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Acts

Engin Isin

The tragedy of Lampedusa unfolds in three acts. All three are acts of citizenship. A fourth must come.

The first and original act is the embarking on a journey to the other shore. When a group of several hundred primarily Somalis and Eritreans got on board a ship, they became migrants. Why 'migrants'? By seeking better lives, these Somalis and Eritreans were subjecting themselves to a regime of truth that rendered them migrants because their journey crossed frontiers. This was their act of citizenship. For more than 300 on 4 October 2013, it became the ultimate sacrifice for it. In another regime of truth, they could have been heroes.

The second act was the announcement by Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta that those who lost their lives were to be given posthumous citizenship. He declared, 'The hundreds who lost their lives off Lampedusa yesterday are Italian citizens as of today'. The day was also declared an official day of mourning for the victims. Was it an act of hypocrisy to give posthumous citizenship to those who were no longer 'migrants' but had become 'victims'? Why not give citizenship to those who survived? Instead, those who survived were now 'illegal immigrants' destined to be charged, detained and deported. In another regime of truth, they could have been patriots.

The third act was when the Italian city of Treviso joined a network of 200 cities granting honorary citizenship to the children of foreigners born in Italy. It is an important act 'to award honorary citizenship in a spirit of solidarity with their neighbours, and frustration with rules that refuse to acknowledge modern Italy's multiethnic social fabric' (Davies, 2013). Still, I wonder if this 'gesture of hope' falls well short of granting what all those who arrive at the frontiers of Europe themselves hope for: European citizenship. Instead, implicitly this act strengthens the rule of autochthony, birth and status. Yet what it recognizes is the principle that those who remain and establish themselves in the social fabric of the city do have a claim to citizenship.

This may be a symbolic act of citizenship, albeit with far-reaching consequences. Why are Somalis and Eritreans not given what they demand, European citizenship? If citizenship is about a chance to make ourselves anew, what better way to recognize them than with European citizenship? Not Italian citizenship, not Greek citizenship, not Spanish citizenship, not European citizenship as a benefit of national citizenship, but non-derivative European citizenship (that is, not dependent on prior citizenship of one of the 28 member states of the EU). This would be a recognition of the fact that our

common humanity deals us citizenship as birthright lottery (Shachar, 2009). Nobody is born under circumstances of their choosing. Somalis, Eritreans and countless others risk their lives for a chance to prove themselves, a chance to make a living for themselves and their families, and overcome what that birthright lottery has dealt them. That one can die in the act is the tragedy, as those nearly 20,000 deaths at European frontiers attests.

If Europe cannot give those who arrive at its frontiers an unconditional citizenship, it can offer a conditional citizenship. Europe has a history of conditional citizenship. The condition is about contribution, taking that chance and making a new beginning. For a long time European cities granted citizenship to anyone who stayed in the city for a year and a day. Being granted citizenship meant receiving the liberty of the city, hence the German saying, 'the city air makes one free'.

It would be folly not to recognize the complexity of global migration. There are many scholars who study aspects of this complex issue and its equally complex history. There are disagreements about approach, methods, data, findings, and interpretations. There are journals dedicated to migration studies and its many dimensions. There are more books on migration than any scholar can follow let alone read. Yet, can we not summon a fraction of the courage of migrants to draw one conclusion: as global inequality spreads (something to which Europe contributes massively and disproportionately) it creates more pressure on millions of people to migrate. Can we not accept that migrants are people who are seeking better lives for themselves and their families? Isn't dividing them into economic and political migrants as cruel as dividing the poor into deserving and undeserving (Bosniak, 2006)? Migrants are citizens not by fortune, but by deed (McNevin, 2011). When such pressure is met with frontier security regimes of surveillance, deterrence and detention, the risks of crossing frontiers become higher. The more migration becomes intractable, the more it spawns further security measures (Guild, 2009).

Nation-state citizenship, which the European Union both sanctions and strengthens, is in a vicious death cycle. Unless Europeans commit member states and the EU to reducing global inequality and offering conditional but non-derivative European citizenship, the frontiers of Europe will engender more death, more suffering, and more tragedy.

As a final (redeeming) act of this tragedy, Europeans must now establish a European network of cities that

grant European citizenship to those who arrive at the continent's frontiers. Each city can decide on a period of growing into the social fabric of the city, learning and following local customs, norms, and sociability, and democratic deliberation with the network. This act would honour not only the dead but also the living. It would also honour a particular European history of citizenship.

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