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Anthropology of Humanitarian Interventions

Solidarity and Humanitarian Aid in the Central Mediterranean. Currents and Countercurrents of Rescue at Sea

Abstract:

The presentations intend to purpose some of the reflections that emerged from the ethnographic research carried out on board of three Search and Rescue ships (Mediterranea Saving Humans, ResQPeople and Doctors Without Borders) in the Central Mediterranean between 2019 and 2021, as part of the PhD course in anthropology at the University of Turin.

The presentations have three objectives: the first two objectives will be explored in the first meeting, the third objective in the second meeting.

First, the aim is to briefly outline the process that led grass-root NGOs and associations to take action in the Mediterranean, with an initial support from State institutions which later discouraged and opposed them. The European policies of border securitization and solidarity criminalization create a context in which various civil society groups are forced to assume a conflictual and "politicized" position that is destined to come into tension with the "humanitarian" and "neutrality" attitude traditionally claimed.

Second, by bringing field experience into dialogue with the anthropological literature of institutions, borders, the humanitarian and the sea, the presentation aims to underline three levels of tensions: between state (or supra-state) institutions and non-governmental organizations; between the different organizations where it was possible to do ethnographic research; and within individual organizations, between their structure and individual practices.

By taking a cross-eye perspective - both as a declared researcher, and an active member of the rescue crew - I was able to immerse in the peculiar context generated on board, and thus grasp - through participation - the practices, rhetorics and imageries used by activists and humanitarian workers to construct their own subjectivity as "rescuers" (in relation and often in contrast to the rescued migrants on the one hand and the structure of which they are part on the other).

Third, the presentation shifts between a "macro" and a "micro" scale, in order to highlight the negotiations of different sovereignties and show how frictions between ethics and morality generate creative paths for a resemantization of arbitrariness. Against an apparently dominant (supra)state mechanism which is replicated inside the organizations, and which tends towards standardization, bureaucratization, and securitarian and hierarchical management, it seems possible to detect also individual practices of resistance and "mutiny", both among activists/operators and migrants.