



## Geopoliticizing Geographies of Care: Scales of Responsibility Towards Sea-borne Migrants and Refugees in the Mediterranean

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# **Geopoliticizing geographies of care: Scales of responsibility towards seaborne migrants and refugees in the Mediterranean**

## **Abstract**

Each year thousands of people seeking better lives in Europe make the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean. Many of those struggling or stranded at sea are rescued by ‘boat people’ (Pugh 2004) comprising NGOs, humanitarian organizations, coast guards and merchant vessels. Under maritime law there is a duty of care towards anyone that experiences difficulty at sea. There is, too, a duty of care by States who under the same law are required to assist ships and allow the disembarkation of those in danger. Yet this practice has important legal, ethical and practical implications and has been challenged by right-leaning political regimes who, making good on election promises to ease immigration, have prohibited such vessels to dock at their ports. This paper, using a case study approach of the humanitarian vessel the Aquarius, considers the ways in which the geographies of care intersect and collide with the geopolitical framing of migrants and refugees. In doing so the paper makes two important contributions. First, it extends conceptualizations of care geographies which are more typically applied to the spatial outworking of health and wellbeing to European migration. It thinks about how care is administered, contested and politicized. The complex concept of care offers a rich lens through which to critique the framing of seaborne migrants and refugees in Europe. Through giving or circumventing legal responsibilities to provide care, seaborne migrants are either humanized or dehumanized. Second, through unpacking the legislative and ethical frameworks shaping search and rescue (SAR) activities in the Mediterranean, we can observe a distinct ‘geopoliticizing of care and responsibility’ whereby these individuals become pawns in wider power dynamics within the European Union.

**Key words:** care, migrants, refugees, Mediterranean, interdiction, NGO

## **Introduction**

In June 2018, the Aquarius, an NGO vessel operating in the Mediterranean intercepted more than 600 sea-borne migrants in distress trying to make their way to the shores of Europe (Wintour et al. 2018). It sailed to the nearest port in Italy, only to be refused entry by the new Italian Minister of Interior who had been in post only a matter of weeks. The ship set sail for Malta, having been turned away from Italy, only to once again be refused entry. Aquarius was eventually welcomed to dock in the Port of Valencia in Spain almost three weeks later, yet not before unleashing a particularly fractious and heated geopolitical debate about modes of care and responsibility towards those seeking refuge in Europe. While scholars such as Hyndman and Mountz (2008) have investigated the legal responsibilities States have towards migrants and those seeking refuge, we rarely think about migration within the context of giving (or circumventing) care. Migrants and refugees are not, of course, without agency and power as Mainwaring (2013) suggests, yet those who are seeking protection or simply a better life often find themselves bound up in care geographies. That care is contingent, I suggest, on an array of interconnected yet complex, moral, ethical, legal and geopolitical frameworks and practices.

The fate of thousands of seaborne migrants and refugees making the treacherous and often fatal journey across the Mediterranean each year (UNOCA 2018) rests in part, on the actions of what Pugh (2004) refers to as ‘boat people’: those operating shipping or military vessels; NGOs and charities patrolling international waters, and State-operated search and rescue (henceforth SAR) vessels navigating complex legal and territorial jurisdictions. The fate of these people is influenced equally on the actions of individual States whose responsibility is dictated by international laws and supranational organizations (see DeBono 2013), or by their geography (or even controversially by their economic power-see, for example, Hyndman 2000). It is, too, shaped by public discourse which feeds into the actions

of prominent and vocal politicians such as Italy's Matteo Salvini, who almost unilaterally decide whether a vessel carrying migrants or refugees should be allowed to dock. This is further complicated by the presence of smugglers and traffickers who have used the blurred boundaries of responsibility to carry people across the Mediterranean. Care within the context of migration is, I suggest, highly nuanced across time and place. The caregiving process may begin whenever a vessel saves or intercepts those in danger, but this care does not end when a ship docks at the nearest port. The future care of migrants and refugees is a difficult and sometimes fraught process.

Giving and receiving care as Fisher and Tonto attest (1990, 40), is a practice that individuals engage with to 'maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible'. Popke (2006) agrees, suggesting that it can instill a sense of responsibility not only toward those with whom we have some sort of emotional relationship, but also toward different and distinct others. He continues 'care is more than simply a social relation with moral and ethical dimensions: it can also be the basis for alternative ethical standpoints with implications for how we view traditional notions of citizenship and politics' (2006, 41). Care therefore can be viewed as being bound to the idea of citizenship and the right to belong. It is argued there that it is also inextricably linked to humanizing (and thus dehumanizing) behavior.

The overarching aim of this paper is to think about the ways in which complex geographies of care, legal responsibility and responsibility under international law across varying scales intersect and collide with the geopolitical framing of migrants and refugees within Europe. On one level, this specific example of Aquarius with which the paper opens, reveals dichotomous efforts by multiple actors to engage in a practice and discourse that, in seeking to determine the extent of which they can or are willing to care for those in danger, contributes to the humanization and dehumanization of those very individuals. Dehumanizing

practice according to Bleiker et al. (2013) is orchestrated by individuals or groups in society who want to protect their privileged positions. By perceiving refugees or migrants as different or undeserving of an equal status, they are stripped of their identity as human beings. On another, it speaks of a complex network of blurred legislative, territorial and humanitarian boundaries that complicate behaviors towards vulnerable individuals. In doing so this paper makes two important contributions. First, it extends conceptualizations of care geographies more typically applied to readings of health and wellbeing to European migration. It thinks about the ways in which care is administered, contested and politicized as individuals attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Care, I suggest, offers a rich lens through which to critique the framing of migrants in Europe. Second, through unpacking the legislative and moral frameworks shaping SAR activities in the Mediterranean, we can observe a distinct ‘geopoliticizing of care and responsibility’ whereby migrants become pawns in wider power struggles within the European Union.

The paper uses a case study approach to examine the controversy surrounding NGO vessels and to tease out the power dynamics embedded within geographies of care that underpin the practice of making and unmaking refugees. The cases were selected following widespread public interest across Europe and a series of publicized high-profile exchanges between stakeholders. Data was collated through an analysis of policy and communication material pertaining to the vessels and their activities over the course of six months in 2018. Statements issued by politicians, NGOs, and European institutions were thematically analyzed and coded. The text of legal frameworks shaping how actors across a multiplicity of scales could and should engage with sea-borne migrants was also analyzed. In addition, media reports were mapped and examined using Carvalho’s (2008) methodological approach which examines language, structure and surface descriptors. Social media platforms, unsurprisingly, produced a rich pool of qualitative data. Politicians, humanitarian

organizations and the public used social media to engage in debates about the duty of care and responsibility and in doing so reframed the labels assigned to refugees and migrants. It should be noted that this paper is not attempting to present a pan-European presentation of the EU, rather it aims to demonstrate some of the nuanced regional approaches to care and responsibility within a complex geopolitical framework. Furthermore, it gives us a sense of some of the geopolitical wrangling taking place at a specific point in the migration 'crisis'.

The paper begins by introducing the conceptual framework, defining care and considering how it relates to the fields of mobility and migration. A scaled thematic discussion follows. It begins by looking at some of the legal frameworks that frame how States within the EU 'should' care for those who seek refuge and suggest that the 'unintended consequences' of legislation that is supposed to care for migrants can often serve to dehumanize them and remove their individuality (McDowell et al. 2017). It then discusses the role of humanitarian organizations before considering the role of individual States in this particular crisis, as well as high-profile politicians. The paper ends with a discussion on how public discourse that is framed within EU geopolitical power struggles can feed into and influence the decision of high-profile politicians who, making good on election promises, circumvent legal frameworks.

### **Conceptualizing care within the context of migration**

Care transcends socio-spatial boundaries (Popke 2006). Each of us engage in care geographies across multiple scales and times. For Lawson (2007, 3) care is 'embedded in all of our encounters and interactions', even if it is not explicitly recognized. Often conceived as an embodied action (Hughes et al. 2005), definitions of care range from emotional responses towards something or someone in need, to the act of providing physical and/or psychological care towards a person or thing (see Conradson 2003). For Held (2006), care is not necessarily

an activity, rather it is rooted in ideas about how we intersect and relate to others across multiple scales. This has important implications for migration policy and practice. How we view individuals who are seeking refuge or a better life, plays an important role in policymaking and the respective practices of those States, SAR vessels and humanitarian organizations who encounter sea-borne migrants and refugees as they move through contested and blurred borders.

Geographers have made a marked contribution to our understanding of the spaces (McKie et al. 2002; Milligan and Wiles 2010) and outworking of care (Popke 2006), although this has not yet reached the complex domain of migration. Davidson and Milligan's (2004) conceptualization of the social dimensions of caring argue for a more nuanced reading of the effective and emotive implications of socially produced landscapes while Brown (cited in Popke 2006, 11) notes that questions of care 'cannot simply be mapped onto the existing liberal democratic maps of the political. They transform its very foundation'. The inexorable link between the social and political has also been the subject of Lawson's (2007) work. In reminding us that care 'ethics' is a social process and practice that is contextually shaped and influenced, she suggests it is intimately bound up in power dynamics and structures and therefore might be considered outside the domain of health geography. The marginalization of care in specific places and of specific people, she suggests, is 'deeply political' (2007, 5). Only perhaps by identifying and theorizing power plays through analyzing the geography of care, might we move towards reconstructing some of these institutions and structures.

Thinking about Lawson's (2007) invitation to consider care in other contexts and fields, this paper suggests that care is a crucial part of human mobility as it relates to migration and asylum systems. It is particularly relevant to much of the practices and policies being applied and enacted in the blurred space of the Mediterranean Sea. Care intersects with migration in this space in three ways: first it is bound up in an ethical or moral obligation to

help those in need; second there is a legal responsibility to care for those found struggling in the Mediterranean, and third, there is a responsibility under international law for European Union States to protect and care for migrants or refugees intercepted at its borders. These intersections although not interchangeable are sometimes difficult to disentangle.

Some of those making the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean during the height of the migration ‘crisis’ were seeking asylum or had been displaced by conflict. Refugee status is a social category, a part of which expectation of care is assumed. Under the definition of refugees as set out by the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention, a person assigned the label of refugee should be able to avail of specific forms of care and protection. Under its terms a refugee is a person ‘who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it’ (UN 1951). Historically, States have held the principle role in assigning refugee status but since 2013 the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNRA) has become increasingly involved if European States are unwilling or cannot engage in this process. As Zetter (2016) suggests governments in Europe use a variety of extra territorial mechanisms to ensure that migrants do not achieve that status within their borders. Mountz’s (2011) research into the offshoring practices of interdiction highlights how migrants are deliberately stopped from researching Europe’s shores in order to ensure that they do not have the right to apply for asylum. Much of this practice has been led by Frontex, the pan-European agency tasked with policing external borders. Frontex, as Mainwaring and Brigden (2016, 15) observe largely ‘depicts migrant journeys as unidimensional and unidirectional lines towards the EU’. They are ‘decontextualized and



depoliticized' which have an almost dehumanizing effect. In response to the volume of migrants and asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean in 2015, it was reframed as the European Border and Coastguard Agency. It plays, as Williams and Mountz (2016) note, a critical role in the militarization of the Mediterranean and is explicitly involved in practices that ensure that vessels carrying migrants will not reach Europe's shores.

In Article 33, paragraph 1 of the Refugee Convention outlines or defines the principle of *non-refoulement*. According to this statute, refugees cannot be returned to their countries of origin for fear of persecution. This effectively implies that more layers of care may be needed for those refugees who cannot be returned, subjecting States to varying economic, social and political ramifications. Zetter (2016) further argues that some EU states deliberately complicate the process of labelling and this has important implications for their duty of care towards those who seek refuge. Echoing this sentiment, Andersson's (2014) research documents lengthy stays for those seeking care at border checkpoints across Europe. He argues that temporality is used as a weapon or tactic with serious economic implications. Participants in his study liken their protracted periods of detention (while waiting to be processed and labelled) to being imprisoned in places of incarceration that are notorious with human right violations or abuses. In these in-between spaces, as a form of biopolitical control of the subjects within them, care is rationed, and individuals are marginalized. 'Crossing borders and transgressing the maintenance of boundaries, refugees bring into view the contested and contingent nature of national limits and identities. Asylum seekers are literally matter out of place' (Andersson 2014, 796). Those seeking asylum or refugee status are kept in extra-territorial spaces outside the margins of the everyday.

### **Evaluating a duty of care within legislative frameworks**

Before thinking about how actors across different scales conceptualize care it is important primarily to review the legal frameworks that influence the ways in which irregular migrants experience care. I draw on Fischer-Lescano's et al. (2009) important work to sketch out the legal texts that shape the behaviors of macro and micro level actors which find themselves in high-pressure environments dealing with sea-borne migrants. Article 98 of the United Nations Convention on the Law at Sea establishes the legal duties of vessels that are confronted with lives at risk at sea. It states that:

Every State shall require the master of a ship flying its flag, in so far as he can do so without serious danger to the ship, the crew or the passengers, to render assistance to any person found at sea in danger of being lost, [and] to proceed with all possible speed to the rescue of persons in distress, if informed of their need of assistance, in so far as such action may reasonably be expected of him.

This principle sets a precedent for both European States and vessels. By linking the 'identity' of the ship with the sovereignty or identity of a specific State, the duty of care is expanded beyond the individual sailing a particular vessel. The Article continues to extend the responsibility of care to coastal States arguing that every 'coastal State shall promote the establishment, operation and maintenance of an adequate and effective SAR service regarding safety on and over the sea and, where circumstances so require, by way of mutual regional arrangements cooperate with neighboring States for this purpose' (1951). This particularly broad remit tasks neighboring states with carrying additional responsibility for those in danger. Yet it does not offer any clarity on the nature of 'mutual regional arrangements' and leaves considerable scope for contestation and resistance between and across EU States who are at odds about their respective duty of care.

While Article 98 sets out the legal duty of care towards those found at sea, a second legal framework that is increasingly used to navigate modes of responsibility is Article 2,

paragraph 1 on the 1982 Law of the Sea which delineates the territorial jurisdiction of States. It suggests that the territory (and thus the responsibility) of the State extends to 12 nautical miles out to sea. If migrants are picked up within 12 nautical miles of a State's shore, then it is their responsibility to initiate the caretaking and caregiving process. This legislation, couched within the geopolitics of Europe, is increasingly having implications for whether neighboring vessels will 'obey' it. Williams and Mountz (2016) suggests that the securitization of migration in Europe, framed within narratives of othering, criminality and even terrorism, intersects with these decisions. 'By scripting migrants and would-be asylum seekers as criminal and security threats the rationale is set forth discursively for their distancing through exclusionary measures or bureaucratic management off-shore' (Williams and Mountz 2016, 32).

The controversial Dublin System which deals with asylum is also problematic. The system works on the premise that requests for asylum are dealt with primarily by the principle State of entry. This has however meant that the challenge of processing and dealing with requests from sea-borne migrants who want to seek asylum lie principally with a small number of southern States such as Spain, Malta, Greece and Italy (see Kasparek 2016). Decisions about the status of 'Dublined' individuals who wish to travel through Europe to meet family and friends often fall to the States at their original point of entry, although the unification of families is on paper supposed to be a key criterion in assigning care. The geopolitical wrangling over the responsibility of care under Dublin in relation to migration across Europe has occasioned a fractious debate that sheds some light on the 'gulf that seems to have opened up between the way in which policy makers conceptualize forced migration and the way in which it is conceptualized by advocates and activists' (Turton 2003 cited in Mouzourakis 2014). These complex and contradictory modes of responsibility across multiple scales have profound implications for the geography of care in Europe.

Problems invariably arise for those in need of immediate or critical care whenever Article 2 collides with Article 98. As they do whenever there is no time or space to work through nautical miles, legal frameworks or systems of governance. How should 'boat people' (Pugh 2004) act when they encounter individuals whose lives are at immediate risk? How does care play out in these emotive and challenging spaces within a context of fraught geopolitical relationships? The scale of irregular migration to Europe across the Mediterranean means that humanitarian organizations, SAR vessels, individual states, supranational organizations and the multiple publics face debates around responsibility and care in challenging environments that blurs ethical/moral, territorial, legislative and geopolitical boundaries. This is further complicated by a contested discourse where the social categories of refugees and migrants often come into conflict with legal categories. The Aquarius case offers an intriguing window into this complex arena of blurred borders and conflicting modes of responsibility.

### **Humanitarian vessels in the Mediterranean: Humanizing migrants?**

Humanitarian work is grounded in the principles of 'humanity, impartiality and neutrality', attempting to occupy a 'symbolic space, separate from politics' (Cusumano 2018, 389). Those who undertake this type of vocational work do so because they want to occupy a caring space that delivers immediate and critical care to those who are in need. Bretherton (2006, 43) suggests 'liberal unitarians and deontologists argue that liberal democracies in principle, owe a duty of care to all humanity and by implication that borders should be in principle, open'. This 'liberal will-to-care' observed by Reid-Henry (2013) and imagined through humanitarian organizations has grown steadily since the end of the Cold War, as have care-based interventions by specific States. Yet the latter has often resulted in conflicting geopolitical imaginaries and tensions (Reid-Henry 2013).

Rozakou (2017) charts the critical role that NGOs and small charities have played in alleviating the suffering occasioned by large-scale migration. This work has, however, become much more difficult given the growing politicization and militarization of aid (Cusumano 2017). It is becoming intrinsically difficult for the humanitarian sector to remain 'aloof from Western governments' agendas (2017, 92). It is hardly surprising then, that humanitarian organizations have increasingly found themselves working at a very complex set of spatial and legal scales that often collide with governance, legislation, political systems and public opinion.

As humanitarian space 'on dry land' shrinks (Cusumano 2018, 388), efforts to engage in SAR at sea have increased (Stierl 2016). Cuttitta (2018) posits that such organizations are playing a growing and much contested role in managing borders. They have since 2015 been working alongside the coastal SAR teams of southern States, such as Italy and Malta. This relationship has been and continues to be fraught with controversy (see Williams 2015). On the one hand, NGOs are assisting and helping coordinate many of the operations. They have played a vital role in rescuing migrants and refugees in the absence of established maritime agencies. On the other, charities and NGOs have found themselves working unilaterally without the consent of States and alongside traffickers and smugglers. Tazzioli's (2016) research into humanitarian visibility in the Mediterranean highlights the growing complexities that NGOs face in attempting to administer care. Visibility, she argues, is one of the pillars of intervention. Since 2015, NGOs and charities have worked tirelessly to increase their own visibility to migrants and to detect ships in trouble. They have developed 'regimes of visibility', defining what must be seen and what can go unnoticed or undetected. By 2016 their willingness to be seen as the 'good border spectacle' had in many ways transformed their capacity to detect into their almost inescapable duty to rescue' (Tazzioli 2016, 577).

Humanitarian involvement in SAR activities in the Mediterranean came sharply into focus in June 2018 when the fate of the Aquarius captured the world's attention. Carrying some 600 of migrants, it became stranded off the coast of Italy. Operating under the humanitarian organization, Medicine Sans Borders (henceforth MSF) at Sea, the vessel attempted to work alongside SAR organizations to help save lives on a particularly treacherous route between Libya and Europe. MSF have been involved in SAR efforts in the Mediterranean since early 2016. It has a large membership and relies heavily on sponsorship and public support. Social media technologies have been critically important in helping MSF and other NGOs engage in the process of humanizing refugees and defending their duty of care. The galvanization of humanitarian intervention not just in the Mediterranean but across the globe has been enabled by the explosion of digital technologies which are enabling like-minded individuals to come together to collectively initiate action to help those in need. For Reid-Henry (2013, 41) contemporary humanitarian work 'allows Western citizens to better understand how their wealth and privilege intersects with poverty and suffering elsewhere'.

MSF works closely with the Maritime Rescue Centre in Rome and abides by maritime legislation. They patrol in international waters during the day and only move closer to state borders if lives are seriously at risk. MSF assert that as a humanitarian agency involved in SAR, it does not have a mandate or means to label or assess the immigration status of the people it assists. It 'provides medical care without judgment and strongly believes that no human being should drown when the means exist to prevent it'. It persistently has lobbied for 'a Europe that protects human lives' (MSF 2018). This stance of not engaging in a labelling strategy when individuals need critical care is shared by other NGOs operating in the Mediterranean. Proactiva Open Arms is a Spanish NGO vessel which uses similar powerful images and language to portray its objectives in its campaigns. With the strapline 'Either a life is saved, or a death is silenced, it has been involved in multiple rescue operations.

Visitors to its website or Twitter feed are confronted with emotive images of individuals that it has rescued. One image shows a child in trouble in the sea with the question. ‘Should I tell him there’s already poor people in my country? Or should I save his life?’ (Open Arms, 2018). These images and words present a simple choice between life and death—a choice that does not include immigration quotas, assigning status or determining nautical miles.

NGOs in the Mediterranean have also suggested that the subsequent refusal of Aquarius, first by Italy, then Malta contravened not only maritime legislation but also were a contradiction of European values (see Jones 2018). The troubles faced by Aquarius were to become a constant feature of 2018. Following the first crisis Aquarius was stripped of its state registration and ordered to suspend operations. After a brief interim period, it found itself at the center of yet another geopolitical controversy when a new crisis emerged a few months later. It intercepted 141 migrants in distress in the Mediterranean and attempted to dock in Italy. However, Italy demanded that Britain take responsibility for the migrants as the ship was registered to Gibraltar, a British overseas territory. It also suggested that foul play was involved suggesting that the ship was also registered as a survey vessel, as opposed to a humanitarian vessel. Malta responded that it would not accept the vessel and would in fact strip the ship of its registration status. The vessel was stranded in international waters between Italy and Malta waiting for a State to open its borders. Weeks later, a Tunisian vessel, the Sarost 5 suffered a similar fate and was stranded at sea for over three weeks.

NGO activity in the Mediterranean has pulled European States into debates about care, morality and values. As Reid-Henry (2013, 425) observes humanitarianism has ‘set limits on state power in terms of what we might today call ‘human’ rights, but only to the extent that it also made possible a mobius-like recuperation of sovereignty, the power over life, in other ways’ (Reid-Henry 2013, 425). States have in retaliation increasingly criticized NGOs for facilitating something much more sinister in Europe that jeopardizes not just the

social and economic equilibrium but also the security of national borders. Humanitarian organizations in the Mediterranean have found themselves operating uncomfortably alongside not only military and law enforcement stakeholders but smugglers and traffickers (Cusumano 2018), further complicating their duty of care. They have been accused of breaching human rights in facilitating illegal activities that contravene human rights. Writing in a different context about the tensions between humanitarianism: ‘For many people, it is almost counter-intuitive to have to consider that humanitarian action may also have a dark side which compromises as well as helps the people whose suffering it seeks to assuage’ (Sims, 1997, 244). Kennedy’s (2005, 6) research into the darker sides of humanitarianism suggests that organizations need to take more responsibility and reflect on the inherent power they hold and how that impacts the lives of other ‘there is scarcely a humanitarian practice that does not act as if governance were elsewhere—in government, statecraft, the member states, the states’ parties, the Security Council, the field, the headquarters, the empire. And yet we do rule. We exercise power and affect distributions among people. Let us no longer avert our eyes from humanitarian rulership’.

### **The role of European States: Geopoliticizing care**

Pugh (2000) suggests that the prominence of the neo-liberal agenda across Europe with its goals of achieving successful economic integration has been accompanied by the tightening of immigration controls at the level of the State. Increased anxiety over the so-called refugee crisis amongst European States is perhaps symptomatic of a much deeper renegotiation of the meaning and form of the nation-state (Brethon 2018). Wealthy States, as Reid-Henry (2013) notes, manage that wealth through immigration controls and engage in dichotomous acts of care and control. Restricting mobility however is a complex and contradictory process.

Petryna (2003, 31) notes that ‘a limited opening up of the State to those in need thus has as its



counterpart the reduction of identities to rather limiting forms of ‘biological citizenship’. Across the European Union the free movement of individuals coexists with a hardening of immigration policy towards non-EU citizens.

The response to sea-borne migrants in the Mediterranean in the summer of 2018 was mixed. The new Italian populist right-wing government sought to reframe its duty of care. Following the docking of Aquarius in Spain, the Interior Minister Matteo Salvini suggested that the Italian government had scored its first victory in government claiming, ‘We have opened a front in Brussels’ (Kirchgaessner et al. 2018). Opening the channels of communication with the European Union was critically important for Salvini who became interior minister only weeks before the Aquarius was refused entry. ‘We are contacting the European commission so that it can fulfil its duties towards Italy that have never been respected’ (Kirchgaessner et al. 2018). Salvini was referring to the disproportionate volume of migrants and refugees reaching Europe through Italy (BBC News 2018b), an issue not resolved through the EU-Turkish pact in late 2017. This pact was designed to curb the number of migrants arriving in Europe. Under its terms, migrants would be held and processed in Turkey, devolving responsibility from European States. Significantly, UNHRC data suggests that the volume of sea arrivals to Italy has in fact decreased dramatically. In 2014, 170,110 migrants arrived by sea. This decreased to 23,370 by 2018 with numbers down to just over 10k by November 2019 (UNHCR 2019). A few days later, the Italian government once again refused a US warship assisting a German SAR vessel (Sea Watch) entry. It was carrying 41 migrants and 12 dead bodies it had intercepted off the coast of Libya. Significantly and paradoxically, an Italian coastguard vessel carrying 932 refugees and two dead bodies was granted permission by Rome shortly after these refusals to dock at the Sicilian port of Catania. Sea-Watch (2018), infuriated by the Italian stance said the decision to allow some vessels over others highlighted the ‘double standards’ of the Italian

government. The United Nations Refugee Agency weighed in stating, 'It is wrong, dangerous and immoral to keep rescue ships wandering the Mediterranean while governments compete on who can take the least responsibility.' Salvini said in an interview with the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper in June, 'Ships belonging to foreign organizations and flying foreign flags cannot dictate Italy's immigration policy.... we will not change (our position) on ships belonging to non-governmental organizations. Saving lives is a duty. Turning Italy into a refugee camp is not' (DW.Com 2018). Salvini's stance and discourse can be read as an attempt to reframe the humanitarian component of the duty of care by conflating it with state-based arguments about borders and territory. A key part of its rhetoric plays on a heightened sense of nationalism whereby Italy's policy on immigration will not be dictated by external stakeholders such as humanitarian vessels, nor by European neighbors.

Italy's refusal to engage with NGO vessels triggered something of a geopolitical standoff as European States sought to position themselves ethically and politically. Malta too, refused the Aquarius entry, stating that as a sovereign country no other State should dictate its policies on immigration. It stated that it did not have the capacity to care for over 600 migrants nor was it 'appropriate' to do so (Denti 2018). French President, Emanuel Macron attacked Italy for being 'irresponsible' suggesting its actions contravened maritime law. He later however changed his tone adding his voice to critics who framed NGO vessels as helping violent gangs trafficking people to Europe (Euroactiv.com, 2018). Commenting on yet another rescue operation by a Norwegian vessel in September, he suggested that it had broken 'all the rules when it took migrants onto its boat'. He added 'We cannot permanently accept this situation. In the end we are playing into the hands of smugglers by reducing the risks of the journey'.

Fischer-Lescano et al. (2009), note that governments 'occasionally argue that State border controls, particularly on the high seas, take place in a space where refugee and human

rights law do not apply'. In this blurred thirdspace where responsibilities are unclear, the process of dehumanization is at its most visible. It is important to note that the care of migrants is a process, not one singular act. When sea-borne migrants are rescued through an act of care it triggers a response that does not necessarily end when that refugee disembarks from a vessel. Some journalists pointed out that the controversy surrounding Aquarius simply illustrates the problem with the Dublin system that they suggested it appeared to be breaking with the pressure of the migration challenge. The geopolitical wrangling between States has sometimes sought to evade the scales of care and responsibility, serving to dehumanize individuals. As Taylor (2018, 8) observes, the dehumanization of migrants is increasing throughout Europe. Writing in the aftermath on an EU summit in June 2018 to curb immigration, he continues: 'the cries of those drowning in the Mediterranean were drowned out...by the sound of the Continent's leaders washing their hands of the misfortune of asylum seekers to save their political skins.'

### **Public discourse: Contributing to the debate**

It is important to note that the decisions of politicians and the actions of NGOs do not exist in a vacuum. Their actions are shaped by and in turn shape and inform their respective publics. Pugh, writing in 2001, suggested that the hegemonic discourse in the West centered on the idea that migrants and refugees arriving by boat to Europe through the Mediterranean were a threat and that their presence would have profound social and political implications for European States. Sea-borne migrants were traditionally viewed as a welfare issue. That discourse has changed significantly in tone since 2013 (see Dempsey and McDowell 2018) with migration increasingly being framed by parts of the media as both a threat to security and its impact likened to that of a natural disaster, an unstoppable, devastating force. The role of humanitarian organizations operating in the Mediterranean reveals the fragmented

contours of public discourse. The emergence of an ‘anxious politics’ (Modest and Koning cited in Dempsey and McDowell 2018) has given rise to an increase in support for populist ideologies. An analysis of tweets and comments posted on the social media accounts of @MSF during the Aquarius controversy revealed a particularly potent strand of public backlash, likening the organization’s activities to that of people smugglers. As one twitter user warned, ‘Water taxi...take the \*\*\*\*\*s back. Illegal migrants funded by Soros &MSF’. Another wrote, ‘Disgusting. Economic migrants can apply legally’. While yet another responded, ‘You’re not humanitarian, you’re smugglers’. Tweet upon tweet accused the organization of people smuggling ‘You are one of the biggest smugglers in the Med. You should all be arrested and imprisoned’. The tone of these specific comments reveals something of the volatility of care geographies in relation to migration.

Another recurrent theme in the online exchange of comments served to denigrate the status of those rescued at sea. One prominent thread involved a story of some twenty missing migrants who disembarked Aquarius in Valencia. As one user noted ‘23 of the migrants who arrived in Spain have already disappeared. Who could have seen this coming?’ The fate of Aquarius received much attention across the European press. The UK’s BBC led with the headline ‘The Aquarius: Migrant taxi-service or charitable rescue?’ while *The Independent* newspaper’s editorial led with an opinion piece entitled ‘Why Italy was right to not let migrant boat dock’ (Cockburn 2018). Editorials in Spain suggested that each of the migrants who arrived in Spain would receive ‘resonalized attention’ (The Local 2018). An analysis of some online commentary paints a very different picture of the activities of humanitarian organizations stripping out morality and care ethics. They present such organizations as actors who deliberately intervene in a crisis to prop up or expedite the smuggling process. This strand of resistance has not been confined to embittered online exchanges. Defend Europe, far-right organization with an anti-Islam and anti-immigration ethos, funded a vessel

to transverse the Mediterranean in an effort to stop trafficking and send migrants and would-be asylum seekers 'back to Africa' (Bulman 2017). It aimed to curb the work of humanitarian SAR activities.

## **Conclusion**

Ambrosi (2018) suggests that the issue of SAR in the Mediterranean is very much a grey zone that blurs boundaries and speaks to deep-rooted anxieties about geopolitical imaginings of Europe. This paper exposes some of those grey zones and presents an insight into the ways in which care geographies intersect with governance, ethics and geopolitics within the context of migration. In applying theories of care to a reading of European migration, it urges for a more nuanced appraisal of how the making and unmaking of refugees collide with fiercely contested notions of how we should, or are willing to, care for those in need. In charting the battles between various actors and stakeholders, the paper contributes to the growing sense that migrants have become pawns in wider geopolitical battles over E.U. policies on inclusion and exclusion. The controversy over humanitarian vessels in the Mediterranean underlines the inherent complexity of legislative frameworks that perhaps are not fit for purpose as migration evolves. It also raises serious questions for trying to administer care in a vacuum where the ethical and moral impulse to save lives, overlaps with the politics of migration on multiple scales.

Popke (2006) suggests that we need to continue to develop ways of thinking through our responsibilities toward unseen others, and to cultivate a renewed sense of social interconnectedness. But where does care begin and end and how do we navigate blurred territorial and moral boundaries? These are important questions, not just for E.U. policymakers but for humanitarian organizations and NGOs that operate in challenging conditions. Sea-borne migrants pose a specific set of complex challenges. There is perhaps

merit in the idea that the very legislation that is intended to assign labels that should in theory provide migrants and refugees with care, often serves to render them ‘less than human’ (Debono 2013, 60), and results in States attempting to circumvent their duty of care. The geopoliticizing of care reveals a Europe with very different ideas about borders, rights and responsibilities.

In December 2018, MSF announced that it was suspending all SAR operations in the Mediterranean following ‘sustained attacks by European States’. The organization had grown tired of the incessant geopolitical wrangling. Italy’s Interior Minister tweeted in response ‘Fewer sailings, fewer landings, fewer deaths. That’s good’ (BBC News 2018b). This fractious online exchange between two key actors underscores the difficulties discussed in this paper, in navigating care across blurred boundaries and at different scales. Cusumano (2018, 390) warns that SAR operations and interventions in the Mediterranean undertaken by humanitarian organizations is simply getting too difficult and is perhaps ‘incompatible with strict interpretation of principles of independence, neutral and impartiality’. At stake however, are the lives of individuals who make the decision to cross a treacherous stretch of water in hope of a better life.

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