Europe's Border Disorder

Rodrigo Bueno Lacy and Henk van Houtum, Dec 5 2013

On the 7th of October 2013 the EU added around 350 corpses to the mass grave that it has been piling up in the Mediterranean. These needlessly wasted lives speak not only of the EU's appalling border management. They should be taken as a warning of a far wider tragedy unfolding all across the EU. The dead African migrants could be thought as potentially dead EU citizens. The disregard for their humanity may be seen as a dramatic result of the expanding disrespect for minorities all across the EU.

In 1951, the EU started as a project intended to breathe life into the injured body of a continent mauled by the savagery of nationalistic hubris. The horrid trauma of a landscape filled with doom and the very credible threat of its reoccurrence brought statesmen around to the then incredible proposal of surrendering part of their sovereignty to a supranational institution (Vernon, 1953:183). 'No more war'; brandishing this adage the bold politicians of that time tried to rally the hearts and minds of a destroyed Europe. Despite its fanciful idealism, this conflict resolution mechanism has indeed managed to turn vicious dictatorships and devastated nations into one of the most developed regions in the world (UNDP, 2013). By showering wealth on the inflaming rhetoric of unscrupulous nationalists, dispassionate technocrats in Brussels have marginalized such demagogues to the fringes of political life since World War II (Featherstone, 1994). However, the EU's legitimacy has been eroded by the current crisis, in which new demagogues have found an unprecedented opportunity to put forward their disingenuous yet highly evocative appeals for a retreat into nationalism as the solution to the self-inflicted economic crisis. A little over six decades after the mayhem from which the EU emerged, Europe is again being swayed by an angry political discourse now espoused by increasingly powerful political figures such as Marine Le Pen in France, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Nigel Farage in the UK and Marian Kotleba in Slovakia—among many others of the kind—who appear bound to sweep electoral majorities in forthcoming national and EU elections (Economist, 2013b). More worryingly still is that in order to court a growing number of increasingly dissatisfied voters, center and even left-wing political parties have been engaged in the self-defeating political maneuver of adopting—and thus legitimizing—this populist rhetoric of closure, discrimination and xenophobia.

Paranoia and fear are fuelling the delusion that a dome can be built around the EU, as if the whole polity could somehow quarantine itself from the problems of a globalization in which it plays a central role itself. EU-phobia is increasingly overshadowing EU-phoria and with it an inside-looking fear is taking over outward-looking extroversion. The retreat into nationalism as a solution to the woes of EU members is breeding a yearning for a national essence and thus resuscitating dangerous anxieties for the loss of cultural and racial homogeneity (Spire, 2013). Promoting policies aimed at keeping foreign influences at bay finds its most concrete political expression in the bodies of migrants. We argue here that the border regime in the Mediterranean is inextricably bound to the future of the EU. Beyond exposing the hypocrisy of a Union that derives great diplomatic strength from its supposed exaltation of human rights (Manners, 2002:240-252), the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean threaten the very foundations upon which the EU rests. Those who believe that the demise of migrants in the Mediterranean is a calamity that stops at the boundaries of the EU fool themselves. The souls of the migrants drowned in its waters not only decry an inhumane border regime but haunt the very soul of a political project that derives a great deal of its legitimacy from the prevention of such atrocities (Schuman, 1950).

What used to be unspeakable anxieties over purification have become the battle cry of xenophobic, racist and EU-skeptic political movements across the EU. Their bitter rhetoric of deportations, detention camps, militarized borders and harassing immigration regimes is becoming not only publicly acceptable, but mainstream in the public debate of both member states and the EU. The overall grand strategy of these tactics is a retreat from openness and an entrenchment in nationalism. An enthusiasm for diversity is being replaced by an ever-deeper fear of what may be coming from beyond either national or the EU's external

borders. Unscrupulous politicians motivated by the expected reward of political prominence are showing no qualms in going to the basement of their intentions to dust the blunt tools of inflammatory speech. Their solutions to highly complex problems rely on primitive oversimplifications that end up blaming what historically have been the most exploitable scapegoats in times of hardness: vulnerable minorities with poor political representation. For all these opportunistic politicians care, society may be ripped apart if this is what it takes for them to reap the political success they crave.

The EU is manifesting a museum-like mentality that seems to suggest that Europe can only be saved by submitting itself to a glorious taxidermy driven by the ruinous desire to entrench in autarkic nationalisms. As if preserving an inexistent essential nation in the alchemical formol of timelessness was a better alternative than exposing it to the vicissitudes of flows and the naturally unavoidable changes they bring about. It's a self-destructive scheme that advocates the dereliction of the EU in order to keep it pure and homogenous. Afflicted by this 'border disorder', the EU keeps confining itself to a special sanctuary while assigning migrants the status of intruders, as if Europeans were a special species on this planet and immigrants a lower life form. This is a dangerous mentality leading to more—not less—panic and fear (van Houtum & Pijpers, 2007; Van Houtum 2010). The EU is biting its own tail blinded by the delusion that tearing itself apart is the answer to its anxieties. For, how can the EU expect to undermine the new nationalism that feeds populist anti-EU parties by feeding their very rhetoric with more fear of migrants? And how can the EU boast about being a staunch promoter of human rights—that by definition have a universal application—while turning a blind eye to thousands of preventable and needless deaths in the Mediterranean?

By undermining the scope of the universal rights it is supposed to promote, the EU weakens not only the rights of migrants that should be the subject of its protection but also the rights of its own citizens and the cohesion of its own populations. The violent migratory policies along the Mediterranean stigmatize local immigrant communities in EU member states and justify fear against them. This in turn breeds resentment among local immigrant communities—many of whose members hold EU passports—towards their own national state and the EU, whom they see badmouthing and tarnishing people similar to them. It is not difficult to see how this antagonism places serious obstacles in the way of integration, divides society and weakens emotional affiliations to national polities and their supranational container (i.e., the EU). One cannot condemn African migrants without expecting the fallout to affect EU citizens of African descent and the perceptions that their fellow citizens harbor about them. Moreover, the progressive mistreatment of these vulnerable minorities gently paves the way for the persecution of vulnerable minorities of EU citizens, such as Muslims (Bunzl, 2005), homosexuals, Chinese, Roma (Gezer, 2013), intra-communitarian migrants (ICF GHK & Milieu Ltd., 2013) and Jews (Than, 2013).

By flying on the wings of nationalism and xenophobia, the EU's border policies undermine the very foreign policy tools that could bolster the kind of reforms that would make illegal immigration less attractive for people in search of better lives. As a consequence of these processes, the current immoral borderline politics of the EU may at some point explode into violence against the EU itself and against newcomers, paradoxically detonated by an EU-skepticism of the EU's own making.

If the EU wants to prosper it needs to keep true to the conditionality-driven conflict resolution model that has created wealth for the countries it has come to engulf. It needs to offer money, increased mobility and access to its markets in exchange for reforms, especially now that the countries where autocracies have fallen or look feeble are more open to its influence. It needs to liberalize its agricultural markets to the North African countries and offer increased mobility to their most ambitious people—which does not necessarily mean the highly qualified. By improving the sometimes deplorable conditions that immigrants heading for the EU righteously try to escape from, the EU would create not only a far-sighted border regime but also one whose justice matched the rhetoric of human rights the EU prides itself on protecting. Moreover, this would come with the advantage of smothering the inflammatory rhetoric of xenophobic, populist, anti-EU political predators that threaten the Union's prosperity and very existence.

The idea that the EU has about how best to deal with migration-related issues betrays a conception of migrants as useless and obscures the magnitude and multiple dimensions of the problem. Why do the

Odyssey-like journeys of migrants deserve a response of scorn and fear rather than applause and praise? Who are the beneficiaries of geopolitical narratives that turn potentially good citizens and chronic tax-payers into criminal fiends and cultural villains? We are talking about detention camps for people who are in search of a better life. They are not the parasites feeding on public services that xenophobic groups depict them to be but often they are able-bodied young people most of whom would be more than glad to work if given the opportunity (Eurostat, 2013). The problem is of substance, not of degree. The substance is that migration is not a problem to be dealt with but an innate human inclination that any liberal democracy would benefit from fully integrating to its regime of rights and obligations. Migration is a tireless brush endlessly retouching the picture of society and its strokes need to be gently led rather than destructively deflected. A painting is going to result anyway, but it is up to governments to create either joyful landscapes or something resembling Goya's macabre prints. Migrants cannot be blamed for doing what humans have always done when faced with the legitimate desire to travel, especially when this reason is the powerful drive to escape a cruel adversity they have never had any means of influencing (Schapendonk, 2012). EU citizens are no different in this respect. Multitudes of them are embarking for other continents in search for better lives as result of the economic crisis (Economist, 2013a). Migrants need to be given a fair chance and their rights and plights need to be assessed in a lawful and dignified way, which means not only fully abiding by refugee law but also finding ways to make turn their ambitions of residence and citizenship into advantageous policies for the recipient polity. Chasing migrants and locking them in cages or leaving them to drown is inhumane and shameful, as well as a waste of civic and economic progress for the EU itself.

So, the idealism of nomadism and unsettledness upon which the EU has built its wealth needs to be rescued from the Mediterranean waters. Let the catastrophe seen in the Mediterranean be the turning point for this. 'No more human suffering in the Mediterranean'. That should be the adage of a reinvigorated EU. If Europe is to be snatched from the claws of xenophobic nationalism, the EU should stop feeding into it and come up with a new grand idea for the continent. How has the EU lost the spirit of freedom, enlightenment and openness that drove its success? Why is the once romantic dream of a united Europe steadily acquiring the anguishing undertones of a disturbing flashback? Where are the Monnets and Schumans of our time? Where are the long-term political visionaries laying out the grand schemes for a future prosperous Europe?

The EU should dare to take a look back at its origins and embrace the bold naivety it once had. No little task; but it's a colossally smaller step compared to founding the EU in a postwar nationalistic landscape. The mass grave in the Mediterranean is a shameful remembrance of the mass graves out of which the EU's own existence came. Perhaps as the best way to appraise the significance of its border disorder, the EU needs to realize that both its external and internal borders are just different levels of the same political theatre. The dramas playing out along the external borders reverberate in the development of the plot across the internal borders. Closing the mass grave of the Mediterranean is a moderate measure compared to the gasping calamity that the disintegration of the EU would mean for the world of each of its citizens.

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