Can Lampedusa Become Europe's Ellis Island?

Marcello Saija (February 18, 2016)

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Among the many studies concerning the current immigration crisis in Italy and Europe, there are some unlikely comparisons being made between what Ellis Island represented to emigrants and what the island of Lampedusa [2] represents to people desperately crossing the Mediterranean. From an historic perspective, the only thing the two islands have in common is that they are, indeed, both islands.

Ellis Island vs. Lampedusa
Ellis Island [3]was set up by the American government to carry out immigration procedures.

Everything there was codified: the migrants, divided by gender, received an official entry pass; there were medical tests, mandatory hospitalization for those carrying transmittable diseases, and an examination of one's ethnic identity and political background.

Immigrants on Ellis Island would meet those who vouched to care for them while they established themselves in their new land. Young women would meet their betrothed.

Ellis Island was an organizational apparatus that implemented a specific project of social engineering aimed at building a new America and supporting its economic development.

Lampedusa is nothing like that. It is merely a place where the Italian government admits migrants without any ultimate aim. Nor did the Italian government choose the site; it was selected by criminal organizations as the nearest point of access for those entering Europe. In Lampedusa, immigrants' hopes often end in tragedy. For thousands, the Mediterranean has been transformed into a great watery grave.

And the majority of men, women and children who do reach the island alive are spiritually devastated. Emigrants of all eras share a hope for a new life, but there is a big difference between what is going on in the Sicilian Canal today and the situation of Transatlantic migrants a century ago.

Although the latter did not know what the future held, they were assured that once they got to their destination they would land on their feet. Those who leave the coasts of North Africa for Europe not only wager on their ability to establish themselves in a foreign land but, consciously or not, they wager their very lives.

Once they have escaped death and reached Lampedusa, they discover how little they have won. 'Welcomed' by unlikely guardians, they are shunted into large rooms covered with mattresses as damp as the boats they just sailed in on. Those with any energy fight for their space. Everyone else shares what's left.

With its daily spectacle of corpses lining its beaches and survivors shut-away in large enclosures, Lampedusa has become a symbol of pain and death, a far cry from Ellis Island, the symbol of tears and hope.

Can We Change Things?

The question is, is it possible to transform Lampedusa into a new Ellis Island?
Ten years ago, during a Peace Study Conference at Messina University, where
I then taught, my department outlined a plan according to which part of Lampedusa would become an extra-territorial space under European sovereignty managed by a committee of European state delegate members. The goal was to welcome the immigrants and send them on according to a well-organized plan of European social engineering.

The committee would provide immigrants with a temporary visa and a destination state after close individual examination had decided to make the visa permanent. Obviously, such a possibility must be based on rational criteria, compatible with existing laws and the political mood of each state. Italy, for example, has no desire to yield its sovereignty over any piece of its national territory.

When 30 Italian members of the European Parliament with different political affiliations were asked what they thought about the proposal to turn Lampedusa into an extra-territorial zone, only one agreed, on condition that there be similar stations located in "border-crossing European countries." Most responded that Lampedusa should remain Italian and that the Italian government (with the assistance of an EU advisory body) should be tasked with selecting and placing immigrants in other European countries. In other words, they believed Italy ought to become a sort of Minos, deciding each soul's final destination. Clearly other European countries wouldn't accept such terms.

Today's Immigration Crisis in Europe

The complicated mechanism for granting immigrants political refugee status—and thus an indisputable right to enter the EU is to blame for the current concentration of migrants at Europe's southern edges, particularly Italy, Greece and Spain.

Without delving into too much detail, suffice it to say that the status of refugees is managed under the so-called Dublin III Regulation, which also sets up a database for fingerprinting illegal immigrants in the European Union and, in order to avoid "asylum shopping," maintains that the member state

responsible for examining the application is the state where the applicant entered the European Union.

Should the immigrant elude processing and cross illegally into other countries, they must be returned to the original port of entry. Since 2013, the scale of migration has made that tenet challenging, especially in Italy and Greece, which were not able to review all requests for asylum, leaving migrants free to cross illegally into other European countries— and then having them sent back.

Then, on June 23, 2015, Hungary, deluged with asylum claims from Middle Eastern refugees who had entered through Serbia, said it was unable to accept immigrants being returned and closed its borders. As a result, Germany decided to suspend the Dublin Regulation for Syrian refugees and directly process their asylum applications.

Meanwhile states such as the Czech Republic and Poland refused to reform the Dublin Regulation, introducing mandatory immigrant quotas for all member states; and Austria decided to build a 600-kilometer wall on the border with Slovenia. Other EU states have also adopted restrictive anti-immigrant measures. In short, the great confusion that ensued threatens to bring about a resurgence of nationalism and xenophobia and undermine the very existence of the European Union.

Given the situation, last August the European Commission announced the creation of "hotspots" around the European coast, Piraeus in Greece, Taranto in Apulia, and five in Sicily. Aside from Lampedusa, they include Catania, Augusta, Pozzallo, Porto Empedocle and Trapani.

The Lack of European Social Engineering

Last August the European Commission announced the creation of "hotspots" around the European coast, Piraeus in Greece, Taranto in Apulia, and five in Sicily: Lampedusa, Catania, Augusta, Pozzallo, Porto Empedocle and Trapani. How do the hotspots work? In each center,
a committee plays Minos.The committees consist of experts chosen by state border police, EU external frontier police (FRONTEX), the European police (EUROPOL) and the European Monitor for the implementation of the Geneva Convention (EASO).

In other words, these committees are much like those proposed by the Messina Peace Study Conference 10 years ago, with only one difference: our proposal called for a well thought-out social engineering platform, one that would build on the lesson of Ellis Island and realistically determine immigrant quotas for each country, without making distinctions between political refugees and people seeking economic empowerment. The European Commission, on the other hand, was mainly preoccupied with collective security. That alone determines the narrow quotas.

Essentially, this rusty complicated bureaucratic machine has only one purpose: to create a European archive of digitized fingerprints and identify individuals to whom refugee status should be granted.

Naturally, things aren't going to plan. According to the little information currently available, to avoid repatriation most incoming immigrants without papers do not reveal their true identity, refuse to be photographed and try to prevent their fingerprints from being taken.

I know neither if nor how the situation can be changed. However, I believe we first need a substantive European-wide program to equally distribute immigrants among individual states. Such a program would have to be politically acceptable as well as economically compatible. But to achieve this we have a big problem: Europe lacks a government capable of legislating over national states. In order to build such a mechanism, all member states must first attempt to merge their national laws. There in lies the rub. Ironically, compared with America at the turn of the century, Europe – the so-called bureaucratic giant – appears to suffer from too little government.

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