Refugees, Europe, Death and Covid-19

A contribution by Marina Gržinić
Professor for Conceptual Art (Post-Conceptual Art Practices)

In March 2020, on the border between Greece and Turkey, tension and a flow of refugees were trashed as a bargain for the 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 a state in total quarantine. On 28 March 2020, US reported more than 100,000 cases.

These two situations collide and what we face still developing escapes easy analysis, as we can put together crumbs of events. One thing is sure: thousands are again being left to die on the border between Greece and Turkey. Italy the other side is transformed into a Middle Age leper, in complete isolation. In the 21st-century we are seeing disease, isolation and auto, let's say, voluntary, segregation, which Valdemir Zamparoni (2016) defines as methods that are central to a colonial medical environment. We can think of this method as a form of self-segregation in order to allow immunization. However, if we connect the two, at first sight disparate situations, we see that at the border between the European Union/Greece and Turkey is about "to kill," and in Italy it is about "to let live." These two sides are the depiction of contemporary neoliberal necropolitics.

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.

We know today that the incarceration, marginalization and rejection of thoughts outside the Occidental (Western) regime represent one approach catering to the steady, discriminative, racist view of the West (Europe) in relation to what it calls "the others."

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 3.7m Syrians, but the conflict in Idlib 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 closer to the north-western border. The EU has accused Mr Erdogan, president of Turkey, of using migrants for political purposes. It insists its doors are "closed."

Meanwhile, clashes have again erupted on land border between Greece and Turkey. There appears to have been a change in Turkey's position with regard to letting migrants try to enter Greece via this route. On 28 February 2020, Turkey reneged on a deal to prevent migrants and asylum seekers from travelling to the EU (McDonald-Gibson, 2020).

Namely, in 2016, a dirty deal was reached 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, which centrally to the debate of the day is really touching base.

I define necropolitics as "let live and make die." Necropolitics confronts us with the horrors of the human condition: death and killing, forced enclosure, total abandonment. I talk about necropolitics and not Thanatopolitics. If we think precisely about what is going on the border in between the European Union/Greece and Turkey we see a new relationship between life and death, where the colonial/racial division is applied. All those who come from states destroyed by imperialist Occidental appetites, and a racial differentiation between the white Occident and the other parts of world, are seen as not legitimate members of the regime of whiteness and its colonial matrix of power, which extends from the past deeply to the present day.

The colonial/racial division is applied to citizenship, and we have two categories of citizenship: one is the category I will call *biopolitical citizenship* (the EU "natural" nation- state citizens), and the other is *necropolitical citizenship* given to refugees and sans-papier (undocumented) 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 that of Lampedusa, in Italy, where 350 refugees from Africa drowned in a single day on 12 October 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 sending their bodies back to their countries of origin and to their respective families). The Italian government decided to prosecute the few who did survive, as they tried to enter Italy and the EU illegally. 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 it for decades) and the occurrence of a new category of citizenship—*necropolitical citizenship*.

This shift can be captured at best through what Balibar in 2000 exposed as the passport of a "rich person from a rich country ... increasingly *signifies* not just mere national belonging, protection and a right of citizenship, but a *surplus* of rights" (Balibar, 2002, 83).

Death itself, as I mentioned above, has become a fallacious rite of passage in modernity's instrumentalization of humanity.

In his *Le nuove melanconie: Destini del desiderio nel tempo ipermoderno*, Massimo Recalcati (2019) says that melancholy is no longer what it used to be; as melancholy, as Freud argued, involved a sense of guilt, but today melancholy has acquired new declinations, characterized by a fundamental lack of awareness of life, and also of keeping life in its transmission from one generation to the next.

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

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

The former eastern Europe entered fully and speedily into this process. In the 2000s we heavily rely on objects; they are mobile, transversal; our smartphones and technological gadgets are a hyper overabundance of objects to such an extent that the social online platforms display an incommensurability of emptiness, loss of meaning, the disappearance of ideologies, loneliness and a self-quarantining condition (not only due to the Coronavirus disease (Covid- 19). Recalcati calls this condition a new melancholy. He talks about a life connected to senselessness.

Without desire, life is directly connected to senselessness; the body is a 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 to these borders is the last chance of 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" (Recalcati, 2019, p. Ivi, translated by Gržinić).

Again, we see this so palpably clear as as staying silent, inert in the face of what is going on with the refugees (in March 2020) on the border in between Turkey and Greece. As Recalcati says, we are witnessing the syndrome that has is centred on protection. This protection is fully embedded in the barbed wire and closure that are the deadly emblems of our time. We have a route from unlimited enjoyment to borders, to walls and fortresses as new objects of investment.

What is going on with the refugees or immigrants, as they are called, is actually deeply connected with the Occident. In classical Freudian psychoanalytic theory, the death drive (German *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 healthy body. This could also be seen in relation to state quarantine, a new type of quarantine camp – that is ,what Italy was turned into in March 2020.

So to return to necropolitics and the emphasized difference to Thanatopolitics: THANATOPOLITICS IS ON ONE SIDE. IT IS A PURE WESTERN, OCCIDENTAL CATEGORY.

It resides in the 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. Neither face one another, but both are reciprocal. Thanatopolitics is the knot that unites 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 was already contracted through the legacy of Western colonialism (Africa). The vertiginous presence of death is the result of a life without consciousness of a proper vulnerability that is pathological, centred on itself, incapable of relating to others.

Neoliberalism's fake vitalism has also cut the ties with the categories of the negative. 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 by 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" (Recalcati, 2019, p. 141, translated by Gržinić).

Coda

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

On one hand we have the state institutions and the necropolitical sovereignty that is sovereignty of an intensive racialization, ghettoization and expulsion, and on the other, the formation not of a monumental landscape, but, on the contrary, a deathscape (which again is 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.

References

Balibar, É. (2002) *Politics and the Other Scene*. London and New York: Verso.

Gržinić, M. (2020) 'Introduction: Burdened by the Past, Rethinking the Future: Eleven Theses on Memory, History, and Life', in Gržinić, M., Pristovšek, J., Uitz, S. (eds.) *Opposing Colonialism, Antisemitism, and Turbo-Nationalism: Rethinking the Past for New Conviviality*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 1–21.

Gržinić, M. and Tatlić, Š. (2014) *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism: Historicization of Biopolitics and Forensics of Politics, Art, and Life*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Mbembe, A. (2001) *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mbembe, A. (2003) 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15(1), pp. 11–40. doi: 10.1215/08992363-15-1-11.

Mbembe, A. (2013) 'The Negro, Figure of Human Emancipation'. Interview by Rosa Moussaoui. *The Economic & Social Justice Reality Report (ESJRR)*, 2013.

McDonald-Gibson, C. (2020) 'Why the EU is doomed to repeat the mistakes of the 2015 refugee crisis', *Time*, 10 March 2020 [online]. Available at: https://time.com/5800116/eu-refugees-turkey-greece-border/ (Accessed: 13 March 2020).

Recalcati, M. (2019) *Le nuove melanconie: Destini del desiderio nel tempo ipermoderno* [The new melancholies: Fates of desire in hypermodern time]. Milan: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2019.

Zamparoni, V. (2016) 'Lepra: doença, isolamento e segregação no contexto colonial em Moçambique' [Leprosy: Disease, isolation and segregation in the colonial context in Mozambique], *História, Ciências, Saúde-Manguinhos* 24(1), pp.13–39. doi: 59702016005000028.