

**BOOK REVIEW**

## *At Europe's Edge: Migration and Crisis in the Mediterranean* by Ćetta Mainwaring, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 219 pp

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The Mediterranean Sea has been the stage of successive spectacular migration crises for the past decades. Most of these crises are framed as something new or extraordinary, even though crises have fluctuated between different subregions around the Mediterranean basin over the years. Rather than something fully unpredictable, they result from the lack of legal avenues to access the territory of the EU and from the multilevel policy approach that has reduced this access considerably and consistently. The manifested crises concern the clashes between those who seek to access the EU territory by any available means, and are compelled to risk their lives while doing so, and the reluctance of EU member states to permit this access, let alone fulfill their legal duties under the international maritime law to save lives in distress at sea.

*At Europe's Edge* builds on long-term ethnographic research the author Ćetta Mainwaring has undertaken in the migratory context of Malta. She has talked to migrants, coast guards, police, fishermen, civil society actors, civil servants, and policymakers to understand how these mobilities are conceived from different perspectives. Focusing on the EU's southernmost member state, the book explores how this marginal space within the EU territory, an island state with a recent colonial history, manages its role as a gate-keeper to the EU, and manages the mobilities of those who attempt to pass through or stay on the island. This management often culminates in the very access to the territory – or the lack thereof, as the successive political and humanitarian crises concerning the destiny of any given boatload of people rescued at sea illustrate, let alone those who lose their lives at sea and may become subjects to mourning and outrage, momentarily and without concrete consequences on how to avoid such tragedies in the future.

The book is divided into six chapters. The first presents the setting and defines the book's interest in different margins and their power: that of small peripheral states such as Malta and people in marginalized positions, here migrants attempting to make their way to the EU (p. 4). Chapter 2 examines how crises are constructed through narratives that seek to present each of these crises as exceptional ones, and how these crises are used as a tool of governance. The chapter also conceptualizes migrant agency not simplistically as a form of celebratory, heroic resistance but as more nuanced; the analysis of which needs to recognize

the structures and hindrances that limit the scope of available options for the people on the move (p. 47). These negotiations cut across various levels, Mainwaring argues, and need to be analyzed as such, taking place between migrants and state actors, between migrants and smugglers, and among migrants (p. 48).

Chapters 3 and 4 explore in depth migrant journeys across the Sahara Desert and the Mediterranean Sea. These chapters give space for the interviewees' narration, thereby foregrounding migrants' agency, meanwhile entwining migrants' insights with other perspectives collected from Mainwaring's differently positioned interviewees. Chapter 5 then turns to the strategies Malta has deployed, namely highlighting its central role in managing the entry to the EU territory. This Malta has done to gain voice despite its small size and to attract European funding for keeping up with its gate-keeping role, including by the successful lobbying the country undertook to host the headquarters of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO). Concluding chapter returns to the broader significance of these crises to the migration policymaking in the EU, and the possibility of imagining the entwinement of humanitarian and security logics in a different manner.

Migrant narratives bring forth the fragmented journeys people on the move have undertaken before they reach the EU territory. As the interviewees recount, these journeys are not necessarily planned in advance having the European continent or a particular country as the destination in mind but are constructed along the way, depending on the (im)possibilities of surviving in the first and subsequent destinations and changing contexts in these places. In the so-called Central Mediterranean route, Mainwaring contends, these have been the Italy-Libya deal in 2008/2009 that accelerated pushbacks, and the ousting of Colonel Gaddafi in Libya in 2011 that dissolved such dirty deals but also pushed the country in a chaos (pp. 79–80). This further compelled migrants to escape the country, as the previous intra-continental migration system no longer functioned and those who had arrived from other countries in Africa and worked in Libya, had to flee and find other places and means of survival.

However, the 'Lilliputian power', Malta, proposed a new multilateral deal during its rotating EU presidency in 2017, based on the model of the infamous deal, the EU-Turkey Statement, the EU had forged with Turkey the year before. Maltese proposal was formally rejected but led to the EU Border and Coastguard Agency Frontex training of Libyan coastguard in Malta and funding for reinforcing the integrated migration and border management capacities of Libya from the Trust Fund for Africa. Italy also signed a renewed bilateral agreement with the faction of Libyan government led by Fayez Serraj that led to Italian pushback operations in Libyan territorial waters and Italian support for building detention centers inside Libya (pp. 80–81).

Furthermore, the policy of mandatory detention of asylum-seekers (formally until the reform in 2015) as well as their economic, social, and political marginalization by Malta have sought to make asylum-seekers' lives so difficult that onward journey, or an eventual return (pp. 95–96), would be a preferred option to staying on the island. This illustrates the kinds of negotiations people on the move undertake after the previous legs of the journey before and at the high seas across the Mediterranean have been accomplished, provided that Malta has accepted disembarkation at its shore. As the statistics demonstrate (p. 86), arrivals have become very scarce since 2014, which has not, however, impeded Maltese officials from maintaining the crisis narrative that leans on the securitized imagery of the island being invaded by racialized others.

Assessing the national and multilateral policymaking around the crises and migration more broadly, Mainwaring highlights the need for developing evidence-based policies. It would be difficult to disagree with this proposition, or her ensuing acknowledgment of how these are not put into practice despite multiple evidence showing the contradictions in the systems in place, as well as in the policy proposals that are put forward.

The methods and ethical issues pertaining to research with participants in highly vulnerable positions and on politically heated topics are discussed more extensively in the Appendix at the end of the book. These reflections could have been included more seamlessly into the main chapters to avoid the sporadic impression of a distant observer, and to allocate due recognition to the extensive fieldwork and multiple insights, including uneasiness, these encounters are likely to have generated. Moreover, in the Appendix part, Mainwaring raises important issues for academic researchers to consider, especially as regards the ways of giving back to research participants in the most vulnerable positions.

Academic research on migratory movements across the Mediterranean is manifold and it has expanded considerably, in particular, from the so-called European migration crisis of 2015 onwards. Through its long-term perspective and analysis of a lesser explored context of Malta, and the ways in which the journeys of those transiting through the island connect diverse sites both north- and southwards the Mediterranean Sea, *At Europe's Edge* provides a valuable critical contribution to this scholarship.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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