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Refugees, Europe, Death and COVID-19

(2020-03-30)

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Introduction

In March 2020, at the border of Greece and Turkey, a tension and a flow of refugees was trashed as being a bargain for dirty business between the European Union/Greece and Turkey. At the same time, we have an outbreak of the *Coronavirus* disease (COVID-19) in the EU, where Italy is the state which has a total quarantine. On March 28, 2020, the USA reported more than 100,000 infected individuals.

These two situations collide, and what we have in front of us now, which is still developing, transcends easy analysis, as we can only put together crumbs of the events. One thing is for sure: thousands have been left to die at the border between Greece and Turkey, again. Italy is on the other side, and has been transformed into a state which resembles, in its complete isolation, the situation surrounding leprosy in the Middle Ages. We see in the 21st century: disease, isolation, and, let us say, self-voluntary segregation that Valdemir Zamparoni[1] defines as consisting of methods that are central to a colonial-medical environment. We can think of these methods as a form of self-segregation in order to allow for immunization. However, if we connect these two as being at first sight disparate situations, we can see that at the border between the European Union/Greece and Turkey it is about "to kill," and in Italy it is about

"to let live" (for Italian citizens only).These two sides are the depiction of contemporary neoliberal necropolitics.[2]

The reordering of spaces becomes crucial; it results in new practices of zoning and creating corridors as circulating modes through which accumulation will take place. I therefore focus on Europe, refugees in Europe, neoliberalism, and racism. Furthermore, the only way to open up possibilities for *white* Eastern European thought is, rather than fully embracing the old Western matrix of knowledge that is an outcome of colonialism, to try to rethink our conditions of potentiality together with those whose thoughts have been marginalized for far too long. Colonialism and present forms of coloniality have not only dispossessed millions of lives and made them commodities but have also incarcerated their thoughts and discursivity. If Europe, that is, as a fortress Europe, the old Western world, is a provincial territory today, then the thoughts and the intellectual repertoire that it can produce are provincial as well.[3]

We know today that any thought that is coming outside the Occidental (Western) regime is heavily subordinated to the steady, discriminative, racist view of the West (Europe) in relation to what it calls "the others."[4]

A Dirty Deal between the EU and Turkey on Refugees

In March 2020, a fierce onslaught by Syrian forces and their Russian backers on Idlib, the last province held by Syrian rebels, led to clashes with Turkey, which supports some rebel groups. Turkey already hosts some 3.7 million Syrians but the conflict in Idlib has led to nearly a million more fleeing to its southern border. Although the EU promised billions more Euros in aid, Turkey was unimpressed and last week decided to open its borders with Greece and even force migrants to come closer to the northwestern border. The EU has accused Mr. Erdoğan, President of Turkey, of using migrants for political purposes. It insists its doors are "closed." Meanwhile, clash-

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[1] Valdemir Zamparoni, "Lepra: doença, isolamento e segregação no contexto colonial em Moçambique," *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2016): 13-39. doi: 10.1590/s0104-59702016005000028.

[2] Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2003): 11-40. doi: 10.1215/08992363-15-1-11.
[3] Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. by Lauren Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).
[4] See Achille Mbembe, "The Negro, Figure of Human Emancipation," interview by Rosa Moussaoui, *The Economic and Social Justice Reality Report* (2013). http://www.esjrr.org/2013/12/achillembembe-negro-figure-of-human.html.

es have again erupted at the land border between Greece and Turkey. There appears to have been a change in Turkey's position with regard to letting in migrants trying to enter Greece via this route. On February 28, 2020, Turkey reneged on a deal to prevent migrants and asylum seekers from travelling to the EU.[5]

Namely, in 2016, a dirty deal was made between the EU and Turkey, whereby Turkey would stop allowing migrants to reach the EU in return for funds from the bloc to help it manage the huge numbers of refugees it hosts. But, since then, tensions between the EU and Turkey have flared on various issues.

Death, Neoliberalism

Now, the question of death that is brought to the center of the debate of the day is really touching the base.

I define necropolitics as "let live and make die."[6] Necropolitics confronts us with the horrors of the human condition: death and killing, forced enclosure, and total abandonment. I talk about necropolitics, and not *Thanatopolitics*.[7] If we think precisely about what is going on at the border between the European Union/Greece and Turkey we can see a new relation about life and death where the colonial/racial division is applied. All of those there are those who are coming from states that have been destroyed by imperialist Occidental appetites, and a racial differentiation between the white occident and the other parts of the world that are seen as being not legitimate members of the regime of whiteness and its colonial matrix of power, which extends from the past deeply into the present days.

The colonial/racial division is applied to citizenship, and we have two categories of citizenship: one is the category I will name *biopolitical citizenship* (the EU's "natural" nation-state citizens), and the other is *necropolitical citizenship*, given to refugees and *sans-papiers* (the paperless) after they die on EU soil. While some are made "equal," the other Others are left to die and are brutally abandoned, or their second-grade status as citizens is fully normalized in the EU. An illustrative case is the one of Italian Lampedusa, when 350 refugees from Africa drowned in a single day on October 12, 2013.

However, the most perverse situation happened afterwards, when these hundreds of dead bodies were given Italian citizenship (but only so that the Italian government and the EU could bury them in Italy ▯ it was obviously cheaper than to send the dead bodies back to their countries of origin and to their respective families). The Italian government decided to prosecute the few who did survive, since they tried to illegally enter Italy and the EU. This is the clearest sign of the perverse and violent new attitude that Western Europe has toward human rights (after the West had been heavily capitalizing its democracy on those rights for decades) and the occurrence of a new category of citizenship - the *necropolitical citizenship*.

This shift can be best captured through what Balibar, in 2000, exposed as the passport of a "rich person from a rich country … [which] increasingly *signifies* not just mere national belonging, protection and a right of citizenship, but a *surplus* of rights."[8]

Death itself, as I presented it above, had become a fallacious rite of passage in modernity's instrumentalization of humanity.

Massimo Recalcati, in his *Le nuove melanconie: Destini del desiderio nel tempo ipermoderno*,[9] says that melancholy is no longer what it used to be; since melancholy, as Freud argued, involved a sense of guilt, but today melancholy has acquired new declinations, characterized by a fundamental lack of awareness for life, and also of keeping life in its transmission from one generation to the next.

Freud talks about melancholy, the old melancholy, which brings with it a feeling of guilt in front of the laws that are too severe, but contemporary melancholy comes from an incapacity to give meaning to - I will add - the "Occidental" experience.

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[5] Charlotte McDonald-Gibson, "Why the EU Is Doomed to Repeat the Mistakes of the 2015 Refugee Crisis," *Time* (March 10, 2020). https://time.com/5800116/eu-refugees-turkey-greece-border.

[6] See Marina Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism: Historicization of Biopolitics and Forensics of Politics, Art, and Life* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

[7] See also Marina Gržinić, "Introduction: Burdened by the Past, Rethinking the Future. Eleven Theses on Memory, History, and Life," in *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Turbo-Nationalism: Rethinking the Past for New Conviviality*, eds. Marina Gržinić, Jovita Pristovšek and Sophie Uitz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 1-21.

[8] Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*, trans. by Christine Jones, James Swenson and Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 83.

[9] Massimo Recalcati, *Le nuove melanconie: Destini del desiderio nel tempo ipermoderno* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2019).

The relation in the Occident between subject and object can be put in a genealogical line as a series of discontinued modalities.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Western youth tried to distance themselves, primarily, from the fetishism of objects. In the 1990s, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, I will say, consumer hedonism was pushed to the forefront and replaced political passion.

The former East of Europe entered fully and speedily into this process. In the 2000s, we rely on objects heavily, they are mobile, transversal; our smartphones and technological gadgets are a hyper-overabundance of objects to such an extent that the online social platforms display an incommensurability of emptiness, loss of meaning, the disappearance of ideologies, loneliness and and a condition of self-quarantine (not only due to the Coronavirus disease). Recalcati names this condition "new melancholy." He talks about a life connected to senselessness.

Without desire, life is directly connected to senselessness; the body is dead weight to be moved, pushed around. This Occidental subject is incapable of relating to alterity, otherness. It is symbolically reduced to a proper border of impossibility, and clinging on to these borders is the last possibility of a proper salvation. Recalcati writes:

> The absence of boundaries inherent in the freedom of the hypermodern turbo consumer has gradually translated into a widespread feeling of anxiety caused by the loss of stable symbolic reference points, but, above all, has given rise to a new demand for protection and security. We have thus gone from the manic emphasis relating to the dissolution of banks and borders to the need for their re-establishment and security enhancement.[10]

Again, we see this so palpably clear when we stay silent, inert in front of what is going on with the refugees (in March 2020) at and on the border between Turkey and Greece. We witness, as Recalcati says, the syndrome that has protection at its center. This protection is fully embedded in the barbed wire and the closure that are emblems, deadly emblems, of our time. We have a passage from an un-

limited enjoyment, to borders, walls, and fortresses, as new objects of investment.

What is going on with the refugees or migrants, as they are named, is actually deeply connected with the Occident. In classical Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the death drive (*Todestrieb*) is the drive toward death and self-destruction. Under this death drive force we see an excess of immunization that transforms into an autoimmune illness. An autoimmune disease is a condition in which our immune system mistakenly attacks a proper body. This could also be seen in relation to the state quarantine, a new type of quarantine camp - that is what Italy was transformed into in March 2020.

Therefore, to return to necropolitics and the emphasized difference to *Thanatopolitics*:

THANATOPOLITICS IS ON THE ONE SIDE. IT IS A PURE WESTERN, OCCIDENTAL CATEGORY.

It resides in Occidental, subjective intimacy. The death drive opposes Eros, the tendency toward survival, propagation, sex, and other creative, life-producing drives. It is a change from preservation to destruction. In *Thanatopolitics*, death is not an enemy that undermines life from the outside but something internally produced by life. Both are not facing each other but are in reciprocity. *Thanatopolitics* is the knot that ties the death drive and the desire to live.

NECROPOLITICS IS ON THE OTHER SIDE. IT IS AN EXTERNALIZATION OF THANATOPOLITICS.

It spreads as a deadly contagious virus from the intimacy of the Occidental subject into the neoliberal global world. Necropolitics is the regime of the war death machine that literally exports contagion into other places, or this contagion that was already contracted through the legacy of Western colonialism (Africa). The vertiginous presence of death is the result of a life without the consciousness of a proper vulnerability that is pathological, centered onto itself, and incapable of having a relation to the others.

Neoliberalism's fake vitalism has also cut ties with the categories of the negative.

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[10] Recalcati, *Le nuove melanconie*, translation mine.

As captured precisely by Recalcati:

> The apparently manic inclination of the capitalist's discourse has reinforced a neo-melancholic inclination in young people who tend to let themselves be absorbed by the ever-present presence of the object, transforming the object into an object-Thing. It is no longer the object that appears against the background of the mourning of the Thing, but it is the object-Thing that melancholically denies that mourning. While the exciting impulse of the maniacal discourse pushes towards the unceasing exchange of the object in a succession of fragmented presents without historical continuity, this new and particular adhesiveness to the object – for example, to the technological object – reveals the undercurrent of this euphoric thrust: the neo-melancholic bonding to the object, the impossibility of sustaining its loss, the rejection of the mourning of the Thing. ... The most emblematic clinical example is that of the regressive withdrawal of many teenagers who desert social life to remain glued to the virtual world, which ensures them of the ever-present presence of their objects. The world of the object-Thing replaces the world of encounter with the Other and its inevitable turbulence.[11]

Coda

These processes of invigorated border control, expulsion of refugees, etc., are judicially, economically and, last but not least, discursively and representationally (as different semio-technological regimes) ratified, legislated, and normativized. Today it is central to draw a genealogy of racism that parallels capitalism's historical transformation and historicization.

On the one side, we have the state institutions and the necropolitical sovereignty that is the sovereignty of an intensive racialization, ghettoization and expulsion, and on the other, the formation of, contrary to a monumental landscape, a deathscape (that is again a necropolitical measure).

Neoliberal global necrocapitalism mixes different forms of dispossession (providing accumulation) and therefore we see how the question of citizenship is embedded in the processes of dispossession, privatization and racialized specialization.

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[11] Ibid., 141, translation mine.