

## What does the sea say to the shore?

This question starts a famous joke which was repeated plenty of times aboard our rescue ship, the *Sea-Watch 3*, during its seventeenth mission. This first effective rescue mission, after the ship had been held unlawfully for 4 months in Malta, ended on January 9, 2019, when the crew was eventually allowed to disembark 32 people, whom they had rescued at sea, 19 days earlier. For 19 days European states had prevented the ship from entering port and disembarking the survivors of the deadliest border in the world to a safe place. A disgraceful hostage situation that would repeat itself multiple times over the course of the next months, as Italy's neo-fascist interior minister Matteo Salvini picked our ships as his vehicle to bring Europe's border policy to a head.

For what is happening in the Mediterranean Sea is not a natural disaster, not a catastrophe. It is a cold-blooded death trap that claimed (likely much more than the official number of) 15.700 lives – only in the past six years. Europe has created a zone at its margins, where all its proclaimed values, its civil and human rights are suspended: *A state of exception*. The EU has weaponized the sea with a brutally simple aim: lock out the unwanted, kill those who dare to try and break in, and thus deter whoever might want to come after.

The genesis of this state of exception goes back until the early 1970s, when Europe had started to shut, step by step, its doors to legal labour immigration. Just like the Sahara (the first row external border, which might even have cost more lives than the sea), the Mediterranean had silently become a cemetery ever since. And for a very long time there was almost no one out there who could have witnessed and reported on this silent piling up of corpses, proving all the alleged humanist values of the European Union lies. For what does the sea say to the shore? *Nothing, just waves*.

## What a ship can do

But then came the ships. The other Europe, the civil society, decided to no longer watch the "failure of the EU" – so went the initial analysis – and counter the dying at “their” external border. In 2015, our *M/S Sea-Watch*, a 100-years-old fishing cutter, became the first renegade lifeboat and set an example for what would soon become a civil fleet.<sup>1</sup> A fleet which in turn became a symbol of solidarity and resistance against the neo-fascist tendencies inside the EU and its member states. How could that happen?

First and foremost, a ship is only a vessel. It contains, shelters and moves those aboard through the infinite unsteadiness of the maritime environment. A ship therefore can explore and scout by taking its crew and passengers to places they otherwise couldn't reach. It acts as a bridge between areas otherwise separated by water and it can even be a bridge between the land and the sea itself. A lifeboat in particular and more than any other vessel, embodies the sheltering function. It does not just protect those who are already on board but it takes on the brave effort to retrieve and shelter those, who had already been delivered to the mercy of the waves.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I decided to ignore the controversial organization MOAS (Migrant Offshore Aid Station), which had already sent a rescue ship in 2014, but which I do not regard as a purely civilian NGO due to its close ties to state & corporate actors.

To explore and to shelter, Sea-Watch took to the central Mediterranean Sea. Only a few months before the one and only large scale state-run rescue effort, Italian operation *Mare Nostrum* had come to an end, after only one year, due to a lack of support by other EU member states. So on June 20, World Refugee Day 2015, the *MS Sea-Watch* sailed South from Lampedusa. The intent was political; not primarily to rescue but to monitor and raise pressure on European politics, by shining a light on the dire “failure of the EU” and by calling in state-run rescue assets. An approach that should quickly and continuously be disappointed over the following months and years.

The engaging humanitarian effort, however, superimposed the political losses, at first: Only one day after the *Sea-Watch*, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) sent their *Dignity 1* from Malta, which was joined shortly after by the *Bourbon Argos*. Other NGOs adopted the idea and also started rescue missions in the Mediterranean: SOS Méditerranée's *Aquarius*, Proactiva Open Arms' *Astral*, Jugend Rettet's *Iuventa* and the *Sea-Eye* joined the fleet in the beginning of 2016. By the end of that year thirteen ships and Sea-Watch's newly launched aircraft operation *Moonbird* were patrolling the so-called search and rescue (SAR) zone, off the coast of Libya.

A ship provides shelter but a ship also demands something in return, namely the constant care to keep it not just afloat but in the best possible shape. There are few workplaces more demanding than a ship, as the relentless onslaught of wind, waves, and salt, needs to be countered just as relentlessly with rust remover, paint, and all kinds of repairs. It is a vulnerable life-support-system and as „C.L.R. James points out in his great book about Melville (written in 1952 in a cell on Ellis Island, where he awaited his deportation from the United States due to “anti-American activities”), is at its core nothing more than the variegated entirety of the work and activities of those on board, which literally constitutes it.“<sup>2</sup> This work of hundreds of volunteers and professionals on board those ships and in our back offices had materialized in a fleet of vessels that gave shelter – to a simultaneously amazing and captivating number of 46.796 people in 2016 alone – not only from the wavy temper of the open sea but also from the clinical hostility of the European border regime. Such a success in saving lives comes with a responsibility not to stop, for better or for worse.

The ship, as Michel Foucault points out, has not just a functional layer. It “has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.”<sup>3</sup> This might explain why our ships – with names like *Aquarius*, *Iuventa*, *Mare Jonio*, *Open Arms*, *Alan Kurdi* or *Sea-Watch 3* – served not only as a vehicle for people. They also came to serve as a vehicle for the idea of a Europe in solidarity, a European society that comes to aid instead of shutting the door in your face. Despite it being in many ways much harder to provide continuous legal or educational support for new-arrivals or

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<sup>2</sup> Mezzadra, Sandro / *Mediterranea: We have a ship*. Available at: <http://www.euronomade.info/?p=11154>

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, Michel: *Of Other Spaces (1967). Heterotopias*. Available at: <https://foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en/>

fighting right-wing tendencies in the neighborhoods of central Europe, than to rescue people from distress at sea, it was this act of defending the absolute minimum of solidarity and the deeply rooted seafarer's principle that "every single life that is at risk at sea must be made safe", that became a symbolic act of resistance.

Or as our friends from *Mediterranea* put it, when they first raised the question "What can a ship do?": "Our ship has been appropriated and somehow reinvented from a wide range of standpoints that go from occupied social centers to parishes, universities and schools, from small town circles to metropolitan assemblies."<sup>4</sup>

### What a ship can't do

A ship is a self-sustaining microcosm for its time at sea: The crew sustains the ship and the ship sustains the crew and guests. This time is limited, primarily by fuel and food, sometimes by spare parts but also by other factors; in our case, for example, by the time our volunteer crew members can afford to spend on the ship. Every ship has to come back to port eventually, otherwise it would also lose its constitutive function as a bridge between land(s) and sea. „Praise the sea, stay close to the shore“ says a Dalmatian sailor's proverb.

A ship depends on land. It depends on the safety of a port to seek shelter from being a shelter itself. A lifeboat can rescue but a rescue operation at sea is by definition only concluded once the rescued people have been brought to a place of safety (POS). And while it can be a symbol of solidarity and resistance, a ship can never provide any of these actions alone or only for a very limited time. If you rescue people from a boat without being able to land them, the rescue is not completed and the people's situation hasn't changed much to the better. A ship that flies the jolly roger of resistance at sea but has no port to go to is isolated in the short and doomed in the long run.

The Atlantic pirates of the golden age – a tellingly short time from 1716 until 1727 – had to learn this the very hard way, when the nation states of the time agreed to treat their „Tribe, as the Common Enemies of Mankind, and [to] extirpate them out of the World.“ This campaign to “cleanse the seas” was mainly undertaken ashore, by people of the land: "royal officials, attorneys, merchants, publicists, clergymen, and writers who created, through proclamations, legal briefs, petitions, pamphlets, sermons, and newspaper articles, an image of the pirate that would legitimate his annihilation. The rhetorical, military, and legal campaign would, in the end, be successful. Piracy would come to an end by 1726."<sup>5</sup>

The modern nation states of the European Union undertook their very own campaign to cleanse the seas: "While [the EU operations] *Eunavfor Med* and *Frontex Triton* had contributed to search and rescue in the area next to Libyan waters in late 2015 and 2016, their assets [...] gradually withdrew from that area between 2016 and 2017, in order to leave the Libyan Coast Guard free to push back migrants, as well as to chase and intimidate NGO vessels."<sup>6</sup> The EU-funded coalition of

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<sup>4</sup> Caccia, Beppe & Mezzadra, Sandro: *What can a ship do?* Available at: <http://www.euronmade.info/?p=11466>

<sup>5</sup> Rediker, Markus: *Villains of all Nations. Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age.* Beacon Press, (Boston, 2004)

<sup>6</sup> Cuttitta, Paolo: *Pushing Migrants Back to Libya, Persecuting Rescue NGOs: The End of the Humanitarian Turn (Part I).* Available at: <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2018/04/pushing-migrants>

Libyan militias, operating under the label *Libyan Coast Guard*, had already threatened and boarded *Sea-Watch 2* in April 2016. They then endangered the ship and its crew again with a breakneck manoeuvre, crossing its bow, on May 10, 2017. In August they fired at the *Bourbon Argos* and boarded it, in September they abducted the powerboat *Speedy* including crew to Libya (the crew was released shortly afterwards, the boat was not). In November the patrol boat *Taleel 267* even inadvertently harassed the German navy frigate *Mecklenburg-Vorpommern*.

At the same time, key positions on land – *royal officials, attorneys, and publicists* – began to inject the assertion into public discourse that NGOs worked hand in hand with smugglers. The first official to come up with such allegations was Sicilian public prosecutor Carmelo Zuccaro. He had initiated investigations into such connections in early 2017 and later even claimed to have found evidence, which he remains short of providing to this day. His allegations though, were gratefully received by right-wingers all over Europe, from Austrian then-minister of foreign affairs, Sebastian Kurz, who proclaimed "*the NGO madness needs to end*", to the two then Italian opposition parties *Movimento 5 Stelle* and *Lega Nord*, which, almost exactly one year later, would form a joint government.

On August 2, 2017, Italian authorities seized the rescue ship *Iuventa*. Many NGOs abandoned the Mediterranean theatre at this point, while on the other side of the sea the so-called Libyan Coast Guard was further equipped, financed, trained and even supplied with a command centre aboard an Italian war ship, moored in the port of Tripoli. One year later Matteo Salvini had closed the Italian ports via Twitter and the remaining five rescue ships were held in Malta or Spain, or had lost their flag and were faced with criminal charges. For months not a single rescue ship would enter the death zone below the 34th degree North latitude.

But the final chapter had not yet been written: Salvini's declaration of war on the NGOs, for which he was celebrated among his right-wing allies all over Europe, and the political centre's telltale connivance, provided a new momentum. Sea rescue became a resistance movement: Tens of thousands took to the streets in Germany under the banner of the *Seebrücke* (sea bridge) and all over Europe, demanding open ports and solidarity cities, following the example of the US sanctuary cities. With the support of Sea-Watch a new rescue operation, the civil society platform *Mediterranea*, came into existence and sent the first Italian-flagged ship, the *Mare Jonio*, in direct response to "il capitano" Salvini. Over the course of half a year the remaining 3 to 4 rescue ships, supported by civil rights movements, fought a war of attrition with the Italian interior minister. This war culminated in the *Sea-Watch 3*'s final 18-day stand-off in front of Lampedusa, which ended in Captain Carola Rackete's disobedient entering of the port of Lampedusa in a declared state of necessity.

Together with Pia Klemp, another famous (and criminalization-affected) female captain, Carola Rackete provided the sea rescue narrative, already highly charged with meanings, with yet another symbolic layer: The heroine captain. "*It was once the man who went to sea and into the world, leaving behind the docile or lamenting woman on the mainland and in the narrow home. But now it is precisely the men who stay behind lamenting, who wish for walls and borders, who close ports and shout "send her back" to the [...] globetrotting, courageous, cool and self-sufficient [female] captains. Of course, first of all, reality is once again more complicated, and*

secondly, the bad guys usually win. But at least we have a story again that gives hope and can awaken rebellious spirits.”<sup>7</sup>

### Exploitation and criminalization

The civil sea rescue fleet (including the often forgotten, but groundbreaking and indispensable *AlarmPhone*) surely has provided an epic story over the past five years. But neither have we gotten any closer to a credible solution, to actually end the deadly state of exception in the central Med, nor is the story free of contradictions. Reality is once again more complicated:

While setting out to end the dying, the civil fleet has also relieved the states from their vexatious plight to intervene and mask at least the ugliest and most blatant ramifications of their politics. Humanitarian reason: *"The same political world order that creates catastrophic conditions shifts the consequences and how they're dealt with off into the sphere of individual morality, in fact turning it into a private affair."*<sup>8</sup> This inherent logic of humanitarianism has led many people to actually believe, that the drama around Europe's external borders could come to a satisfactory end if only there was reliable sea rescue. By playing on this notion (inadvertently or by not knowing better) the sea rescue NGOs are surely playing their part in masking the cold blooded reality of what the EU border regime sovereignly brings about.

And even worse: if it wasn't for this political exploitability of sea rescue – as well as for a closely related mechanism, in which some political stakeholders could consolidate their moral superiority over others in the EU – the SAR fleet might have been much more effectively shut down over a year ago. The tragic monument of *Iuventa* is a constant reminder of what EU authorities are capable of and how defenseless our structures are, when it comes to an actual government crackdown: A ship that saved over 16.000 lives now left to rust since two years, in the Italian port of Trapani. Its crew ever since under the ongoing threat of judicial persecution.

Our ships and planes operate not only in the constantly changing environment of the open sea but in a political environment that is just as erratic and unpredictable. Most the time, we battle upwind, against the waves on a course that turns your stomach. It gives the impression of fighting the good fight, and, for sure, as even the notoriously critical *Gegenstandpunkt* has to admit in their open letter to the sea rescuers: We always have the morally unbeatable "at least", "shall we just watch?", "after all..." on our side.

The question is, if we want to remain there. I believe I am speaking at least for many activists within Sea-Watch and Mediterranea, when I say no. And for sure in many small events, at sea and ashore, we are already creating spaces and narratives that go beyond *at least* and call for a new vision of Europe symbolized in the rescue ship; a space of solidarity, of a caring multitude and of a common struggle against the omnipresent adversity of a world divided by competing nation states. After all, no matter how politicians on land try to hijack them for their own agenda, our ships are heterotopias – *other places* – in which the

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<sup>7</sup> Seeßlen, Georg: *Oh Captain, mein Captain*. In: Jungle World, 26.07.2019. (Translated from German). <https://jungle.world/artikel/2019/30/oh-captain-mein-captain>

<sup>8</sup> Gruppe Gegenstandpunkt: *Offener Brief an die Seenotretter und ihre Sympathisanten*. (Translated from German). <https://gegenstandpunkt.com/artikel/offener-brief-an-seenotretter-ihre-sympathisanten>

surrounding state of exception loses its power. The simple act of saving lives, which, according to the sovereign powers, shouldn't be saved, has proven to be a powerful narrative. It washes ashore in waves that tell tales. What will the land reply to the sea?

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