

Ciclo: Oficina de Ecologia e Sociedade | 2015-16

19 de abril de 2016, 16h00, Sala 1, CES-Coimbra

ENTITLE | Encontro de leitura

Lampedusa (un)disciplined

Gaia Giuliani (CES)¹

Abstract

As a disciplined geography, Lampedusa represents the hyper-real functioning (or dis-functioning) space for border control. Site of biometrics and definitions of European 'imagined community' (Anderson), Lampedusa is the conundrum of a number of colour lines/borders that have old and more recent origins: the North/South (Continental Europe vs. Mediterranean Europe), the South-South (Mediterranea Europe vs. Mediterranean Africa), South-East (Mediterranea Europe vs. the Middle East) faults constructed within a set of discourses that are racialised, gendered, and sexualised. My paper wants to explore the overlapping of local, national and international colour lines and European borders, their cooperation in constructing a system of definitions - fixing the meaning of 'life' (Butler) - and distinctions - between 'expendability' and 'must-be-defended-ness' (Asad and Mbembe) - within what Talal Asad has called the «small colonial wars». By local, national and international colour lines, I mean the cultural, social, geographical axes assigned of a specific colour (racialised identities) by European agencies implied in transnational migration's control and management. As European borders I mean those established - and continuously shifting - by European government(s) in order to contain Europe within an idea of itself that identifies EU as the Northern avampost of civilisation, whiteness and rightfulness.

As a disciplined space, Lampedusa represents the hyper-real functioning (or dys-functioning) of border control. A site of biometrics and (re)definition of the European 'imagined community' (Anderson), Lampedusa is the conundrum of a number of colour lines/borders that have older and more recent origins: the North/South fault (Continental Europe vs. Mediterranean Europe), the South-South

¹ The present writing corresponds to a conference paper I have presented in two reviewed versions at 3 different International conferences: ENTITLE project: *Undisciplined Environments*, Stockholm, 20-23 March 2016; *The Politics of Location*, The Innovation Forum, University of Salford, Manchester (UK), 12 November 2015; *Comparing "WE's". Community, Cosmopolitanism and Emancipation in a Global Context*, University of Lisbon, 8-9 October 2015. An expanded version of it will be included in a collective book: Gabriele Proglia and Laura Odasso (eds), *Fortress Europe, Border Lampedusa. Migrations across the Mediterranean Sea in Cultural and Comparative Perspective*, Palgrave, London 2016 (forthcoming).

one (Mediterranean Europe vs. Mediterranean Africa), the South-East one (Mediterranean Europe vs. the Middle East) – constructed within a set of discourses that are racialised, gendered, and sexualised.

My essay wants to explore the overlapping of local, national and international colour lines and European borders, as well as their interaction in constructing a system of definitions - fixing the meaning of 'life' (Butler 2009) - and distinctions - between 'expendability' and 'must-be-defended-ness' (Asad and Mbembe) - within what Talal Asad has called the «small colonial wars». By local, national and international colour lines, I mean the cultural, social, and geographical axes assigned of a specific colour (racialised identities) by European agencies involved in the control and management of transnational migration. With 'European borders' I mean those 'instable fictional boundaries' established by European government(s) in order to contain Europe within an idea of itself that identifies the EU as the Northern outpost of civilisation, whiteness and rightfulness. My reflection connects «texts» and «contexts», whether the texts are those upholding 'national security' discourses and 'risk management' measures, or the cultural materials forging the imaginary of the War on Terror.

Intersecting colour, gender, class and cultural/religious lines as social and discursive constructions are seen here as formed for and made 'functional' (Hall) to a number of (often conflicting) power relations. The effectiveness of these colour lines – which grounds the consent towards a number of policies regarding both borders and social control – derives from the multiple correspondences that their discursive construction finds in the shared imaginary representing the (European/national) Self and its Others. In turn, they contribute to shaping that imaginary, adding new meanings to the symbolic materials of which the latter is made. Although this imaginary is not devoid of internal contradictions and unevenness, it solidifies into a more static and coherent representation of Europe and its actual and prospective nations when a *crisis* from outside is said to threaten their (national/European) 'identity'.

Here the term *crisis* is resignified and does not correspond directly to the material crises (like the financial crisis ongoing since 2008) that have hit the

economic and social space of Europe, the West and their global dimensions. Rather, it refers to the crises of self-representation that both are engendered by and reproduce the material crisis. Here the symbolic and the material are conceived not just as interconnected and mutually interacting: they actually produce each other within a complex camp of individual and super-individual forces.

After 9-11 an imaginary of the 'emergency' includes, amongst others, images of refugees escaping the war in Tunisia and Syria and images of migrants (all the Others that are not acknowledged the status of refugee) landing in the offshore islands of the Southern border of Europe or crossing its Eastern frontiers. Their representations as both victims and potential criminals will be explored here as part of a more general understanding of immigration as an 'abusive' quest for help/rescue/better life. The abusiveness of migrants' quest/presence is connected to a representation of migrants/refugees as 'immoral monsters' who threaten the life standards of European citizens and societies. This threat can be seen as referring to social and cultural but also racial standards. The construction of migrants (and to a lesser extent also refugees) as 'monsters' whose life is 'expendable' in so far as it represents a threat for the European 'internal order' is crucial in my articulation: it allows to examine contextual overlaps, in the intersections of Lampedusa's many colour lines, between ideas of *monstrosity* and *abjection* inherited from both colonial and national archives. An exploration of the interrelated and persistent constructions of the internal abject (the Southerner) and the external threat (the migrant/refugee) aims not only to uncover constructions of Otherness but also and more importantly to shed a light on the unsaid, unspeakable feature of Europe and Italy as profoundly racialised 'imagined communities'.

Here, I explore the visual representations of Lampedusa as a 'proscenium' (Cuttitta 2014, see also 2012) where a number of power relations, imaginaries, and stories (individual and collective) are continuously rehearsed and modified – like in a work-in-progress *mise en scène* of the Self and its Others.

This 'stage' is seen here as dystopian for two reasons: firstly, because the discourse that represents Lampedusa as a border reveals the coexistence of a

number of fault lines that cross the national and European political space. These many intersecting lines both disrupt the dichotomy between a single Self and its (external) Others (Europe/Italy and 'the Rest'), and disavow the disconnection of a 'single' *crisis* from other former and actual crises. In that sense, the alleged clear line on which the border control regime operates that separates here from there, the land from the sea, the Self from its monsters/abjects, is revealed as blurred and clearly open (for monstrosity to trespass and spill into the 'legitimate' space of citizenship, and for liminality to become monstrous).

Secondly, Lampedusa is a dystopian space, because being a proscenium, it is thus also a 'gate' between past, present and future – for memories of colonial violences to come back, for potential/future postcolonial violence to enter the space of the Self. The discourse around Lampedusa reveals the persistence of the foreclosed memories of colonial conceptions of the global space.

These colonial conceptions are dissimulated and yet actualised in the landscape of the War on Terror through border control systems: they are based on the rhetoric of the *risky body* – the potential threat embodied by a variety of subjects defined by specific colour, gender, and religious/cultural lines. This threat corresponds, as I argue, to the shadow of that figure of the colonial subaltern which in the time of empires was deemed as the undomitable barbarian, violent, fanatic, and irrational. This subject has been often iconized as a monster – a cannibal, used to monstrous rituals, with no sense of humanity, objet of desire as well as repulsion, as stressed by Frantz Fanon (1952), Edward Said (1978), and more recently Jeanelle Hobson (2005). I draw from the critiques of those representations for a description of the 'migrant at the frontier' as a *monster*, connecting it to the iconography often deployed in mass culture as well as border and racial profiling to describe boatpeople as an 'horde of animals'.

In colonial narratives, the condition of the colonised's subalternity was described as 'natural' and 'irremovable': any act of revolt was thus inappropriate and illegitimate. I will build a parallel between the 'illegitimate' counter-violence of the (internal and external) colonized and the 'abusive' penetrating violence instantiated by postcolonial migrants and refugees 'at the frontier'. Its aim is that of

revealing both the strategic use of, and the reasons of the consent to, intersecting colour, gender, and class lines inherited from the European colonial past and deployed today as a legitimising discourse for border control regimes (Mezzadra 2002).

In the first case, this double feature of Lampedusa as both a proscenium and a gateway produces Lampedusa itself as at once a joint and a fault that, facing fears of 'invasion' and 'collapse of European/national identity', both reinstates its same identity and reveals so-called European society as everything but homogenous. Again, it leaves 'the door open' to the *crisis* both confirming the symbolic power and revealing the 'fictionality' of the representations of the space of Europe as politically coalesced and culturally homogenous. It reveals Europe as divided – as confirmed by the recent European nations' disagreements on anti-crisis measures after 2008 and, more importantly here, on a common European approach to both the Arab crisis and the Syrian refugees' quest for asylum.

It reveals also, through the same *mise en scène* of the 'gate', the persistence of those faults (in terms of class, colour and gender lines) that endure nation-wide since the very formation of the nation. They result from specific ideas of the national community and its sovereign subject: I am referring to those internal hierarchies – like the one separating North and South in Italy – that have been sedimented and kept at the core of the nation's self-representations.

As the furthest offshore piece of land, geographically closer to Tunisia than to Sicily, Lampedusa is the proscenium where what I called elsewhere (Giuliani 2015a, 2015b) 'images of race' – that is recurrent intersecting racial, class and gender constructions sedimented nationally and transnationally in colonial and postcolonial history – are continuously reinstated and reproduced in so far as they construct, by opposition, a 'Northerner' Self. European, and Italian, hegemonic representations of the South have always been loaded with heavy stereotypes depicting it as the margins of Italy and the loci of *abjection*. Here, I will briefly explore these 'images of race' in order to unravel the complex conundrum of colour lines that paints Lampedusa as a 'moving mosaic' of power relations.

Border control and postcolonial attitudes

Two worlds of globalisation are represented through risk practice in the war on terror: one populated by legitimate and civilised groups whose normalised patterns of financial, leisure or business behaviours are to be secured; and another populated by illegitimate and uncivilised persons whose suspicious patterns of behaviour are to be targeted and apprehended (Louise Amoore, Marieke De Goede, introduction to their edited book *Risk and the War on Terror*, 2008, p. 13).

Lampedusa is precisely one of the 'gates' between these two worlds: the 'familiar' (the Self) and the 'unfamiliar' (the Rest) or the 'uncanny' that through the gate comes to stay (Simmel, 1908; Mehta 1999).

The dichotomy between a 'legitimate and civilised' world and its 'illegitimate and uncivilised' Other forms a pattern through which we can interpret the events that happen in what is conceived to be the 'external' world of the 'alien'.

To establish a binary rhetoric that locates 'barbarism' beyond the border, on the other side of the 'gate', means to locate what is conceived as 'the place for disasters' where migrants come from. In colonial narratives the discovered land to colonise was the place for disaster, where indigenous people stayed overwhelmed by natural as well as human-generated disaster that they were unable to master (they did not own Western technics). Nowadays disasters coincide with a number of phenomena, from wars, to tsunamis, from epidemics to unhuman labour exploitation: in brief global inequalities in their extreme version.

To 'borderize' Lampedusa means to distance Italy (mainland Italy) from disasters, keeping it safe from a reading of geography that in the past had included it as a whole in the space beyond the 'gate' (I am thinking about the orientalised view that Europe forged of the Meridione) and had viewed it as culturally, socially, politically and racially inferior to the 'whiter/more civilised' Europe. Although this 'borderization' is meant to reinstate the dichotomy between here and there, the frontier of Lampedusa – an offshore and distanced one – allows this shift and

reproduces the 'Other side of the gate' (Africa and the Middle East) and the 'gate' itself (Lampedusa) as Others.

In this picture, disasters are brought to the border – travelling with the migrants' bodies – and Lampedusa itself becomes a place of disaster. The difference between 'out there' and Lampedusa lays in the fact that 'out there' corresponds to an indistinct set of places *for* disaster, while Lampedusa is a place *of* disaster: as 'differentially included' within the nation (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013), Lampedusa must not be a place *for* disaster but one where the disaster occurs only by virtue of the 'abusive' landing of those who come from 'out there'.

Within the dichotomy between civilised and uncivilised, deserving and undeserving, Lampedusa, together with its population, is to *deserve* (because they formally belong to the nation), although its in-between positionality (loaded with anti-Southern stereotypes) identifies it as the exceptional space characterized by a geographical and symbolic neglect.

I read this in-between positionality, neglected by both the State and the EU, through Talal Asad (2002) and Achille Mbembe's (2003) lens, that interprets the reading of post 9-11 global space as divided between those who must be defended and *risky bodies* as driven by neo-colonial attitudes. Accordingly, Lampedusa confirms the Saidian and then Subaltern Studies understanding of the colonial world as structured in a multiple and internally conflicting set of complicities and resistances with the colonial power. Lampedusa is one of the various interstitial intersecting spaces and spheres that reproduce colonial dominance.

The island and the population of Lampedusa lay at the margin of Italian society and on the border between in and out: while they belong to the Italian territory, society, and body politic, they are externalised as subjects that are the mere recipients of the many decisions about border control taken elsewhere (Italy/Europe/Frontex) as well as of the apparatus for implementation of these decisions (police enforcement at the frontier and CIE staff). At the same time Lampedusa's microcosmos is left aside (or behind): it is not granted the basic services provided nation-wide by the State (hospitals and higher education but also

water and energy supply for which Lampedusa is strictly dependent on Sicily). It is not compensated for the dramatic shortfall from its first economic activity – that of the tourism industry. Lampedusa and Lampedusians look like the remotest province of a postcolonial Empire, where the supposed colonial servants are caught between isolation and impotence.

In post-Fascist Italy, Southerners have been seen for decades as objects, *risky bodies* whose emigration towards the industrial triangle was read as loaded with a sinister omen of barbarity and decay. This abjection was experienced by Lampedusians, occupying the particular position of the South of the South of the South (Southern to Sicily which is already considered the South of the South).

As a land ‘for fishermen’ and emigration (during the last 50 years Lampedusians migrated to inland Italy in their numbers), in the discourse on mass illegal immigration Lampedusa figures as a spot inhabited by uncivilised ‘poor’ people barely able to profit from the island’s beauties (the tourism sector has been only very recently developed) and to cope with the ‘emergency’ of illegal boatpeople landings.

As such, Lampedusa, as a dystopian proscenium – as the theatre where after 9/11 the dichotomy separating the Self from its Others is performed – reveals the shifting nature of the border and the many fractures that characterise European and Italian ‘imagined identities’. It reveals the fictionality of Fortress Europe as an homogenous space, trapped as it is into, and engine of, a number of intersecting colour lines and regimes of citizenship forged by and functional to the reorganisation of global governmentality.

It is precisely Lampedusa’s inbetweenness that, on the other hand, provides the space for undisciplined subjectivities to come to be – those of migrants exerting their “right to escape” and “will to live”, and for Lampedusians to create forms of unexpected solidarity and re-politicisation of the ‘migration-emergency’.