

# HUMANKIND'S: SUFFERING IS NOT SOMETHING ONE CAN GET USED TO



I decided to write a book in the summer of 2009 when the Italian government started intercepting and turning back migrants at sea. I thought it would have helped me analyse what has been going on these years and what is not happening nowadays. Despite the apparent calm that was looming over the waters of the Mediterranean in the absence of disembarkments, apprehension still arose from the many stories of the men and women who had reached, one after the other and throughout the years, the Favarolo dock of Lampedusa and the southern coasts of Italy.

Those stories echo in my ears, hindering me from finding even just a single positive aspect of the “pushbacks” in high waters. All back, the same solution was applied to all of them: indiscriminately pushed back regardless of the individual causes behind their escape. A single offhanded sentence without appeal. Notwithstanding if you are in the middle of the sea because your country is torn apart by war, or if you are in a rubber dinghy because staying at home would have meant being tortured.

On this side of the Mediterranean, the distinctions are no longer taken into account. And the reaction of a substantial portion of the public opinion applauding this initiative without considering the price paid by those migrant also makes me feel uneasy. Those pushed back, including the children, end up in detention centres in Libya, where they remain for months or perhaps years, without having committed any crime whatsoever. They are only human beings who do not have the privilege of living at home and who have to look for peace and security elsewhere. Moreover, those returned also run the risk of being sent back further south, in the middle of the desert. How can we agree with all this?

Very few of the stories of the many men and women I have met throughout the years working as a

spokesperson for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are devoid of suffering. The condition of person on the run is almost never resolved without traumas. Most of these people endure a genuine ordeal of pain and solitude.

But it is not necessarily the cruelest stories that have left more of a mark in my mind. There are situations where someone else's anguish is so overwhelming that it is hard even for the listener to contain it. This transposed sense of malaise can be comforted only with a concrete action to help those people, to instill in them a glimmer of hope in the future.

Humankind's suffering is not something that one can get used to. Going back through the years, my memory takes me to Afghanistan, one of the most spectacular places on the planet. A place where you can perceive the intolerable dissonance between nature's beauty and the horrific stories told by women annihilated by violence; the immaculate white peaks of the Hindu Kush and the nefarious crimes perpetrated against entire generations of women and girls, silent and invisible.

From the Balkans, the images impressed in my mind are those of the elderly kicked out of the hospitals in Kosovo and transported in hand-carts by their relatives through impervious mountain paths under the pouring rain. In pain and quiet are the aghast looks of those seniors who would have died rather than endure that tribulation, or the looks of those skeletal prisoners released at a frontier post after having been used as human shields to protect the enemy's military posts.

It is also difficult to forget the long lines of Eritrean women and children, enveloped in the sandy winds overshadowing the sky. After walking for hours under the implacable sun and blistering temperatures reaching 50°C (122°F), they arrive exhausted and parched at the first refugee camp of Kassala, just beyond the Sudanese border.

A few years later, other stories of refugees, this time told in Italy, opened my eyes on the ultimate frontier of desperation. They revealed an actual Russian roulette managed by smugglers of human beings, the real warlords of the war fought in the Mediterranean. Being forced on a ramshackle rubber dinghy or on a fiberglass skiff to cross the 160 miles separating Libya from Lampedusa basically means being willing to pay the ultimate price. But, when you are without papers, or without an entry visa for a safe country, you have no choice.

But what do we know of these people and of their arduous existence? In my opinion, not enough. In the media, and consequently in the public opinion, those arriving from the sea are commonly and hastily called "illegal aliens" (or, in Italian, clandestini). It is a term loaded with prejudice, a word evoking something dangerous that has to hide from justice, even though most of the people arriving on the Italian shores are seeking asylum. This is why I consider each of these stories a legacy handed over to me, an extremely valuable patrimony in which to invest constantly through my work.

Refugees do not have the privilege of living at home, and many of them wish to return there as soon as possible. When migrants are repatriated, either because they entered or are staying in the country irregularly, they do not run the risk of being imprisoned, tortured or killed; at most, they can incur in some sanction, but nothing that would put their lives on the line. But if it is a refugee who is being pushed back to his or her country of origin after having fled from it because of persecutions, being repatriated basically means being forced back into the lion's den. There are about 35 million people in the world who live this condition of forced rootlessness, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is there to look after them. The media doesn't give much space to the 'other side' of these disembarkments, so the public opinion often neglects the tragedy behind their escapes: it is too easy to take advantage of this situation and to play on people's fear. In doing so, a victim needing help becomes a menace, a person who is frightening just because he or she arrived in this country irregularly, perhaps by sea.

Common sense can do little in front of fear, especially when it is fuelled in such a misleading way, spreading it and turning it into something collective. This perception, so arbitrary and deceptive, does not do justice to the women, men and children who have reached the Italian coasts in these years. Nor does it do justice to an Italy that is invisible, yet real: that of those who, in their everyday lives and through their jobs, promote a mutual understanding and a civil coexistence. I think of the teachers who, with the little resources given, support young foreigners in their difficult academic path and who prepare the young Italians to live in the

global village. I think of the many fishermen who have risked their own lives to save hundreds of people in the Mediterranean in the past few years. I think of the Italian families who get to know and learn from this new resource, who respect their dignity and their rights.

It is in these contexts that the society of the future is developing, and it is thanks to these ordinary heroes that integration becomes a concrete thing, in a spontaneous and almost unconscious way, while too often it still remains a vague and abstract objective for the institutions.

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