

The Landing of Migrants: Is it Possible to Transform Lampedusa Into a New Ellis Island?

Marcello Saja (November 20, 2015)



Among the many analyses concerning the current emergency of illegal immigration to Italy, there happen to be some improbable comparisons between what Ellis Island represented to emigrants who reached America from around the world, and what the island of Lampedusa represents to poor people desperately crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Some authors presume to find and demonstrate affinities between the two world events, but only those who operate from an anti-American ideology can believe this is workable . All who start their analysis with an historic perspective grasp the deep differences between the two phenomena. If we want evidence of what is common to these two events the only thing we can affirm is that both are islands . I don't believe it is possible to push this analysis further .

In order to separate Ellis Island and Lampedusa, first of all, there is institutional evidence. Ellis Island is the predetermined site set up by the American government to administer over the immigration procedure. Everything here is codified: the migrants, divided for gender, receive an official entry pass; there is a medical exam, identity tests, examination of identity and political conditions, and mandatory hospital stays for transitory diseases. Here the immigrants meet those who will vouch for them and care for them while they establish themselves, and here young women meet their promised spouses, becoming wed to them in very little time.

Finally, Ellis Island is the organized apparatus for the project of social engineering that has been formulated in order to build a new America, and to support the great development process characterizing the American economy during the transition of the nineteenth to the twentieth century.

Lampedusa is nothing similar. Under the institutional profile, it is merely the site where the Italian government runs migrant admissions without any program nor any finality. Despite anything else, it was not the Italian government that chose this site. Lampedusa was selected by criminal organizations as the nearest place of access to carry immigrants arriving in Europe.

Women, men, children destroyed in body and soul may reach the island still alive; however, very often tragic events end their hopes, and for thousands of them transforms the Mediterranean Sea into a great liquid cemetery

Of course, the hope of a new life is a common feeling among emigrants of all ages, but there is a big difference between what is going on now and the emigration of past centuries. In those days, everybody left to meet many variables not knowing the future, but assured of survival. Now, he who leaves the North African coasts for Europe is not only betting on his ability to establish himself in a foreign land, but consciously or not, is obliged to bet on his very life. And if he wins in reaching Lampedusa, he has yet won nothing: not much of his own condition has changed.

All who escape the dead reaching Lampedusa are 'welcomed' by improbable guardians who send them to large rooms covered with mattresses as damp as the boat crossings. Here those who have energy occupy and defend their space. The others share what remains. Among them there are often also criminals who guided the boats, but the line between them and their victims is not visible in the silent behavior of all.

Until 2002, some guards attempted to summarily identify immigrants for registration, dividing immigrants and political refugees from the others, but without any papers this operation was really very difficult. When the number of immigrants became unsupportable, the "Authorities" decided to transfer groups of immigrants to other similar admission centers springing up daily in Sicily and in other regions of south Italy with the economic support of the government.

Nothing has been pre-planned. Only an emergency law decided the destiny of everyone. And in this confusion many immigrants escaped, reaching other EU countries. After strong protests by many EU member states, an Italian law of 2002 tried to remediate, creating the 'SPRAR' (Protection System asylum seekers and refugees). The new institutions improve immigrant logistics a little. But the procedure to recognize refugee status became more complicated and was impossible to carry out quickly.

So, huge masses of immigrants flocked to Lampedusa and other countries at Europe's external borders, leading to the more serious migration crisis in recent years.

Lampedusa thus became the symbol of the crisis in the process of supplying spectacles every day of masses of men and women shut up in enclosures and cadavers lined up on its marvelous beaches. However in this moment could the image of Lampedusa be so far from that of Ellis Island!

Ellis Island has been the Island of tears and hope. Lampedusa, the island of pain and the dead.

This is how much that has happened up to now. But now the question is, can things change? Is it possible to transform Lampedusa into a new Ellis Island?

We can easily wish it to be so, but it would be very difficult to realize.

Ten years ago, during the Peace study Conference organized at Messina University, my department affirmed the possibility of submitting part of Lampedusa as extra-territorial space under European sovereignty governed by a committee of European states' delegate members. In the proposal, the goal of this committee could be to welcome the emigrants sending them forth according to their expectations, but in harmony with a well-organized plan of European social engineering. The committee could provide immigrants with a provisory visa and the destination State would decide whether to make the visa official after close, individual examination.

Obviously, here we are talking about a hypothesis dealing with what might be possible. And as possible today, it must be based on rational criteria compatible with existing laws and the political mood of the individual states.

Italy, for example, has no desire to yield its sovereignty over any piece of its national territory. We posed the question of extra-territoriality to a sample of thirty Italian European parliamentarians from different political backgrounds. But only one with a broader view accepted this hypothesis, placing, however, the condition that reception stations be more than one, and located in "border-crossing European countries" along the northern Mediterranean coast. Most parliamentarians are of the opinion that Lampedusa should remain entirely Italian and that only the Italian government should be delegated the task (with the assistance of a European Union advisory body) of selecting and placing migrants in other European countries. In other words, for the latter, Italy should become a sort of Minos, famously described by Dante Alighieri with the task of judging and choosing the final destination.

There Minos stands, hideous and growling, examining the sins of each newcomer. With a coiled tail he judges and displaces.

And this, of course, is unlikely to be accepted by other European countries.

But at present, the reason that concentrates the masses of migrants at the southern edges of Europe, particularly at Italy, Greece and Spain, is the complicated operation of the a mechanism designed to grant the status of political refugees and, in particular, the identification of the a competent member State competent to instruct supervise the practice.

The Status of Refugees is recognized by the Geneva Convention signed by most Western countries on July 28, 1951, and adopted and codified in the Statute on February 16, 2004. Over the years there have been several changes to the "EU Regulation N. 604/2013" commonly known as the Dublin III Regulation which governs the status of refugees. Here we set out the criteria and mechanisms for determining Member State responsibility in examining an application for international protection lodged in one of the Member States. With this regulation, the EU set up a database for fingerprinting



illegal immigrants in the European Union and, in order to avoid asylum shopping, states that the Member State that will be responsible for examining the application is the State where the applicant made entry into the European Union.

Starting from 2013, the enormity of the migration flows has challenged this mechanism, especially in Italy (Lampedusa) and Greece, which again were not able to hold reviews on requests for asylum, leaving the migrants free to cross illegally to other countries of Europe. In these cases, the Dublin Regulation provides that anyone who, having filed for asylum in an EU country, crosses borders illegally to go to another EU country, should be returned to the first state.

So the actual crisis grows. Hungary, deluged with asylum claims from Asian refugees from June 23, 2015, began receiving back migrants that were sent back to them, who had entered Hungary through Serbia and later crossed the borders to other EU countries. Not being able to handle so many migrants, Hungary decided to close its borders. As a result of this drastic situation, on August 24, 2015 Germany decided to suspend the Dublin Regulation with regard to Syrian refugees and to directly process their asylum applications.

Other states, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary itself denied readiness to review the content of the Dublin agreements and, specifically, to introduce permanent and mandatory quotas for all member states. And Austria, finding itself overloaded with the same difficulties, decided to build a 600 kilometer wall on the border with Slovenia. Restrictive measures have been adopted by other European countries also.

In short, a great confusion that threatens to bring about a resurgence of nationalism and to undermine the very existence of the European Union.

In such this situation, at the end of august of this year, the European Commission announced the creation of the HOTSPOTS to be located for distribution on the European coast (Piraeus in Greece, Taranto in Italy and five in Sicily: Lampedusa, of course, Catania, Augusta, Pozzallo, Porto Empedocle, Trapani).

In other words, Sicily becomes the experimental laboratory for the new reception policy of the European Union.

How should work the Hotspots work?

In each center, a commission has the role of Minos. It consists of experts chosen by the border police of the individual States, by the police of the external frontier of the European Union (FRONTEX), by the European Monitor for the implementation of the Convention of Geneva (EASO) and by the European Police (EUROPOL).

As you see, it is a role and with a composition very similar to that contained in the proposal advanced by us 10 years ago with only one difference: in our proposal to govern the political charges should be stipulated that there be a well thought out project of social European engineering, one that is able to determine the quotas of immigrants for each country, without distinction between economic migrants and political refugees. In practical implementation made by the European Commission, however, the reasons that move for moving the

HOTSPOTS is only the merely collective security. And only this determines the very tight quotas proposed by each state.

In essence: a farraginous confused bureaucratic machine with the its only purpose being to create an



a European archive of digitized fingerprints and to identify the individual and give refugee status.

But let us see how it began to run or not run everything!!

According to the few notices we have, the majority of Immigrants, in an attempt to avoid repatriation, do not reveal their identity, preventing their fingerprints being taken and being photographed.

I don't know if and how is possible to change this situation. I think, however, that whatever the hypothesis chosen, what appears necessary, first of all, is a genuine welcoming project shared by the entire community, a project which is able to balance immigration flows and disburse an equal burden on individual States. And this would have to be not only politically compatible; it would also distribute the difficulties and the opportunities arising from the flow of incoming migrants. But with this scheme there is a big problem: Europe does not have a government able to legislate over national States. So to launch this mechanism and to avoid disparities, what is first needed is that all member States accept comparison of their national laws and act to harmonize them.

This goal is really difficult because of great differences in thinking and internal laws that exist today among the member states.

So, as long as European policy does not make significant gains in building a European politic that leads to a legitimate government by the European Parliament, one which is capable of uniform decision making for all its member States, Lampedusa is destined to remain what it is today and Italy is destined to alone support the pressure of rising illegal immigration.

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