



**Mutual aid
in the Central Mediterranean:
The responses of search and rescue NGOs
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of the border**

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Giovanni Penna

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Authors

Giovanni Penna

MSc in Migration Studies graduate, University of Oxford

penna.giovanni@gmail.com



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Abstract

My research studies the practices employed by search and rescue (SAR) NGOs in the Central Mediterranean to respond to Italy's and the EU's restrictive border policies. I will argue that SAR NGOs exploit the cracks in Italy's and the EU's governance of the border through cooperation and emulation. By tracing institutions' incomplete attempts to exert a monopoly over borderwork, my main analytical contribution will be to foreground the role of mutual aid in the history of humanitarianism. I will investigate this as a rationale that is making a comeback in the politics of SAR NGOs, drawing from the writings of Russian geographer Peter Kropotkin. Throughout my account, I will address the development of SAR NGO politics, in order to illustrate the politicisation of NGOs and foreground mutual aid as a force capable of redefining humanitarianism.

Introduction

'In 2012 all European governments closed legal entry channels, obliging migrants to risk their lives in the Mediterranean. We decided to monitor activities in the middle of the sea not just to save migrants but to save ourselves, as we are really worried about what is going on in Italy and in Europe at the moment' (Tedeschi, 2019). This statement by Alessandra Sciorba, the legal coordinator of search and rescue (SAR) NGO *Mediterranea Saving Humans* (MSH), is indicative of the rationale informing the group's mission. MSH was founded in Italy in 2018 to rescue boat migrants in the Central Mediterranean and since then it has been a vocal opponent of Italy's and the EU's border regime (MSH, 2018). This conflict stems from the transformations that led the Southern Mediterranean Sea to become the deadliest border worldwide (IOM, 2016).

In the 1990s, the loss of national sovereignty that came with the opening of Europe's internal frontiers with the treaty of Schengen was compensated with more restrictive policies at the EU's external borders (Lavenex, 2006). After Italy and Spain introduced visa requirements for North African citizens, illegal boat migration became an increasingly prominent phenomenon across the Mediterranean (Andersson, 2016). In EU countries' governance of migration, 'the birth of sea operations' came in 2006, when Spain and the EU launched naval operation *Hera* to curb boat arrivals to the Canary Islands from West Africa (Frontex 2010: 37, cited in Andersson, 2012). In the following years, the spectacles of deterrence and rescue at the sea border became intertwined, with multiple actors pursuing different agendas. My study focuses on the Central Mediterranean, as an area where the coexistence of

states' naval operations and migrant rescue NGOs since 2014 resulted in political conflict, as outlined by the quote from MSH in the previous paragraph.

Previous research has analysed Italy's and the EU's governance of migration, exposing the rationale that upholds it, namely the containment and securitisation of migration from the Global South (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017a; Tazzioli, 2018). With regards to NGO politics, scholars have studied SAR NGOs' discursive frames and their re-politicisation of the migration regime (Stierl, 2018; Cuttitta, 2018), as well as the criminalisation of solidarity by European governments (Fekete 2018). Building on these studies, I will study the conflict between SAR NGOs and Italy/the EU. I will explore this by analysing changes in the politics of humanitarianism, as well as Italy's and the EU's attempts to monopolise borderwork. Tracing the history of these attempts since 2014, I will expose key political issues that led to the scenario of conflict portrayed by MSH.

The attempts to monopolise borderwork derive from the fact that the governance of borders is increasingly shared by actors beyond the nation-state, such as the EU, civil society groups and border security operatives, in a process called 'borderwork' (Rumford, 2014). Because of this plurality, efforts by institutional actors to establish a monopoly over borderwork remain incomplete. The cracks left open by these incomplete attempts to monopolise borderwork are exploited by SAR NGOs, which I will focus on in my study. My perspective from inside the Central Mediterranean border is therefore a way to account for the perspectives of the different actors involved in borderwork to disentangle the power struggles that affect the border (Rumford, 2014).

I will assess NGO politics through the practices they use in their conflict with national and supranational authorities, to answer the following research question:

What practices do search and rescue NGOs employ to contest Italy's and the EU's attempts to monopolise borderwork at the Central Mediterranean border?

The prevalence I give to the Central Mediterranean and Italy stems from considerations over the recent trajectories of migration in the area. Italy represents an interesting case because it was for most of its history a country of emigration, which in the 1990s shifted to being a country of immigration. Immigration became a highly disputed issue in Italian politics

and society with the Arab Spring, during which boat migration on the Central Mediterranean route grew significantly. In 2015 and 2016, Italy received more than 335,000 irregular arrivals through the Mediterranean Sea (Scotto, 2017). In my study of the border, I draw a comparison of the use of humanitarian and securitarian discourses in the Mediterranean with the US-Mexico border. This comparison is necessary because it illustrates the difference paths taken by the EU and the US in the securitisation of migration at their southern borders and the resulting specificity of conflict the Central Mediterranean case. Moreover, in the Mediterranean, the conflation of Italy's national interests and the EU's supranational/intergovernmental authority complicates the picture on the institutional side. Finally, the fact that the Central Mediterranean is a sea border, as opposed to the US frontier with Mexico, which is a land border, opens questions on how far states' power can reach.

My main analytical contribution will be to foreground the role of mutual aid in the history of humanitarianism. I will investigate this as a rationale that is making a comeback in the politics of SAR NGOs, drawing from the writings of Russian geographer Peter Kropotkin. In the empirical section, I will follow the different stages of Italy's and the EU's attempts to monopolise borderwork in the Central Mediterranean, in relation to the evolving role of SAR NGOs. My overall argument will be that SAR NGOs have been able to use a variety of practices of contestation thanks to their increasing reliance on mutual support and emulation, with 2018 and the foundation of MSH marking the turn to more antagonistic actions and discourses.

Literature Review

This chapter is divided into four parts, which address the role of NGOs in the Mediterranean, the literature on the politics of humanitarianism and mutual aid, NGOs' relationship with national and supranational authorities, and my own perspective on NGOs' countermoves. These serve the purpose of setting the scene for my analysis and illustrating my focus on the relationship between institutional forms of humanitarianism and non-governmental responses.

Non-governmental humanitarianism in the Central Mediterranean: Search and rescue NGOs: an overview

In this first part of my literature review, I situate the context in which NGOs conduct their work and their advocacy. In the 2010s, the increase in boat migration that came with the Arab Spring was followed by a proliferation of

humanitarian actors across the Mediterranean Sea. This rapid spread was a consequence of the pervasive sight of suffering at the border, for example the images of the drowning of around 360 migrants in the waters of Lampedusa in 2013, and the photo of three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi who drowned in Turkey in 2015. Numerous non-governmental actors responded to these portrayals of a 'humanitarian crisis' by launching search and rescue operations. In 2014, these were Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Seawatch, SOS Méditerranée and Proactiva Open Arms, but new groups appeared over time, while others had to give up their mission (Perkowski, 2016). On land, the Watch the Med Alarm Phone initiative was launched in 2014 as a hotline to communicate and provide information to SAR NGOs and border-crossers, as well as to pressure authorities to rescue. The project aimed to counter the transformation of the Mediterranean border into a 'maritime void' where migrant deaths were inevitable and invisible (Stierl, 2016). At the same time, border security actors like the EU Border and Coast Guard Agency Frontex framed their mission as humanitarian intervention, together with the EU's military operation EUNAVFOR MED and Italy's operation Mare Nostrum (Perkowski, 2016). This proliferation of humanitarian actors reflects the plurality of actors engaged in 'borderwork'. The specific feature of borderwork in the Mediterranean in recent years is border actors' central goal of saving lives, generating what Pallister-Wilkins (2017b) calls 'humanitarian borderwork'.

In the Central Mediterranean, SAR NGOs have played a key role in saving lives at sea but the political environment that surrounded their work changed over time. Until 2016, NGOs operated in favourable conditions, enjoying the right to disembark migrants in Italy, low costs for SAR operations, substantial private donations and largely positive media coverage (Cusumano, 2017a). However, in 2017 SAR NGOs started being the target of criminalisation attempts and policy restrictions to their activities, accused of colluding with human smugglers and constituting a 'pull factor' for illegal boat migration from Libya, a claim proved wrong by Cusumano and Villa (2021). Although all criminal investigations to date resulted in acquittals, through this repressive atmosphere Italy and the EU tried to push SAR NGOs into their institutional system of border governance (Cusumano and Villa, 2021), in other words attempting to monopolise borderwork in the Central Mediterranean. The launch in 2018 of MSH signalled a new wave of NGO antagonism with authorities and re-politicisation of the Mediterranean border governance (Cuttitta, 2018). To set the scene for my study of the unfolding of this conflict with border

authorities, I will unpack my understanding of the politics of humanitarianism in the next section.

The politics of humanitarianism and the Mediterranean case

In order to address the role of non-governmental search and rescue (SAR) operations at Europe's Central Mediterranean border, I position my research within the broader sphere of the politics of humanitarianism. I will contextualise my analysis of the political configurations of SAR NGOs by tracing the trajectories and debates around the nature of humanitarianism. Drawing from Kropotkin, I will foreground alternative interpretations of humanitarianism that have their roots in the history of mutual aid and illustrate how this can help understand non-governmental migrant rescue operations in the Mediterranean today.

Historically, humanitarian action is considered to originate as an attempt to fix the perceived moral breakdown of society (Barnett and Weiss, 2008), as opposed to the need to relieve human suffering that we see in the Mediterranean today. Because of this interventionist nature, a key characteristic of humanitarianism in its conventional understandings is its one-sidedness, whereby recipients of humanitarian aid are framed as passive victims in need of top-down assistance. In conventional accounts, the Red Cross is usually indicated as the first example of modern humanitarianism. Founded in 1863 in Switzerland, it was rooted in a Calvinist understanding of aid as voluntarily coming from individuals (Dromi, 2020) and that humanitarianism could help establish adherence to a religious moral code in society (Bornstein and Redfield, 2011). In more recent times, mainstream international humanitarianism has shifted its action to emergency response, alongside the growing engagement of humanitarian actors in borderwork (Perkowski, 2016). I will address these changes in the following paragraphs, to contextualise the current humanitarian landscape in the Central Mediterranean.

However, focusing solely on the legacy of institutional solutions means overlooking spontaneous grassroots forms of humanitarianism that still influence solidarity practices today. This alternative history of humanitarianism began decades before the Red Cross was founded. Since the end of the eighteenth century, a constellation of mutual aid societies had already been flourishing across Europe (Dromi, 2016; Milan, 2020). Mutualism is defined as a 'doctrine according to which individual and collective wellbeing can be obtained only by common action' (Zamagni, 2013: 238, cited in Milan, 2020). At the turn of the 20th century, Russian

naturalist Kropotkin (1902) laid the basis for the coding of this behaviour in his essay 'Mutual aid: a factor of evolution'. Kropotkin published his essay in response to the increasing prevalence of social Darwinist ideas in academic and political discourses, which considered competition and individual initiative to be decisive elements in the progress of society. In view of this, Kropotkin argued that the most important feature of evolution was the continuous presence of cooperation in human societies across the centuries. This early anarchist work formed a new discourse that was capable of redefining conventional understandings of power and knowledge (Ferretti, 2017; Grubacic and Graeber, 2020). Drawing from Kropotkin, I argue that the history of humanitarianism should be retraced in order to give prominence to its mutualistic roots. By decentring the 'good deeds' of individuals and institutions and foregrounding instead collective responsibility and egalitarian rhetoric, I can partly explain the actions of a plurality of non-governmental humanitarian actors in the Mediterranean today.

Critical academic studies have engaged with the politics of humanitarianism over recent years, in ways it is worth revisiting. International humanitarian actors' relationship with the state has taken different forms over time. In the early 1970s, Doctors Without Borders/ Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was founded in Paris with the goal of carrying out a form of medical humanitarianism that would respond to emergency situations worldwide. The NGO claimed independence from states and their interests, while at the same it emerged as a vocal critic of governments' failure to protect people (Redfield, 2012). Over the decades, MSF grew to become one of the best-known humanitarian NGOs worldwide, and, after it launched its own search and rescue mission in the Mediterranean in 2015, it was able to confront EU authorities openly on the human suffering caused by their restrictive border policies (Cusumano, 2019a)

In the 1990s/2000s, Western global governance adopted a humanitarian rationale that permeated foreign policy and was often employed to justify Western foreign policy in the Global South and military interventions (Fassin, 2007). In Duffield's account (2001), the root of the issue was to be found in the post-Cold War Western governance of international migration, development and security. Duffield's key argument was that Western powers incorporated military intervention and policing in their development discourse, resulting in a security/development nexus. This entailed a shift from pursuing economic development in the Global South to military operations, active support of democratic institutions and social

change, aiming to integrate countries into the Western sphere of influence in a subaltern role. Thanks to their influence over international humanitarian organisations (e.g. UNHCR), Western countries were able to appropriate a humanitarian rhetoric that legitimised their military interventions. In relation to Mediterranean migration, this logic underpinned the militarisation of Europe's southern borders, with the official goal of preventing migrants from dying at the border (Duffield, 2010).

In a later phase, during the War on Terror, security became the new mantra in global governance, which partly took over the previous phase of humanitarian governance. While the War on Terror provided the US military-industrial complex with a new opportunity for profit extraction, it also resulted in the proliferation of counter-terror measures around the world. The complex benefitted from significant government funding, which aimed to securitise the border with Mexico in order to stop potential terrorists and criminal organisations from entering the US (Chebel d'Appollonia, 2012). Worldwide, humanitarian actors had to comply with the restrictions coming with the emergence of a new securitised landscape. At the same time, border enforcement agencies in the US began appropriating a humanitarian rhetoric, in an attempt to legitimise their securitarian measures and to monopolise the terrain taken up by non-state actors. The tendency was later replicated at Europe's Mediterranean border by EU and Italian authorities, with some differences that I will analyse in a later section (Williams, 2016). The changes that humanitarianism underwent over the years reconfigured it, but politics and conflict continued to exist as key elements in the relationship between non-governmental and state actors.

Writing in the early 1900s, Kropotkin stressed that the original terrain of mutual aid in human communities was being eroded by the top-down action of the capitalist state, which intervened to undermine subaltern forces' ability to organise autonomously (Adams, 2015). Nevertheless, fostered by 'the conscience of human solidarity', mutual aid never ceased to exist, resisting governmental efforts to order and monopolise social relations (Kropotkin, 1902:5). In my analysis, I aim to unpack the politics of humanitarianism in the Central Mediterranean case, contrasting governmental efforts to monopolise borderwork with the actions of SAR NGOs. I view NGO actions as an alternative mode of governance that is unfolding in the Mediterranean, which draws on mutual aid links with solidarity networks and migrants themselves. Thus, I will illustrate the return of mutual aid at the Mediterranean border from 2018 onwards, in opposition to top-down military/humanitarian interventions.

Manufactured insecurity and conflict in the Mediterranean

In the case of the EU, the construction of a humanitarian/security nexus at the border stems from moral panics over migration, which have been a major feature of European politics since the 1990s, as a result of the proliferation of political discourses constructing the Schengen area as the space for a common European identity. The establishment of EU border agency Frontex in Warsaw in 2004 can be seen as a response to this need for border security. The prominence of migration containment in EU politics is proven by the steep increase in the funding Frontex received from the EU over recent years, which went from €19m in 2005 to €143m in 2015 (the year of the so-called Mediterranean 'migration crisis'). What is particularly relevant to my analysis is that Frontex has made extensive use of a humanitarian discourse to justify restrictive migration policies (Andersson, 2016).

Frontex constructs border security as necessary to save migrants' lives, since it criminalises human smugglers and creates an unfavourable environment for illicit border crossings. For example, the code of conduct for Frontex operators includes two articles on the maintenance of fundamental rights and international protection (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). The humanitarian discourse also legitimises the externalisation of border controls to third countries, which use their power to contain migration in order to receive funds from the EU, in what Tsourapas (2017) calls 'migration diplomacy'. However, due to the widespread violation of human rights caused by border security and externalisation, Frontex finds itself in the ambiguous situation of claiming to be doing humanitarian work while in fact it creates unsafe conditions for migrants in third countries and at the border itself (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015). At the same time, it is also difficult for NGOs to criticise the border regime openly because doing so would risk violating the principle of neutrality that several SARNGOs embraced in the early phases of non-governmental missions (Scott-Smith, 2016). In this scenario, the top-down humanitarianism pursued by European institutions in the Mediterranean works towards the monopolisation of borderwork, because it seeks to impose a securitarian interpretation of humanitarianism and border governance and silence dissent from other border actors like NGOs.

In my research, I will problematise Walters' (2011) analysis of the rise of the 'humanitarian border' in the last two decades. Walters proposes the term 'humanitarian border' as a new configuration of state frontiers, whose governance is handled as a humanitarian project. The border zones that experience this shift are the ones that represent a sharp divide in the living

conditions and opportunities available on each side, such as the US-Mexico border or the EU's Mediterranean border. When states restrict immigration and militarise their frontiers, they transform border crossing into a dangerous, and often deadly, experience. To counter these humanitarian crises at the border, state actors respond with the deployment of a humanitarian apparatus (which often includes non-governmental actors) and further securitisation, in order to stop migrants from risking their lives trying to enter the country illegally. In this 'border game', securitisation generates insecurity, which is tackled with more investments in border security, causing more insecurity, in a continuous cycle (Andreas, 2009). The humanitarianisation of state frontiers is therefore a by-product of the political centrality of migration containment and the securitisation of borders.

Against this backdrop, Walters (2011) views NGO politics and contestation as embedded in the border regime, not external to it. In his analysis, the humanitarian border is defined by political struggle, whereby humanitarian actors can simultaneously be critical of the border regime and contribute to perpetuating it. However, I argue that Walters does not account for the incompleteness of governmental efforts to monopolise the border, as well as the potential of non-governmental humanitarian actors to exploit the fractures that exist in the border regime, in order to combat it while operating inside of it. In the Central Mediterranean case, different SAR NGOs have taken different stances in relation to Italy's and the EU's border governance. The embeddedness of SAR NGOs' within the politics of the border regime has been evident from the beginning: their engagement in rescue operations at sea was initially possible and financially viable thanks to the use by national and supranational authorities of a humanitarian rhetoric, which justified NGOs' presence in international waters (Cuttitta, 2018).

Having established their incorporation into statist configurations of borderwork, the most productive lens to study their politics is to focus on the practices they employ to contest it. My focus resonates with Squire's (2015) perspective on border politics at the US-Mexico border, which she views as border actors' daily practices on the ground. My view on conflict is that SAR NGOs enact resistance from within the border system they are embedded in and exploit the incompleteness of the EU's and Italy's attempts to monopolise borderwork.

The subversive potential of humanitarianism: countermoves

In this section, I situate my stance on political antagonism in relation to Kropotkin and reflect on how to study NGO actions as ‘countermoves’.

First, an issue I need to address is my reliance on Kropotkin in my study of NGO politics. This choice could cause some scepticism given Kropotkin’s apparent lack of direct relevance to contemporary issues of migration and activism. The Russian scholar’s work is conventionally classified as ‘classical anarchism’, a body of theory that today is often considered obsolete and too essentialist. However, as argued by Ferretti (2017), Kropotkin’s work should be viewed as a valuable theory of knowledge that openly criticised European ideas of progress and race. Hierarchical ideas still survive today, although in a less explicitly racist tone, and uphold the European border regime, for instance through the fact that European governments intervene at the border regulate the mobility of formerly colonised people.

Moreover, Kropotkin’s theses on mutual aid are still very relevant today paradoxically because they were formulated at the turn of the 20th century. This was a time when European states began to build their welfare systems by co-opting the grassroots networks of social assistance created by mutual aid societies. This co-optation has similarities with national and supranational authorities’ appropriation of the humanitarian discourse in the Mediterranean in recent years and their attempts to incorporate SAR NGOs into their system of border governance. This comparison follows Ferretti’s (2017) call to apply Kropotkin to the study of contemporary social movements.

Furthermore, I argue that from 2018 a radicalisation of SAR NGOs’ discourse has been taking place in the Central Mediterranean, which would reflect similar paths in activism on land across the Global North. Especially since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a proliferation of occupy movements and grassroots solidarity initiatives that have made direct reference to mutual aid (Grubacic and Graeber, 2020; Springer, 2020). Finally, introducing Kropotkin to the study of SAR NGOs can be an innovative way to rethink the border regime and provide new perspectives to the study of migrant solidarity, viewing mutual aid as a force binding together NGO actors.

My perspective on NGO practices employs the analytical lens of ‘countermoves’. Given the abovementioned changes in activism, looking at countermoves means considering direct action to be the most productive

form of political expression, as envisioned by Kropotkin himself (McKay, 2014). My study of countermoves will be guided by literature on solidarity that is more recent. Vandevordt (2019) claims that humanitarianism in Europe has become subversive, in the sense that it challenges the rising criminalisation of solidarity and it increasingly employs direct action to subvert the dominant social and political order in which it is confined. This echoes my view that resistance develops from within the system of border governance. Moreover, assessing the subversive potential of SAR NGO practices can be a way to compare the actions of different groups, highlighting the diversity of political stances on the activist side of SAR humanitarianism, and the mutualistic links within the non-governmental side. I view mutual aid as upheld by solidarity, which I consider 'a relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression' (Featherstone, 2012: 5), which enables SAR NGOs to exploit the fractures in the border system.

Conclusion

To sum up, in my study I view humanitarianism as a tool used by national and supranational authorities to govern borders. My take on NGO resistance draws from Kropotkin's study of mutual aid, whose enduring presence shapes the practices of non-governmental actors in their conflict with institutions today.

Methods

Data selection and analysis

I chose qualitative methods in order to collect data on the positions of SAR NGOs and institutions. My epistemological approach is interpretivism, because I unpack the meanings attached to the actions of governmental and non-governmental actors.

Moving chronologically from 2014 to 2021, I carry out a discourse analysis of the claims and actions of SAR NGOs and Italy's and the EU's political and maritime authorities. My material is a mix of Italian newspaper articles, TV programmes, social media and website posts by SAR NGOs and Italian politicians, reports by international organisations and academic publications. I selected material that could provide me with information on each phase of the governance of the border from different angles. The goal is not to trace an objective history of the Mediterranean border, but rather to identify the politics of humanitarianism expressed by governmental and

non-governmental actors. My discourse analysis is intertwined with my chronology. For example, when analysing cases of criminalisation of SAR NGOs, I collect newspaper headlines that report on the issue to sketch out the political significance of the case and its position in my history of the Central Mediterranean border. Subsequently, I search for the reaction of the NGO in question in newspaper interviews or social media and website posts, and I examine the vocabulary, the sentence structure and the images used, to identify themes and sub-themes relating to my analysis.

With regards to my themes and my perspective on SAR NGO politics, this are shaped by my preliminary study of *Mediterranea Saving Humans* (MSH), which I picked based on its open antagonism with Italy and the EU, its horizontal structure based on solidarity networks, and its collaboration with other NGOs. Its specific humanitarian/political discourse helps me make sense of the changes that NGOs underwent in recent years. To study the perspectives and practices of SAR NGOs, I carried out a preliminary categorisation of the discourse of MSH, identifying the themes of 'Criminalisation', 'Relationship with other SAR NGOs', 'NGO structure' and 'Counter-moves'. This allowed me to understand the characteristics of the current conflict with authorities, while I also searched for the same themes in the discourse of other NGOs in order to detect the origin and transformation of these themes.

Challenges and ethics

However, my approach presents some challenges. Firstly, the institutional side in the conflict shifts across scales (national, supranational). This means that I need to clarify throughout my analysis how the audience changes and how this affects the discourse. Secondly, the ethics of representation and of my methodological choices needs to be addressed. By having institutional and NGO actors as protagonists in my chronology, I risk silencing migrant voices. As pointed out by SAR NGO Sea-Watch captain Carola Rackete, '[i]t's unfortunately very common that cases of white sea-rescue activists receive a lot more attention than cases of refugees themselves who get criminalised' (ElHiblu3, 2021). However, deflecting attention away from migrants to focus on NGO activists can also dismantle the conventional structure of humanitarianism, where the recipient of aid is a passive victim subaltern to the rescuer (Neumann, 2020). In my research, I report quotes by migrants rescued at sea, but these are collected by SAR NGOs, which means that they are filtered through the rescuers' perspective. Carrying out ethnographic research could have given me direct access to migrant voices, but this is beyond the scope of my research. My focus instead is on NGO-

state struggles, which includes different takes on the role of the rescued migrant figure.

Empirical chapters

Incomplete attempts to monopolise borderwork

The first concern of my analysis is with unpacking the construction of institutional actors' attempts to monopolise borderwork.

In 2018, 6 people per day lost their lives trying to cross the Mediterranean by boat. Frontex operation Triton, which had seen the engagement of EU vessels to rescue boat migrants in the Central Mediterranean, was halted that year. The number of deaths in 2018, totalling 2,275, represented a dramatic increase in comparison with the previous years. The proportion went from one death for every 269 arrivals in 2015 to one death for every 51 arrivals in 2018. In particular, on the Central Mediterranean route, the increased deadliness should be viewed as a consequence of a dramatic reduction in search and rescue capacity. These changes occurred according to a logic of externalisation and invisibilisation of the border adopted by the Italian government (UNHCR, 2019), as well as increasingly repressive measures against non-governmental SAR actors. I view these as the result of Italy's and the EU's attempts to monopolise borderwork (Rumford, 2014), which SAR NGOs responded to with more openly antagonistic discourses and practices. In 2018, *Mediterranea Saving Humans* (MSH) was founded as 'a platform of different initiatives of civil society coming to the central Mediterranean after the NGOs have been forced to leave in consequence of being criminalized by political rhetoric' (MSH, 2018), while NGO *Proactiva Open Arms* shifted from collaboration to open antagonism with Italian and EU political and military authorities (Floris, 2019).

My analysis of the conflicts over the monopolisation of borderwork develops around Williams's (2016) study of the humanitarian management of the US-Mexico border. In her work, Williams views the humanitarianisation of border enforcement by the US Border Patrol that occurred since the 1990s as having three main consequences. Firstly, the humanitarian rhetoric occupies a space that would otherwise be taken by non-governmental human rights groups critical of the border regime. Secondly, it legitimises US efforts to militarise and securitise the border. Thirdly, it justifies the state's control and regulation of life within its territory. In this sense, the US government's strategic monopolisation of borderwork is comparable to the Mediterranean case, where it developed in a similar time frame. However,

three fundamental differences characterise my interpretation of the monopoly in the Mediterranean. In the European case, attempts to monopolise borderwork are always incomplete; the border is governed at multiple scales (national, supranational, intergovernmental); and NGOs' presence is more visible, resulting in several points of conflict between the actors involved.

Operation Mare Nostrum was launched in 2013 by the Italian government as a response to a dramatic increase in migrant drownings and a spike in media attention focused on the 'crisis' in Lampedusa. Like in the US case (Williams, 2016), the humanitarian rhetoric justified the state's securitisation of the border and authority over migrants' lives. The result was the centrality of 'humanitarian borderwork' (Pallister-Wilkins, 2017b), whereby border policing was discursively founded on humanitarian concerns for migrants. The first SAR NGO to operate in the Central Mediterranean was MOAS, launched in 2014 by a millionaire couple from Malta. Founded as a civil society alternative to official rescue operations, MOAS ended up working together with the Italian Navy (Tazzioli, 2016). During Mare Nostrum, SAR NGO vessels were allowed by Italian maritime authorities to disembark migrants rescued in Libyan waters (Cusumano, 2019a). I view this as part of the Italian government's attempt to monopolise borderwork, which relied on the incorporation of non-governmental ground-level actors in its border governance. On land, the non-governmental initiative Watch the Med Alarm Phone chose a different type of collaboration. It used monitoring technologies to detect boats in distress and pressure authorities to intervene, while it also directed SAR NGOs and helped migrants find safe routes. Supported by an international network of solidarity actors, the project drew from a pre-existing circulation of resources and information between migrants and activist groups that it turned into coordinated action (Stierl, 2016). This constitutes the first major instance of countermoves produced by horizontal, cooperation-based relations.

2014-2018: Triton, criminalisation and disobedience

In November 2014, Frontex replaced Mare Nostrum with operation Triton, with the engagement of several European countries. From 2015, Triton was supported by the anti-trafficking and anti-smuggling naval operation EUNAVFOR MED Sophia. Although the two operations maintained a humanitarian rhetoric and Operation Sophia was named after a baby born in 2015 during a rescue at sea (Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2020), neither Triton nor Sophia had a specific SAR mandate and carried out relatively few rescues. Instead, they stepped up efforts to target smugglers in Libyan waters and

destroy their boats. Consequently, smugglers started using cheaper, unsafe rubber dinghies that were often left adrift in the sea with migrants on board, in order to avoid patrols and save money (Cusumano, 2019b). As pointed out by Andreas (2009), in the 'border game' securitisation generates more insecurity.

The EU's borderwork in the Mediterranean still included the presence of NGO actors. Given the mismatch between rhetoric and practice in terms of rescue and the steep increase in sea crossings, the number of NGO ships operating offshore Libya grew rapidly in 2016-2017, reaching the total number of ten (Cusumano, 2017b). Their presence was allegedly supported by the Italian and European naval industry, whose involvement in rescues was having a negative economic impact on its commercial activities (in 2014 alone merchant vessels had to rescue around 44,000 thousand people) (Floris, 2019). This shows a difference with Williams's (2016) analysis of the US-Mexico border, where the presence of NGOs was effectively contained over the years. In Arizona, the arrest of volunteers and activists, as well as surveillance and raids on their camps reduced the space for non-institutional humanitarianism. Conversely, in the Mediterranean, NGOs kept part of their power to intervene, which in 2016-2017 served the purpose of easing Triton and Sophia from the burden of rescue (Cusumano, 2019b).

However, from 2017 onwards, high-profile judicial enquiries against SAR NGOs multiplied and several vessels were seized by authorities. Frontex accused NGOs of being a pull factor and colluding with smugglers (Cusumano, 2017b), but the main accusations came from Italy. In this phase, Italy and the EU jointly used criminalisation of NGOs as a way to reassert their power over the Central Mediterranean border (Mainwaring and DeBono, 2021). In July 2017, Italy's Interior Ministry decided to release a code of conduct to regulate non-governmental migrant rescue operations in the Mediterranean. The code came after a request from the European Commission. Among the NGOs active at the time, Doctors Without Borders, Jugend Rettet and Sea Watch refused to sign the code, because it required SAR NGOs to have judicial police on board (Tazzioli, 2018; Cusumano and Gombeer, 2018). Other NGOs chose a more collaborative path and signed it. These were SOS Méditerranée, Save the Children, MOAS, Proactiva Open Arms and Sea Eye (Redattore Sociale, 2017). The different non-governmental reactions to the code raised questions on the role of non-state actors in a securitised landscape, beyond the interests of states. These were due to NGOs' 'selective emulation' of each other, whereby SAR NGOs influenced each other's practices, but each NGO retained a degree of autonomy that depended on its own conception of humanitarianism (Cusumano, 2019a).

Italy's centre-left government never followed through on its threat to close Italy's ports to non-signatory NGOs, but judicial enquiries proliferated. In August, the space for rescue was further shrunk by Libya's decision to deny non-governmental ships access to an area of one hundred miles from its coast (Tazzioli, 2018). MOAS was criticised by other non-governmental groups for its choice to have former members of Malta's military in its crew to facilitate its communication with Italian maritime authorities (Cusumano, 2019a). Nevertheless, MOAS's rejection of any political stance and its alignment with institutions did not prevent it from being targeted with a criminal investigation that accused it of concealing illicit sources of funding. This experience, together with fresh accusations of human smuggling that affected other NGOs, turned the Mediterranean landscape an increasingly disputed space. MOAS left the sea in September 2017 and relocated to Bangladesh, to assist Rohingya refugees (Floris, 2019). Save the Children, which had cooperated with authorities and let onboard police forces whose findings started a large judicial inquiry against NGOs, halted its operations the following month (Scherer, 2017).

While the NGOs that typically collaborated with institutions left the Mediterranean, the subversive turn observed by Vandevordt (2019) in European migrant solidarity activism expanded to the sea. In the second half of 2017, Proactiva Open Arms, previously generally cooperative with authorities, adopted a more antagonistic rhetoric due to the proliferation of accusations coming from the Public Prosecutor of Catania Carmelo Zuccaro, the Italian government, politicians and the media (Floris, 2019). Its founder Oscar Camps in August 2017 announced the NGO's embrace of civil disobedience in an interview with the online newspaper Público, saying 'If to save lives we have to sign [the code], we'll sign it. If to save lives we have to disobey, we will disobey' (Escribano, 2017). Proactiva put words into action in March 2018, when it refused to transfer 218 rescued migrants to the Libyan Coast Guard, defying the orders received from Italy's maritime authorities, based on the fact that Libya was not considered a safe port by international law (Open Migration, 2018). More broadly, since attempts to cooperate with institutions resulted in continuous repression, more confrontational practices started to be employed by SAR NGOs to counter the monopolisation of borderwork by Italy's and the EU's apparatus of government (Floris, 2019). The strategy was emulated multiple times in the following period (2018-2021) by other SAR NGOs, for example by Sea-Watch and MSH, who decided to disembark rescued migrants in Italy without authorisation following standoffs at sea with the Italian government.

To sum up, contrary to the US case, during Triton NGOs continued to operate at the sea border. While the 2017 wave of criminalisation by Italian authorities shrunk the space of rescue and tried to push SAR NGOs to be subservient parts of the European system of border governance, it actually prompted the remaining SAR NGOs to adopt more antagonistic discourses and practices. Disobedience became a practice used by NGOs to carry out their work of rescue and contest the securitisation of the border.

2018-2021: re-politicisation and mutualism

The events described above bring us to the 2018 scenario, with the end of Triton, relatively few crossings but a high number of migrant deaths. 2018 was also the year when far-right Interior Minister Matteo Salvini closed Italy's ports to SAR NGOs and all foreign-flagged merchant ships carrying rescued migrants. The measures were taken by the new League-Five Star Movement coalition government (Conte I cabinet, 2018-2019), in an explicitly securitarian turn that rejected earlier humanitarian discourses. In June, SOS-Méditerranée's ship *Aquarius*, carrying 629 people off the coast of Libya, was the first vessel to be stopped and was later allowed to disembark in Valencia by Spain's government. Later it was the turn of Mission Lifeline, with 259 migrants on board, which was authorised entry in Malta after a ten-day standoff. Remarkably, entry was also denied to Italian Coast Guard ship *Diciotti*, which had to wait five days at sea before being allowed to dock in Sicily. In the same period, the UNHCR registered signs that merchant vessels were reluctant to rescue boats in distress, given the problems they would encounter when trying to disembark (Cusumano and Gombeer, 2018; Foderi, 2020). On 14 June 2019, Salvini instituted a security decree that introduced harsh sanctions for SAR NGOs entering Italian waters without authorisation, with the possibility of fines up to € 50,000, the arrest of the crew and the seizure of the ship (Berti, 2021). Meanwhile, Operation Sophia relied solely on air surveillance (without any vessels), because the Italian government did not want migrants to be rescued and disembarked in Italy (Liss, 2019).

Due to these developments, the 2018-2021 phase is characterised by Italy holding significant power to govern an empty sea border, whereas EU operations focus on controlling the space from above and securitising the external border, such as the 2020 naval Operation *Irini* aiming to stabilise Libya (Council of the EU, 2020). Since 2020, first under Italy's Conte II government and currently under the broad coalition Draghi government, SAR NGOs have been subjected to a steep increase in administrative detentions. This is a measure ordered by the Coast Guard to detain and

inspect foreign commercial vessels, officially due to stricter standards required by the Covid-19 pandemic. Compared to Salvini's 'closed ports' policy that left NGO vessels floating at sea, this new policy attempts to empty the sea of ships, resulting in a 'maritime void' (Stierl, 2016) and NGOs' claim that a removal of witnesses of border violence and drownings is currently under way (Merli, 2021).

On the SAR NGO side, the politicisation of humanitarian action has characterised the 2018-2021 period. By politicisation, I mean the opening up of the possibility for disagreement and alternative models of governance (Cuttitta, 2018). In 2018, the process was led by the establishment in Italy of MSH, which continued the practice of disobedience started by Proactiva. While it emulated the grassroots nature of Sea-Watch and its openness to collaboration with other groups, MSH made its alternative conception of humanitarianism a central part of its mission. I view MSH as signifying the return of mutual aid societies to today's humanitarianism: MSH 'is not a non-governmental organisation, but a non-governmental action designed by organisations of different nature and individuals' whose 'promoters and supporters are working in their local areas to launch solidarity and support initiatives, like fundraisers open to all citizens' (MSH, 2018).

MSH's legal team coordinator Alessandra Sciorba's (2020) book 'Saving one another, together' evokes in its title a conception of humanitarianism that is rooted in mutual aid, rather than top-down intervention. It recounts the experience of MSH's July 2019 mission, when MSH's sailing ship Alex rescued 50 migrants in distress off the coast of Libya. In Sciorba's story, migrants are no longer rescued victims but 'brave fellow travellers', with which MSH volunteers 'became one crew, 70 people strong'. Only fifteen minutes after the migrants were rescued from the dinghy and transferred to the sailing ship Alex, MSH was reached by a Libyan Coast Guard vessel, whose captain ordered the MSH crew to hand him the migrants. MSH chose to disobey but was unable to transfer the migrants to a larger and better-equipped vessel because Italian authorities were detaining the ship Mare Jonio. Due to the number of passengers exceeding maximum capacity, migrants and activists quickly ended up with scarce food supplies and overflowing toilets. Once the ship Alex approached Lampedusa, the crew faced a standoff with Minister Salvini but decided to declare a state of emergency and enter the port without authorisation. The episode was remembered by Sciorba in her 2020 interview with Italian TV channel RAI 3 as a moment of 'courage and magic' (MSH, 2020). Besides Sciorba's romanticisation of the story, it is important to notice that the situation on the Alex and the attention paid to migrants' words managed to strip humanitarianism of its conventionally

hierarchical structure. Here, migrants and rescuers were all witnesses of the border regime's violence and the experience of disobediently crossing a border.

Mutual support also shaped SAR NGOs' political stances. In 2020, MSH joined forces with MSH, NGOs Sea-Watch, Doctors Without Borders and Proactiva have campaigned to pressure the Italian government to stop blocking non-governmental vessels and take action to save lives at sea (InfoMigrants, 2020). Overall, the trend of building mutual support networks with other NGOs and migrant groups has become a standard practice in the language of SAR NGOs in 2018-2021. For example, in 2019 Sea-Watch captain Pia Klemp refused the City of Paris Grand Vermeil medal, awarded to her for her engagement in migrant rescue operations at sea. Klemp justified her refusal based on her solidarity with migrant and activist mutual aid groups in Paris (Klemp, 2019). Like many others throughout Europe, these groups were being criminalised for their work, with measures such as the 2017 ban on food distribution outside the La Chapelle centre, which led to arrests and fines for members of the NGO Solidarité Migrants Wilson (Fekete et al., 2017). Something quite emblematic of the return to traditional forms of mutual aid in the Mediterranean is captain Pia Klemp's move to one of the newest SAR NGOs to date, the Louise Michel, funded and decorated by street artist Banksy (Louise Michel, 2020). The naming of the ship after Louise Michel, an early anarchist thinker engaged in dismantling hierarchies through direct action in 19th century France, is in line with my arguments on the ability of anti-authoritarian theory to inform such recent expressions of humanitarianism.

Conclusion

In my research, I have investigated the origin and the evolution of the conflict currently taking place in the Central Mediterranean between SAR NGOs and Italy/the EU, trying to re-think humanitarianism from Kropotkin's mutual aid perspective. To do so, I have set the scene of the conflict by illustrating how Italy and the EU have tried to gain a monopoly over borderwork in the Central Mediterranean since 2014. In the Triton period, non-governmental ships continued to operate at the sea border, but the 2017 wave of criminalisation pushed the remaining NGOs to adopt critical stances against the European border security system. Subsequently, Italy's 2018-2019 government abandoned the previous humanitarian rhetoric and tried to reassert its power over borderwork, by portraying SAR NGOs as violating its national sovereignty. Finally, from 2019 to 2021, Italy reconciled

with the EU over border governance, with the unstated goal of emptying the sea of SAR NGOs.

The NGO responses to the attempted monopolisation of borderwork can be summarised as two main strategies. Firstly, the merging of non-governmental humanitarianism with civil disobedience. This started with rejection of the 2017 code of conduct by three NGOs and with Proactiva's discursive response to criminalisation, and from 2018 onwards it has become a common practice for SAR NGOs. Secondly, the politicisation of humanitarianism, led by MSH. This move was based on the return of mutual aid as a key component of humanitarianism and resulted in the use of networks of support between land and sea to attack the European management of immigration. Overall, the attempts to monopolise borderwork proved to be incomplete, due to the increasing antagonism of SAR NGOs, who claimed their role as witnesses of the violence of the border regime.

Based on my findings, I argue that NGO practices have developed through emulation and cooperation. For example, some NGO countermoves emulate Italy's and the EU's border management practices, occupying the cracks in institutional borderwork and turning them into sites of conflict. As I have shown in my empirical chapters, the emulation of other NGOs' experiences through cooperation has experienced a significant growth since 2014, giving SAR NGOs the ability to engage in conflicts with institutions in spite of the increasing removal of witnesses from the sea. This form of emulation means that each NGO observes what the most successful countermove is in each phase and cooperates with other groups to maximise its success. These strategies, based on the formation of networks of cooperation, gained prominence in 2018 with the foundation of MSH. Therefore, my argument confirms my reflection on the value of Kropotkin's theses on cooperation and mutual aid in the study of migrant solidarity.

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Appendix: empirical data

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The **Centre on Migration, Policy and Society** (COMPAS)
University of Oxford
58 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 6QS
e: info@compas.ox.ac.uk