example, did not simply made explicit the dysfunctionality of Europe’s asylum system and its broader architecture (Hampshire 2015); it also made evident how, through the narrative of “rescue,” interdiction was laundered into an ethically sustainable strategy of border governance (Moreno-Lax 2018) by combining the securitization and humanitarization of borders. On the ground, migrant safety continues to be undermined by policies that further securitize and militarize borders (Williams 2016).

We owe the convincing definition of the humanitarian border to William Walters (2010), who explained that the idea of a humanitarian border might at first sound oxymoronic. Contemporary humanitarianism is often described as a force that, in the name of an endangered humanity, transcends the walled space of both national and international systems. However, it would be misleading, Walters suggests, to draw any simple equation between humanitarian projects and the logic of

deterritorialization. While humanitarian interventions might stress certain norms of statehood, the exercise of humanitarian power is intrinsically connected to the production of new spaces. By redefining certain territories as “humanitarian zones,” humanitarianism actualizes a new geography of spaces, which materializes in various situations—in conflict areas, in regions affected by famine, in the context of failed or fragile states, or in situations where the actual borders of states and gateways to national territories become zones of humanitarian government (Walters 2010: 139). This is the case with many borders today in Europe, the United States, the Middle East, Australia, and Africa. In Europe, for instance, the multiplication of border barriers, detention centers, and shelters, on the one hand, and, on the other, the intensification of border patrols, maritime control, and deportations signal a new step in European border history: the humanitarization of European borders as zones affected by severe crisis.

Traditionally, border control has been implemented with the mandate of maintaining state sovereignty over exclusive territorial spaces through the regulation of who and what can move across state borders, that is, into and out of exclusive state territory. To this aim, border control has authorized practices that range from violence embodied in the restriction and denial of movement to physical force embodied in the work of the border police (Pallister-Wilkins 2017). With the rise of humanitarian borders, the politics of bordering have increasingly overlapped with practices of confinement (helping refugees and migrants in their “home countries”). As a consequence, the externalization of European borders and policies of rejection have been framed as actions of compassionate control and as a response to crisis and insecurity. Patrolling coasts, expanding the reach of immigrant reception centers, or fencing territories have thus become humanitarian reactions to migrant and refugee emergencies and, by extension, to border crises. Today, the reciprocal relationship between humanitarian search-and-rescue operations and state-sovereign performances on European borders reproduces, on European territory, a dynamic that humanitarian militarism around the world has best embodied for decades: the overlapping of rescue and global policing (De Lauri 2019). Despite the diversity of geographical, historical, and cultural contexts characterizing today’s humanitarian borders globally, it is possible to discern the emergence of a transnational discourse of compassionate border security that fuses the humanitarian impetus with policing and militarization, reshaping traditional territorially based understandings of borders (Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017).

## The power of crisis

One thing that is often inadequately discussed in public discourses about the control of mobility and the humanitarization of borders is that crisis is good business for the governmental, international, and private actors that provide security infrastructures and personnel. The technological, bureaucratic, and policing apparatuses mobilized by security regimes have produced a major growth industry today. While the enforcement and supply of security measures have always been understood as one of the exclusive functions of the nation-state, a more recent security turn has triggered a process of internationalizing and privatizing security (Deitelhoff 2009). Rather than marginalizing the state, however, this process has accompanied the re-emergence of nation-state ideologies as an integral part of the globalizing effects of securitization (De Lauri 2019).

The more crises we are exposed to, the more complex securitarian architectures are provided by state, international, and private actors. What Tine Hanrieder and Christian Kreuder-Sonnen (2014) call the “emergency trap” refers to the capacity of international organizations to use emergency powers that feed the securitization–exceptionalism nexus. The emergency trap continuously expands the space for security needs and plays a crucial role in shaping the way insecurity is collectively perceived.

Crisis, on the other hand, constitutes the lifeblood of the humanitarian system itself. Arguably, there is no humanitarianism without crisis. Studies of illegality have shown that when border barriers are used as infrastructures to combat criminal organizations, they do not reduce illegal trafficking. On the contrary, illegal flows are connected to the business of bordering (Van Schendel and Abraham 2005). Anthropological research on the US-Mexico border, for example, has largely addressed the political economy of borders and the link between global capitalism and states’ production of borders (Alvarez 1995; De León 2015; Lugo 2008). The explosion of crises, therefore, always corresponds to the fortification of some forms of power.

To explore the meaning, legitimization, and power entailed in representing the refugee crisis in Europe, anthropologists Seth Holmes and Heide Castañeda (2016) suggest returning to Antonio Gramsci’s notion of a “war of position.” As both a continuation and a contrast with the concept of a “war of manoeuvre,” the war of

position is defined by the struggle over symbols that legitimize and shape political-economic structures. Boats of refugees in the sea, human flows across borders, and refugee centers in collapse are all framed and experienced as part of a humanitarian crisis. These are moments in “the war of position and war of manoeuver when hegemony and the architecture of a social world are at stake,” with upcoming “structural and symbolic realities unknown” (2016: 13). Holmes and Castañeda argue that Gramsci himself consistently conceived of crisis “as a moment of openness in which ‘the old is dying and the new cannot be born’” (2016: 13).

For Gramsci (1967, 1975), the future is a political product, the effect of an actualized political will that is able to transform the social environment. To accelerate and shape the future, there are two different possibilities. The first one corresponds to the capacity to extend such a political will to the number of people needed to make that political will productive, a quantitative form of progress. The second possibility is qualitative progress, which refers to the capacity to intensify the political will within an existing minority until it reaches the equation  $1 = 1,000,000$  (Gramsci 1967: 55).<sup>1</sup>

In the current European context, characterized by multiple discourses over immigration, hospitality, hostility, and rejection, humanitarianism manages to produce both quantitative and qualitative progress. That is to say, it is able to accelerate and shape the future through a progressive humanitarization of a world to come. This process concretely translates into the bureaucratization of aid (Dunn 2012), the professionalization of solidarity (Olesen 2008), the stratification and hierarchization of victimhood and, in this specific case, the reproduction of the crisis of borders. Clearly, border crises in the European context did not begin with and are not limited to recent migration and refugee flows. Tensions between nation-states in the eastern part of Europe (for instance, between Ukraine and Russia) and ongoing territorial disputes (for example, over Gibraltar) indicate that the stability of the nation-state notwithstanding, “the issue of bordering, of ordering territory, is still fraught with fragility and contention” (Hess and Kasperek 2017: 58). However, the humanitarian crisis of borders transcends the realm of territorial control to enhance a mode of governance that extends to the entire life trajectory of multitudes of people. Consistent with European Union migration policies, the humanitarization of borders reiterates the vision of the “irregular” migrant as both a life that needs

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<sup>1</sup> The book is a collection of Gramsci’s political writings that appeared mostly during the period 1914–1921 in *Avanti*, *La città futura*, *Il grido del popolo*, *L’ordine nuovo*.

protection and a security threat to protect from (Vaughan-Williams 2015). Transformed into a humanitarian crisis, the violence on borders does not appear as an instrument of exclusion but, rather, as a response to emergency. The exacerbation of security and control therefore becomes acceptable and legitimate in the public discourse through its humanitarian reconfiguration. The multilevel humanitarian response to crisis does not implement or support violent means of control per se. However, by enabling forces of contingency, humanitarizing borders turns violence into a “zone of protection.” The violent control at borders becomes acceptable because of the emergency that needs humanitarian responses. In the Mediterranean “hotspots,” we see today two apparently different narratives and forms of action: state policing, control, and rejection, on the one hand, and rescue and assistance provided by humanitarian organizations, on the other. What has been recently called the “Black Mediterranean” to describe the history of racial subordination in the Mediterranean region pushes us to situate the contemporary migrant and refugee crisis in the context of Europe’s history of empire, colonialism, and transatlantic slavery (Danewid 2017: 1679), thus reconnecting historical forms of humanitarian assistance with the construction of a specifically European form of border governance.

Of course, even if today’s humanitarian goals at the border contribute to inequality, we might be inclined to distinguish between actors and activism—not least to avoid blaming all humanitarians for contributing to exclusion and death. However, although this distinction is worthwhile and evokes a different ethos embodied by state actors and humanitarian organizations, border policing and humanitarian rescue belong to the same episteme to the extent that they take place within a humanitarian space governed by exceptionalism and emergency. It is in the framework of this contingent geography of crisis that we can understand how regimes of protection are affirmed and how the freedom of movement is dismantled. In short, Europe is currently being walled up. One of the most notorious examples is Hungary, where, in July 2015, its president announced the construction of a four-meter-high fence along its border with Serbia to prevent refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan from “trespassing” across Hungarian national borders. Consistent with this approach, the Hungarian parliament approved a controversial law enabling all asylum seekers in the country to be detained in “transit areas” (camps) and forced back into neighboring Serbia. As of June 2016, nearly 146 kilometers of the planned 166 kilometers of the barrier had been constructed on the border between Bulgaria

and Turkey as a response to increased migrant flows (De Lauri 2018). Elsewhere, regimes of border control in various countries are displacing migrants caught between different borders. As a result of the large number of migrants and asylum seekers traveling across its land borders in the past few years, Greece has increasingly fortified and militarized its border with Turkey—including the areas affected by landmines hidden from earlier conflicts. This process has led to the displacement of thousands of migrants between the Turkish-Greek and the Bulgarian-Turkish borders. The new politics of fencing today finds its legal and political justification in the framework of FRONTEX, the agency tasked with border control for the European Union.

In our globalized world, freedom of movement is still a mirage, especially for migrants left with no more than their labor force to sell in the capitalist transnational market. Paradoxically (although not surprisingly), the entire architecture of border control in Europe has been rationalized and justified as an effort to “protect” migrants and refugees. In the process, much was gleaned from earlier humanitarian efforts to fight human trafficking and regulate human mobility. Within the new geography of emergency and crisis, a powerful regime has been put in place, one that legitimizes a wide array of actions to keep mobility under control (Sharma 2017). The criminalization of migrants and the consequent reproduction of a vulnerable labor force to be used in host countries (De Giorgi 2010) are relevant in this picture. As much as humanitarian interventions across the globe have been often accompanied by neoliberal projects of economic and political expansion (De Lauri 2016), the humanitarization of the border crisis coherently responds to and shapes new economic and political challenges in Europe.

To describe something as a humanitarian crisis implies facilitating specific forms of action but disallowing others, enabling the public to think about a specific issue in one way but not in another (Scott-Smith 2016). Moreover, once a crisis is qualified in specific terms (that is, as a humanitarian crisis), it directly calls for a specific power to manage and administer it. In opposition to a historical narration that is “disrupted and episodic” (Gramsci 1975), the humanitarization of borders in crisis is a universal salvific narrative that creates a constant nexus between human suffering and the need for humanitarian exceptionalism. This exceptionalism in managing borders translates into exaggerated security practices and consolidates the hierarchization of borders as something “natural”—thus normalizing the political and social scrutiny of those who can and those who cannot cross a border. At the

same time, the humanitarian border transforms the social and legal status of border crossers by enhancing mechanisms that reproduce victimhood and perpetuate categories of people eternally in need of help. Since 2015, the invocation of tragedy, and thus the question of crisis, has served as an ordering principle to reinforce the fortification of various forms of border policing (De Genova 2017a). One main feature of such a humanitarian strategy at the mercy of state political actors is the polarization between “irregular migrants” and innocent victims. In this context, policing (to reject “irregular migrants”) and piety (to help victims), violence (deportation, confinement), and promise (help “them” at “home” and welcome those “who are really in need”)<sup>2</sup> become components of a humanitarian framework that is founded in crisis itself.

### **A critique of crisis**

Due to its propensity to feed and reproduce power, crisis should be constantly subject to critique. Didier Fassin (2017) has recently emphasized that critique is under attack both in academic circles and public fora. By drafting a genealogy of critique, Dario Gentili (2016) has noted that to be questioned and challenged today is not critique as a modality of judgment. On the contrary, what we see today is a diffused criticism, enhanced by new media and new technologies and conditioned by the neoliberal market. It is the figure of the intellectual and the act of political critique that are increasingly marginalized. The proliferation of crises should solicit a reinvigorated critique as both a political act and a “process of social ferment” (Koselleck 1988).

Elsewhere, I have pointed out the distinction between criticism and critique (De Lauri 2016). Wendy Brown (2009) has reminded us that critique has been distinguished from criticism for much of modernity, especially for Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx, who distanced themselves from “criticasters,” and “critical critics,” respectively. Even though the fact remains that critique seems to intrinsically

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<sup>2</sup> Many political leaders use such a categorization to distinguish between deserving migrants and undeserving others. For instance, Tomáš Zdechovský, a member of the Czech center-right European People’s Party, said, “I was surprised these people were not refugees. It was revealed during the special procedure when they gave their true purposes away. We should help people who really need it, like those escaping from Syria, and let the other ones know the EU has the right to choose.” See <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/refugees-or-migrants-the-eu-grapples-with-definitions/>.

replicate a tacit presumption of reason's capacity to unveil errors (Brown 2009), I would argue that the distinction between criticism and critique is based on a further difference: criticism is a way of simply reiterating a counterdiscourse, while critique is stimulated by a generative force. For the same reason, critique should not be confused with skepticism, which "involves suspension of belief in something," or with radical epistemological skepticism, which "involves an attempted—or affected—suspension of belief in everything" (Sayer 2009: 770). With its inclination to remain bonded to the order produced by the subject being criticized, criticism serves to reproduce power, insofar as a certain level of criticism is what makes a hierarchical order legitimate. If criticism were not allowed, this order would appear to be totalitarian as a matter of course. Critique, in contrast, produces new ways of reimagining the world. This generative force makes critique, rather than metahistorical, fully immersed in the time to which it belongs. I understand this form of critique as the result of the intellectual engagement of a critical mass of people with specific public concerns, for example, mobility and borders. Here, critique is a modality of imagining the world in other ways. Critique itself seems to carry a utopian quality—and thus a certain level of dependence on ideology and an intrinsic impossibility of being "disinterested" (Wallerstein 2006). By extending the reflections of João Biehl and Ramah McKay (2012), it is possible to argue that critique is a means of repopulating the public imagination. Hence, it is linked to public consciousness and is required for animating any moral and political dialectic.

Although today we see growing criticism targeting the management of borders and the treatment accorded to border crossers, such criticism remains tied to the discursive domain of humanitarian borders. An example is the discourse that we should protect migrants but also control them; we should help them, but only at their "home." Criticism solicits contrasting feelings of pity and fear and reproduces the dominant refrain of humanitarian crisis. Arguments of innocence (e.g., the innocence of those who die at sea) and compassion (generated by agonizing images of border crossers) are thus used to legitimize humanitarian exceptionalism and a contingent politics of suffering. By contrast, critique points to the legal and political structural changes required to create the conditions to ensure the rights and freedom of populations on the move and identifies them beyond humanitarian borders. As Miriam Ticktin (2016) has put it, to argue against humanitarian borders is not to claim that there is no place for emotion in the face of suffering and death. Rather, it is to create space for an "affective politics" (2016: 268) that supports

different projects of equality and fits with different political visions. A critique of crisis is an invitation to move beyond humanitarian borders, to move beyond emergency.

Freedom of movement and the protection of border crossers are not actually humanitarian problems: they are political imperatives, issues that belong to the realm of politics rather than humanitarian emergency. The capacity of crisis to push freedom and protection outside the sphere of ordinary politics into the realm of humanitarian exceptionalism generates conditions that suspend the political democratic project and neutralize durable political efforts. The scope of a critique of crisis thus substantially overlaps with a “critique of power” (Saar 2010) as an endeavor opposed to both “neutral control” and hierarchical categorization. Such a critique presupposes an idea of mobility as a political project of equality. Although this final intention might be shared by many humanitarian actors engaged in rescue and assistance operations across borders, the way humanitarian emergency frames the issue of mobility and migration produces opposite effects (e.g., processes that frame some border crossers as victims and others as criminals).

### **From humanitarianism to political change**

In 1914, Antonio Gramsci recognized the gravity of the political and military situation in Europe, noting that the consequences of that historical moment would be severe and dramatic for the future of humanity. A proper political response, he emphasized, could not take the “comfortable position of absolute neutrality” (Gramsci 1967: 9). Europe has changed since then, and it would be misleading to construe that historical narrative as a mirror of today’s challenges. What is still meaningful, though, is Gramsci’s concerns over neutrality.

Given the relevance of hidden “power agendas,” the politics of humanitarian negotiation, and the broader sphere of humanitarian diplomacy to provide access to certain forms of aid and assistance, humanitarian neutrality has long been questioned. Yet it continues to be a key principle of the contemporary public humanitarian domain—despite a certain degree of difference in terms of how it is interpreted and practiced by different humanitarian agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). It has been argued that, in the context of contemporary migration flows, aid organizations find themselves at a crossroads: they can “hold onto neutrality and impartiality, or they can question these principles entirely”

(Scott-Smith 2016: 17). But overall, neutrality, along with humanity, impartiality, and independence, still provides the foundations for humanitarian action. Such a “presumed neutrality” obfuscates the very notion of political will or political intention. An increasing number of NGOs and humanitarian practitioners consider neutrality to be marginal (at times, even counterproductive) when compared to the main challenge to “leave no one behind” and guarantee access to aid, but there is still a gap between public policy and concrete strategies of humanitarian practice. As a result of this tacit political attitude, humanitarianism provides some political actors (e.g., right-wing political parties in Italy) with fertile ground to implement emergency politics and avoid debates over structural political changes—thus perpetrating the conditions for the *longue durée* of nondurable solutions. Indeed, the action required to address issues such as the rights of migrants and freedom of movement is not a (presumed) neutral humanitarian action but an explicitly political kind. In a democratic context, political action is part of the ordinary democratic process. Humanitarian action, on the contrary, is not intrinsically democratic: it is intended to solve an immediate emergency and, by its own nature, is extraordinary and contingent. The expansion of contingency to the realm of ordinary politics is what normalizes emergency and the use of force.

The contemporary humanitarian machinery constitutes a coherent strategic framework (Duffield 2001) that integrates different elements such as aid apparatuses, diplomacy, private investment, and military force into a single functional role. Humanitarianism is not merely a substitute for explicit political action and political projects; it is also the expression of the historical persistence of a salvation philosophy that “becomes an industry pretending to be free of political self-interest” (Nader and Savinar 2016: 53). A critique of crisis and humanitarian borders, I believe, corresponds to the effort of thinking politically beyond the appearance of the humanitarian order of things. It is a way to relocate ordinary politics—rather than exceptionalism—at the core of our understanding of political action and change.

Against this background, I envision ordinary politics as an avenue to counter the humanitarization of borders and all that accompanies it. Invoking ordinary politics should not be taken as a suggestion to imagine the realm of politics as an apologetic space in which doing good is the rule and the political dialectic goes smoothly. Nor do ordinary politics exclusively refer to state politics. Rather, I summon the concept of ordinary politics to refer to the democratic exercise and

ongoing confrontation of hegemonic political power, which is, by definition, subject to critique. In fact, the notion of ordinary politics covers a rich spectrum of political activities, ranging from demonstrations to political party initiatives, from grassroots activities to local governance, from institutional action to spontaneous forms of public engagement. I contrast this idea of ordinary politics with humanitarianism as the politics of protracted emergency in which political change is substituted with a neutral administration of contingency.

Political change is notoriously not univocal (Werlin and Eckstein 1990). My focus on political change stresses the need to imagine an alternative to humanitarization by creating the space for different political subjectivities to emerge in the realm of ordinary politics. It is also worth clarifying that political change does not necessarily result into a more just and equal world. Indeed, it would not necessarily lead to open borders. Nevertheless, it is in the realm of politics that different actors can claim their rights—beyond their temporary humanitarian protection. Asylum seekers and migrants “embody a quest for liberty, rather than for help. They demand rights, rather than permissions” (Albahari 2015: 2). It is in the arena of political struggle that migrants and refugees can claim freedom of movement and their social and political rights, not in the limbo of their exceptional and protracted humanitarian victimhood. Following a critique of crisis, the space of political change is revealed to be the space of “conscious action” (Gramsci 1967), of declared political projects.

For Gramsci (1975), the possibility of political action arises from critical awareness and historical consciousness. This is an aspect of crucial relevance to the current European context. The historical narrative produced by discourses of humanitarian crises transforms migrants’ political subjectivity into the mere expression of their basic needs. When not considered as social threats (e.g. “irregular migrants”), border crossers are depicted as voiceless victims, therefore reinforcing the “individualizing effects” (Kallius 2016) of the current governance of mobility. At the same time, the narrative of crisis fosters the image of the migrant as a radical Other. As Holmes and Castañeda (2016) have noted, Europe has been caught between two simultaneous responses: hospitality versus xenophobia, compassionate pragmatism versus fear of (cultural and religious) difference. Although mostly neglected in mainstream media and humanitarian propaganda, a racial mechanism of repulsion still underlies attitudes in today’s Europe (De Genova 2017b).

Humanitarian borders reflect the political and conceptual shift away from legal borders and portray policing operations as articulations of a politics of compassion and repatriation. The merging of humanitarian search-and-rescue operations with state-sovereign performances on European borders is the counterpoint to the complex architecture of confinement in the Middle East and Africa (“helping migrants where they are”). Rejection and restraint, in this perspective, mutually serve the main function of keeping migrants and refugees in their “home countries” while reframing the geographical substance and the political extension of borders. The critique of humanitarian borders informs a political history of the present that aims to detach mobility from the hegemonic narration of crisis, perpetual victimhood, and radical otherness. It is against the backdrop of critique, I argue, that the space for political participation and political change emerges.

## **Conclusion**

The humanitarization of borders has introduced new dichotomies into the domain of mobility and borders management, such as rescue/policing, crisis/need, victim/criminal, and emergency/control. These dichotomies, however, do not simply function as a politics of the oxymoron. Rather, they structure a governance of borders in which radicalized security regimes and hierarchies of mobility are both nourished by compassionate humanitarian goals. I have suggested that to open the space for political action and change, we need to move beyond the constraints of humanitarian crisis. This implies the possibility of recognizing multiple political subjectivities in the realm of ordinary politics rather than humanitarian exceptionalism.

Historically, borders have reflected the state’s order of things. In contemporary Europe, frontiers between national territories also reflect a humanitarian (b)order of things governed by imperatives of crisis and contingency. The role of the state is not diminishing, as some would argue, but is reinforced in the framework of humanitarian crisis. The force and violence that the state is able to exercise on its borders are increasing as a legitimized reaction to crisis. In response, the critique of crisis represents an instance of political action that aims to rethink borders outside of the humanitarian domain—thus delegitimizing violent borders. The critique of humanitarian borders does not translate into the absence of an empathetic vision of human suffering. Quite the contrary: critique questions a vision

of suffering that justifies the reproduction of victimhood, and it echoes the emergence of the diverse political subjectivities that borders crossers experience and strive to express.

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