

The Contested Mediterranean. Temporalities of New Forms of Migration Containment in Italy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Emilio Caja¹

Abstract

With the outbreak of COVID-19, attention has been increasingly given to new forms of confinement, both in reception facilities and detention centres. In this context, emerging forms of immigration containment and detention have initially been analysed mostly through spatial lenses. In particular, in Italy, new forms of migration containment, especially the so-called ‘quarantine ships’, have been analysed mostly on their spatial features: in the middle of the sea, far away from the space of the “national polity”. Yet, throughout the two years of existence of quarantine ships (until June 2022), attention has been increasingly drawn to the temporal dimension of this new form of migration containment. In this sense, moving beyond the analysis of quarantine ships as a static and unique form of containment, and including the ships into a broader picture that takes into consideration what happens before and after them, the article aims at understanding how new spatio-temporal regimes of control affect asylum seekers’ lives. In particular, it studies how quarantine ships have become a central device of a specific temporal regime of migration control that developed in Italy with the outbreak of COVID-19; what the connections between this regime and pre-pandemic containment configurations are; and, finally, what tactics of resistance have been put in place by asylum seekers and those acting in solidarity with them. Quarantine ships and the temporal governance strategy that developed around them (the “detention-deportation chain”) can be better understood looking at the increasing logistification of asylum seeking. On the other hand, within this emerging form of government, asylum seekers and those acting in solidarity with them put in place tactics of resistance to interrupt the suspended time imposed by this regime; to interrupt sudden accelerations, as in the case of deportations; and, finally, through practices of active memory, they challenged the status quo imposed by the European border regime.

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1. Introduction

With the outbreak of COVID-19, attention has been increasingly given to new forms of confinement, both in reception facilities and detention centres. In this context, emerging forms of immigration containment and detention have initially been analysed mostly through spatial lenses (Esposito et al., 2020; Tazzioli, 2020). In particular, in Italy, new forms of migration containment, especially the so-called ‘quarantine ships’, in April 2020, have been contested for being a *de facto* confinement at sea, and the focus of the critique has been mostly on the spatial collocation of the ships: in the middle of the sea, far away from the space of the “national polity” (Stierl & Dadusc, 2022; Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021).

Yet, throughout the two years of existence of quarantine ships (until June 2022), attention has been increasingly drawn to the temporal dimension of this new form of migration containment (Caja et al., 2022; Caja & Mattiello, 2023). Indeed, researchers and activists condemned this device, which immobilised asylum seekers in the middle of the sea, blocking their lives in a never-ending waiting period, preceded and followed by abrupt movements between land and sea (Anderlini & Di Meo, 2021; Di Meo, 2020). In this sense, moving beyond the analysis of quarantine ships as a static and unique form of containment, and including the ships into a broader picture that takes into consideration what happens before and after them, the article aims at understanding how new spatio-temporal regimes of control affect asylum seekers’ lives².

² The current article focuses on quarantine ships, where all the people arriving at sea have been confined between April 2020 and June 2022, including those who managed to ask for asylum before entering these ships, those that managed onboard the ships, those that were denied the right to ask for asylum and those who chose not to ask for it. The article also mostly focuses on Tunisian people (where Tunisia is considered by the Italian government as a “safe country”) and their detention and deportation; on quarantine ships and when in detention, some Tunisians managed to apply for asylum, but were rejected with an accelerated procedure (that applies to people coming from “safe countries”); the vast majority of them tried to apply for asylum but were actively denied this right from authorities on the ground that they were Tunisians; some of them did not want to apply for asylum. Indeed, the line between those who actually applied for asylum and those that wanted but were prevented blurs. Following the focus of the Special Issue on refugees and asylum seekers, the current article refers only to people that applied for asylum and were rejected and people that manifested their intention to

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In line with the aim of the special issue, this article studies how quarantine ships have become a central device of a specific temporal regime of migration control that developed in Italy with the outbreak of COVID-19; what the connections between this regime and pre-pandemic containment configurations are; and, finally, what tactics of resistance have been put in place by asylum seekers and those acting in solidarity with them.

Indeed, the strategies of those in power in this temporal regime are analysed together with the tactics of resistance put in place by asylum seekers: what they made of the “stolen time” (Khosravi, 2018) of quarantine and detention; and how they tried to break the spatio-temporal isolation of confinement, by getting in touch with solidarity groups on the Italian territory, before, during and after their containment.

The next section provides a review of the literature on the temporalities of migration and state control. It aims to contextualise the case at study in this article within the pre-existing understanding of temporal regimes of controls. The following section on methodology illustrates the timeframe of the current research (between April 2020 and the end of 2022), as well as the main methods used in the research project: ethnographic fieldwork, document analysis and interviews. The research focuses in particular on the case of Tunisian asylum seekers, who have been the highest number of people coming to Italy in these years, and have also become the primary target of the temporal regime of containment at study (Di Meo, 2022a; Di Meo, 2022b).

The two empirical sections then focus on the case of asylum seekers firstly confined on quarantine ships and then trapped into what authors have come to call the “detention-deportation chain” (Caja et al., 2022; Gennari et al., 2021). The latter has been composed not only of quarantine ships, but also ‘hotspots’ in Lampedusa or Pantelleria, detention centres, airports halls, deportation flights. Finally, the last section draws some conclusions: the Italian case can be understood as an attempt to perfect the “logistification of asylum seeking” (Vianelli, 2021).

2. Conflicting temporalities in the Mediterranean

Studies on the temporality of migration move from the assumption that, just as migration can be studied as a spatial process, it can also be examined through its temporal dimension, which, however, has received less attention

apply for asylum but were denied this right by border authorities. It does not focus on people that chose not to apply for asylum, yet acknowledging that they have been equally affected by the ‘detention-deportation chain’ analysed in the article.

(Bhatia & Canning, 2021). Consequently, the literature on the temporalities of migration has primarily focused on states' strategies to steal asylum seekers' time. Khosravi's work, in particular, has highlighted how asylum seekers' time is "stolen" (2018, p. 41): people's saved, spent, and invested time is dispossessed by state, private, and humanitarian actors of the border industry in the name of the fact that asylum seekers' "*tomorrow* belongs elsewhere" (Khosravi, 2018, p. 41, emphasis in the original) and everything should be done in order to achieve this.

Following Khosravi, recent scholarship has pointed out that migrant time is regularly governed by policy, law, and legislation, as well as militarised interference and patrols at national and international borders (Bhatia & Canning, 2021, p. xvii). In particular, the everyday life of asylum seekers and migrants is characterised by waiting (Hage, 2009; Khosravi, 2010), and their lives are often stuck in limbo (Fontanari, 2019). However, asylum seekers' time is not solely comprised of waiting. In this sense, scholars have pointed out that asylum seekers are governed through im/mobility (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014; Tsagarousianou, 2022): "mobility and immobility are not thought of in binary terms but are intertwined, in that the logic of one is always present in the other" (Nimführ & Sesay 2019, p. 16). Yet, once again, mobility and immobility should not be understood simply in spatial terms but also in temporal ones. In this sense, scholars focusing on the temporal dimension have highlighted how asylum seekers' time is governed through accelerations, decelerations, suspension, and disorientation (Andersson, 2014; Tazzioli, 2021, 2022). This happens at states' borders as well as inside them (Khosravi, 2010): inside camps and detention centres (Boochani, 2018; Campesi, 2015; Iliadou, 2020, 2021); and in administrative offices (Fontanari, 2019; Sanò and Zanotelli, 2022).

As a result, through the lens of time, the focus of this article is on how protracted waiting, sudden accelerations, and disorientation are experienced by asylum seekers and if and what practices they put in place to challenge or resist the stealing of their time. Given this dimension, what asylum seekers make of their suspended temporalities is also central to this article. Temporal immobility may mean an oscillation between hope and depression (Janeja & Bandak, 2018; Sanò & Zanotelli, 2022). Yet, recent studies have highlighted that asylum seekers can also develop tactics of resistance (de Certeau, 1984) during their protracted waiting times and put them into practice in case of sudden accelerations (Daminelli, 2022; Fontanari, 2016).

In relation to this, the re-appropriation of time by asylum seekers also occurs through autonomous networks (Di Meo, 2022a; Massey et al., 2005), active and collective memory (Di Meo, 2022a; Fanon, 1967), and the relationship with activist groups (Dijstelbloem, 2021). Autonomous asylum seekers' networks facilitate the flow of information that transcends both space

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and time, shaping subsequent travels to Europe. Collective memory serves as a specific tactic employed by asylum seekers and their families to counteract the violence of European borders, promoting a temporality that gives a face and a voice to those people that are otherwise killed or invisibilized by the European border regime: demanding justice for those who have been killed, disappeared, detained, or deported in the Mediterranean; but also creating a shared awareness and memory that challenges the void imposed by the border regime (Di Meo, 2021). Lastly, activist groups provide support for autonomous - individual and collective - organisation through their knowledge of Italian and European laws, as well as their privileged possession of documents that afford them greater guarantees when facing the police. Through these means, asylum seekers are able to challenge the ambiguity of waiting times and suspension, alter sudden accelerations such as deportations, and reaffirm their own agency in the face of state-imposed disorientation.

The last element to consider is then how these contested temporalities - the state-imposed one and the asylum seekers' one - unfold in the context of the Mediterranean. Following the vast work of Braudel (1987), the Mediterranean shall be studied on the basis of its complexities, as well as the stratified historical relations that exist between its different regions. In relation to the aim of this article, over the last decade, the scholarship on critical border studies has produced a vast account on arrivals by sea, as well as the border policies and practices implemented by the Italian government and the European Union (Campesi, 2018, 2020; Cutitta, 2012; Pinelli, 2017, 2018; Queirola Palmas & Rahola, 2020). In particular, for the purpose of this article, contested temporalities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic shall be analysed in relation to two specific dimensions. First, the instrumental use by the state of emergency discourses and practices to govern migration, and how this affects asylum seekers' lives and their temporalities (Cutitta, 2012; Tazzioli, 2021; Tazzioli & Garelli, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic and its emergency framework shall be understood in continuity with a history of "emergencies" that have characterised the politics and policies of migration in Italy over the last decade (Campesi, 2018, 2020). Second, how asylum seekers' lives and autonomous temporalities are curbed through different strategies of government that span from control and surveillance to institutional abandonment (Esposito et al., 2019; Esposito et al., 2022; Pinelli, 2017, 2018). The new containment devices introduced by the Italian government during the COVID-19 pandemic are the result of a long history of strategies of asylum seekers' control and abandonment (Caja & Mattiello, 2023).

With this in mind, the current article focuses on the Central Mediterranean in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Esposito et al., 2022; Sanò & Firouzi Tabar, 2021). In particular, it focuses on the movements from Tunisia

to Sicily (Anderlini & Di Meo, 2021); on protracted waiting onboard quarantine ships outside the coasts of Sicily (Caja & Mattiello, 2023; Stierl & Dadusc, 2022; Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021); and on the sudden accelerations across Italy and Tunisia during asylum seekers' detention and deportations (Caja et al., 2022).

In the next two sections, the Mediterranean and its contested temporalities are therefore studied through a series of material dimensions - autonomous boats, private ships, hotspots, detention centres, airport halls, aeroplanes -, across land and sea (Mountz, 2011) - Tunisia, the Sicilian Chanel, Sicily, Italy -, and through the actions and voices of different actors - asylum seekers, humanitarian operators, police forces, Frontex agents, detention centres staff, national politicians.

3. Methodological note

This article was conceived in the midst of a global pandemic, which, among many dramatic consequences, made it impossible to conduct any sort of fieldwork inside immigration confinement and detention sites in Italy and in most other places around the world (Berg et al., 2022).

On the one hand, nobody, neither activists, nor institutional actors, including the National Guarantor for the Rights of People Deprived of their Liberty, managed to enter quarantine ships. The official reason has always been the safeguard of the health and safety of the people onboard, of the personnel and of those interested in accessing the ship themselves. As a result, the only way to access information on daily life management and the access to rights and health care on the ships has been through the testimonies of people confined there and of socio-legal operators.

On the other hand, entering Italian immigration detention centres as a researcher was hard even before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Esposito, 2017). Yet, with the pandemic, access to these centres was prevented also to NGOs and humanitarian actors, to families and friends and, in some cases, to lawyers. As a result, beyond the silence imposed by state authorities, police forces and management bodies, collecting information on the situation inside the centres has been possible through the weekly bulletins of the National Guarantor; information shared by lawyers and civil society organisations, which conducted FOIAs (Freedom Of Information Act) requests; and direct testimonies published by solidarity groups that were able to maintain contacts via phone with people inside centres. The latter became increasingly difficult as, from January 2020, it became a standard practice inside Italian detention centres to seize personal phones of detainees, who could then only communicate with the

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external world using common telephones for which they had to pay or by managing to hide their phones when detained.

In this context, empirical data in this article comes from different sources³. First, as a member of local solidarity groups and NGOs in Catania (Sicily), I conducted monitoring activities of “quarantine ships” disembarking procedures in the port of Catania (which could last even 8 hours while all the people were divided on buses directed to reception or detention centres scattered across the country) (Anderlini & Di Meo, 2021; Borderline Sicilia, 2022; Caja & Cirrone, 2022). Second, after the first national lockdown, quarantine ships returned to operate also as touristic and commercial vectors, so that two alternative spatio-temporal configurations emerged: the same ship transported goods and passenger at one time on a specific route (a time of production), and then confined asylum seekers in another time and route (a time of confinement). It is precisely this uneven access to mobility (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013) that gave me the opportunity, in November 2021, to enter one of these ships, the GNV (Grandi Navi Veloci) ‘Excellent’, to search for traces of the passage of the people confined on it (Caja & Mattiello, 2023). Third, empirical data on detention centres come mainly from a broader research project on Italian immigration detention during the COVID-19 pandemic conducted with Francesca Esposito and Giacomo Mattiello (Esposito et al., 2020; Esposito et al., 2022). In this work, we used all the information available online (National Guarantor’s bulletins, information provided by lawyers and civil society organisations, direct testimonies reported by solidarity groups); we then conducted phone interviews with key actors (lawyers and activists); we circulated a survey prepared by the Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights (Coalizione Italiana per le Libertà e i Diritti Civili, CILD) and a survey that we prepared as part of the interactive map project Landscapes of Border Control, an initiative of the Border Criminologies network (Border Criminologies, 2020). These surveys were circulated among lawyers, activists and NGOs practitioners. Finally, data comes from my involvement in anti-

³ The research can be intended as an activist-scholar project (Scheper-Huges, 1995) or a militant research approach (De Genova, 2013). Indeed, at the time the research was conducted, I was part of several activist groups, composed of racialised people, militants and researchers. It follows that my position as a white man and European scholar was acknowledged and discussed (at times critically) at an individual and collective level. The empirical data in this article therefore come from participant observation, document analysis, interviews and informal conversations with different actors that I encountered during my time as a member of these groups. Even in informal settings, people were aware of my position as an activist and in many cases they were aware of my position as a researcher.

detention networks and solidarity groups in support of freedom of movement in different parts of the country.

4. Italian “quarantine ships”

Quarantine ships were silently introduced during the first national lockdown, when national borders were seized and arrivals from the sea were rarely mentioned in public debates. It is in this period, after the declaration of the state of emergency, that, on April 7, 2020, Italian ports were declared unsafe for the disembarking of foreign boats conducting rescue operations outside the Italian SAR (Search and Rescue Zone). This decision was justified in the decree as a measure safeguarding the “functionality of the national health, logistics and security structures dedicated to containing the spread of infection and to the care and treatment of COVID patients” (Interministerial Decree n.150, 7 April 2020). Following this decision, on April 12, 2020 the Italian Department of Civil Protection published an instruction for the use of private ships and ferries as a place for quarantining asylum seekers arriving from the sea. The formal justification for the choice of renting private ships was “the absence of a place of safety” where they could disembark (Civil Protection Decree n.1287, 12 April 2020). Yet, in an interview, the Interior Minister declared that “the choice comes from the need to ensure protection to local communities” (Ministero dell’Interno, 8 September 2020). The biggest tourist and commercial operators in the country - GNV Spa, Moby Spa, Forship Spa - participated in the call for tenders issued by the Civil Protection. Indeed, in a context of complete stop of all sorts of touristic movements and of many commercial transportations, this call came as a big opportunity to keep the companies’ finances floating (Caja, 2021). The Italian government paid between 30 and 36 thousands of euros per day for renting these ships, and over the course of two years of operation at least ten different ships have been used for this purpose (Caja and Mattiello, 2023). Overall, according to government data (Ministero delle Infrastrutture e dei Trasporti, 2021), 109 millions have been spent by the Italian government in exchange for the ships. Once the service providers were found, someone to manage the life onboard of these ships had to be chosen. With an “emergency” decision, the Red Cross was appointed as the managing body of the ships (Civil Protection Decree n.1287, 12 April 2020).

Once the state-private-humanitarian triangle was complete, “quarantine ships” began operating. Instituted as an emergency solution to manage the first dramatic phase of the pandemic, they remained in place for more than two years, until June 2022. More than 50 thousand people were confined on these ships, for at least 14 days onboard. In fact, the quarantine count began only

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when the ship was completely filled and, to conclude this operation, several days could pass (Anderlini & Di Meo, 2021). This meant that when new people were boarded on the ships, the quarantine automatically reset to zero for all the people in contact with the newcomers. Furthermore, for those who tested positive on the ship, or for those who had a positive family member, the permanence onboard would last at least until the negative result of a swab (Anderlini & Di Meo, 2021).

The National Guarantor (2020), as well as civil society organisations (V.A., 2020), denounced how the implementation of quarantine measures in extraordinary and exceptional places cannot result in a ‘limbo’ situation. Entering these ships has meant for asylum seekers an imposed immobilisation of their lives and bodies, and the sanitary justification for it (Stierl & Dadusc, 2022; Tazzioli, 2020; Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021) is completely challenged by direct testimonies from people confined, lawyers and socio-legal operators.

A socio-legal operator interviewed in April 2021 explained how, during their mission,

On at least one occasion, it has happened that among a hundred people who boarded negative to COVID, there were positive cases a few days later. Among the various hypotheses that can be assessed in abstract as to how the infection developed, one could also include the presence of positive subjects on the same floor or in the same cabins up to a few hours before the new arrivals came. In fact, in order to “empty” the Lampedusa hotspot, the Prefecture, from time to time competent, does not hesitate to “fill” the quarantine ships, sometimes without even waiting for the technical time needed for sanitation.

Those who test positive have to go through another layer of confinement, as the operator continued explaining

The floors where the positives are placed (i.e. people destined for a longer ‘stay’, from ten up to forty days for some) are, in some cases, located in the hold of the ships: with no light or outlets to the open air, with no access to the internet or other recreational activities.

But also in relation to the timing of the quarantine, the operator explains how

The times prescribed by law for quarantine are not always precisely defined, varying from a minimum of ten days to an indefinable maximum, depending not only on any ‘positives’ of family members forcing other negative members to extend quarantine in order not to be separated, but -

much more seriously - for unspecified organisational requirements of the USMAF [Offices of maritime, aerial and border health] and the authorities ashore (who delay the time for the tenth day buffer, sometimes keeping the same people for 12-15 days on the ship without justification).

Finally, the operator explains how the daily temporality of quarantine has an impact on the lives of those confined onboard

Asylum seekers (including children) are given ten to twenty minutes a day to breathe oxygen in the open air, when this is not obstructed by the ship's stationing at the port, during which time exits are not authorised due to supposed security requirements, and which can last for a whole day or two.

This view has been confirmed also by a lawyer that I interviewed, together with Giacomo Mattiello and Francesca Esposito (Caja et al., 2022). Talking about quarantine ships, the lawyer explained how

This period has led to a dilatation of the detention time [...] From the point of view of the migrant, this crazy management is a psychotic element, because you can't understand what's going on.

And, in the words of asylum seekers confined on the ship that I met in Catania after disembarkation, the violence of this imposed immobilisation at sea emerge in all its arbitrariness,

On this ship, the treatment is "sick": the food is unhealthy, there are not enough seats and we are denied the most basic human rights. If we are all negative, even after the second test, why are we still on this ship? Why is our request for protection not respected?

The neverending waiting has become an essential feature of life and death onboard quarantine ships. Indeed, three people died 'of' quarantine ships. Bilal Ben Messaud drown after jumping from one of the ships after several weeks confined on it, despite a negative COVID test meant he could leave it; Abdallah Said died at hospital in Catania after that his tuberculosis aggravated onboard the quarantine ship and was not taken care of; Abou Diakite died at the hospital in Palermo as a result of a septicemia not treated onboard of the ship.

Given this scenario, it is not surprising that protests and collective actions have shaped life onboard quarantine ships since their introduction, with people reacting against only partially explained confinement at sea. Resistance was carried out in different forms by different people, depending on their gender, ethnic or religious group, and, crucially, expected treatment once disembarked

from the ship. In particular, Tunisian citizens have been the biggest group coming to Italy during the pandemic (National Guarantor, 2021, 2022); between 2020 and 2022, Tunisian have also made more than 50% of deported people from Italian detention centres (National Guarantor, 2021, 2022). Tunisian people became the target of what was configured as a “detention-deportation chain” (Caja et al., 2022), as it is explained in the next section. Quarantine ship played a crucial role in this chain. In fact, the quarantine period became a period during which migrants were legally categorised as potential asylum seekers or ‘economic migrants’. After disembarkation, the former were brought to reception centres, while the latter were brought either to detention centres and then deported or, if these were operating at full capacity, left at the disembarkation ports with a “deferred pushback” paper commanding to leave the country in the next seven days. Tunisians in the majority of the cases were labelled as ‘economic migrants’ and hence refused protection. And, as a result, from the moment they entered quarantine ships, they started carrying out different forms of resistance.

The traces of this resistance can be found in specific places capable of telling part of the story of this alternative time that quarantined people experienced onboard the ships. Following Boochani (2018, p. 127), who identified the bathroom as “probably the only place in the prison where the prisoners feel liberated, if only for a few minutes”, when I was onboard of the GNV ‘Excellent’ I went to the bathrooms (fieldnotes 20/11/2021),

Halfway through the journey I decide to go to the bathroom. I close the door, a normal piss I think. And instead, looking up at the white hospital wall a world opens up; a world of violence and suffering that an unsuspecting passenger on this ship could never expect. On the bathroom walls are writings: ‘GNV puta mafia’, ‘Italia merda’, ‘Arabia Resista, Italia nazi’ and then there are two swastikas, one of which has ‘Maroc’ written in the middle. These are the inscriptions of the invisibles of this quarantine ship [...] The writings are testimonies of resistance in the exasperation of those who have been stranded for weeks on board this ship.

5. The ‘detention-deportation chain’

The introduction of quarantine ships was the first step in the direction of what, from summer 2020, configured as the “detention-deportation chain” (Caja et al., 2022; Gennari et al., 2021). Two other steps contributed to the development of this chain, whose main target became especially Tunisian citizens (and more broadly those labelled as ‘economic migrants’).

First, in August 2020, the Italian government, under the sponsorship of the European Union, renewed its bilateral agreements with the Tunisian government. The agreement consisted in financial support (11 millions) from the Italian government to Tunisian authorities to reinforce border controls and train border and police officers; it also added diplomatic cooperation in relation to repatriation of Tunisian citizens (these agreements were then renewed in 2021 and 2022) (Caja & Mattiello, 2023). A month later, the new Italian Interior Ministry, Luciana Lamorgese, changed the immigration law, reducing the maximum detention period from 180 to 90 days. What at a first glance might seem a positive development was in fact part of a broader plan to create an “efficient deportation system” that the Ministry in an interview called “sliding door detention” (Camera dei Deputati, 2020): detainees “shall remain little time in detention in order to guarantee repatriation and then allow the others, that in the meantime arrived in Italy, but to not have the right to stay, to go into detention” (Camera dei Deputati, 2020). From November onwards, three deportation flights per week from Italy to Tunisia inaugurated the “detention-deportation chain” (Caja et al., 2022).

While it is important to highlight how this measure could apply to everyone that was deemed not worth of protection - and specifically to the people coming from countries ranked as “safe countries” by the Italian government -, over the past two years, it has been mainly Tunisian people and their bodies that have been trapped in this chain. From first identification at the hotspot in Lampedusa or in other Sicilian coasts, they were confined for a period of at least fourteen days in quarantine ships often without the possibility to declare their willingness to ask for asylum in the country. Once disembarked from the ships, they were directly brought inside detention centres where, in the time of a few days or - for those that managed to ask for protection, but were systematically rejected - two weeks, were put on a deportation flight back to Tunisia (Di Meo, 2022a). The numbers explain clearly what we mean. In 2020, out of 3351 deportations, 1997 involved Tunisian citizens (59,6%) (National Guarantor, 2021). In 2021, out of 3420 deportations, 1945 involved Tunisian citizens (56,9 %) (National Guarantor, 2022). Finally, between January and April 2022, out of 859 people deported, 431 were Tunisians (50,1%) (National Guarantor, 2022).

The spatio-temporality of detention and deportation contributed to increase the “psychotic” dimension highlighted by the testimony of the lawyer in the previous chapter. Firstly, people who arrived in Lampedusa (but increasingly also in Pantelleria) were stuck there for an indefinite amount of time, which could vary from a few days to several weeks. Then, all of a sudden, boarded on quarantine ships, again, for an indefinite amount of time, at least from the perspective of asylum seekers, who were given little to no information

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about quarantine. Disembarkation from quarantine ships happened in Sicilian ports, mainly in Trapani, Catania, Porto Empedocle, Pozzallo, but also in Messina or Palermo. But, then, people classified as ‘economic migrants’ and detained could be brought to different locations. Looking again at data, it emerges how in 2021, in Sicilian detention centres, in Caltanissetta and Trapani, the average detention period within these centres was 14,5 and 15,8 days respectively; here the percentage of people deported with respect to all the detainees was 87,9% and 68,3% respectively; but also the average detention period in Palazzo San Gervasio, in Basilicata, was 22,7 days and the percentage of people deported was 63,8%; but also in Gradisca d’Isonzo, in Northern-Eastern Italy, the average detention period was 38,73 days and the percentage of people deported was 55,5% (National Guarantor, 2022). Southern centres became hubs for deportation activities, but they were not the only ones, as data from Gradisca confirm. Moreover, testimonies from activists, lawyers and asylum seekers report that deportation activities were carried out even from centres with longer detention periods and deportation percentages, such as Milan, Turin and Rome.

Focusing on the Tunisian case, all deportations were carried out through private aeroplane contractors from the airport of Palermo (Rondi, 2021), where all deportees were identified by Tunisian consul. Finally, deportation flights arrived in Tabarka, a small airport in the North-West of Tunisia, close to the border with Algeria.

In the space of a few days or weeks, Tunisian people moved everywhere around the Mediterranean, around Italy and, finally, around Tunisia, but always in a situation of confinement or detention.

Previous research has highlighted how abandonment is the technique of government inside detention centres (Esposito et al., 2019; Esposito et al., 2022), implying a generalised negligence towards the life of the people detained by the managing body of the centres, police forces, institution and media. From the testimonies that I collected in Catania and from accounts of people detained in the detention centre in Caltanissetta in summer 2022, it emerged how living within and through a confinement chain meant undergoing a temporality parallel to that of the external world, made of silence, fear and uncertainty. Yet, abandonment shall not be understood as a static dimension of life in detention: when news from the outside, such as the one on the spread of the COVID-19 virus, or protests inside challenged the ordinary life inside detention, police forces and the management body did not hesitate to repress any form of dissent (Esposito et al., 2022). This was the case of the detention centre in Caltanissetta, where for the whole summer of 2022, protests sparked in relation to the health and sanitary condition inside the centre and a spiral of repression and reaction developed, and it managed to exit the walls of the centre thanks to contacts

with Sicilian solidarity groups, until all the people in contact with activists were deported at the end of August 2022 (Rete No Cpr Sicilia Orientale, 2022).

Resistance along the ‘detention-deportation chain’ happened also through the same sanitary devices imposing the ‘confine-to-protect’ mechanism. Indeed, one of the key moments in the chain was the COVID test to be carried out before deportation. Throughout the years of the pandemic, there have been testimonies of COVID tests imposed with force by police authorities on the bodies of Tunisian people to be deported (LasciateCIEntrare, 2021). Yet, at the same time, once people realised that it was impossible to carry out deportations without a negative COVID test, they started to oppose the test and in many cases this has prevented the deportation. Overall, as one lawyer I interviewed with Giacomo Mattiello and Francesca Esposito explained (Caja et al., 2022),

The feeling I bring back from visiting the detention centre is a mixture of abandonment and domination, which makes all the spaces of autonomy vital, first and foremost that of the COVID test, which, besides being the instrument to avoid deportation, is also one of the few moments where one can (re)assert one’s will, because one can say no.

Alongside direct resistance inside the ‘chain’, another important form of resistance was put in practice by deported people, as well as by the families of missing or dead people. They demanded justice against the violence of the European border regime through practices of active memory (Di Meo, 2022a; 2022b). In particular, the voices of the mothers of the Tunisian people that disappeared in the Mediterranean have broken the silence imposed by Italian and Tunisian authorities on the fate of people missing or dead at sea. These women enacted protests outside the Italian embassy in Tunis (Di Meo, 2022b), obtained Visas to come to Lampedusa to commemorate the death of their children, went to different Sicilian cemeteries to look for the silently buried bodies of their children (Di Meo, 2022a), fought for the truth of the children who died in immigration detention in Italy (Filpi, 2022). The objective of their action was to reclaim their own temporality: one made of a collective memory that brings together all those who suffered violence or death imposed by the Italian and European border regime; a practice of collective memory that demands justice, but also builds a collective awareness that challenges the temporality imposed by the European border regime, whose aim is to cancel the memory of all those who were killed (Di Meo, 2021). In the words of one of these mothers (Di Meo, 2021),

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My children have been the driving force behind the search, now they will be the driving force behind justice for all the children of the Mediterranean. In the face of these crimes, we cannot stand idle.

6. Discussion: temporalities of logistification and resistance

The sections above showed how the temporal regime of asylum and deportation, that emerged in Italy during the pandemic period, worked in continuity with past configurations, but it also entailed new features (Caja and Mattiello, 2023; Spada, 2020; Tazzioli & Stierl, 2021). The introduction of a new device of containment in Italy, quarantine ships, plus the subsequent renewal of agreements with so-called ‘safe-country’ Tunisia and the changes in detention laws, led to the development of a ‘detention-deportation chain’, whose main targets have been asylum seekers legally categorised as ‘economic migrants’. In Italy, this applied particularly to Tunisian people, whose bodies have been trapped in the chain from the moment they arrived in Sicily. Lampedusa or Pantelleria’s hotspots, quarantine ships, detention centres scattered across the country, Palermo airport’s police station, and finally deportation flight to Tabarka. The invisible travel of Tunisians happened in many cases in the space of a few weeks, where moments of accelerations (transfers, identification procedures, deportation) cohabitated with moments of immobilisation (confinement at sea and in detention centres). Tunisian people, then, are the most explicit target of the Italian deportation regime, but what happened to their bodies and lives is a laboratory of present and future practices of containment, detention and deportation through temporal regimes of (im)mobilisation (Andersson, 2014; Tsagarousianou, 2022).

The development of a ‘detention-deportation chain’ can be better understood through the concept of the logistification of asylum seeking (Vianelli, 2021): organisational and logistical aspects prevail over the care of asylum seekers. Indeed, the latter are objectified and dehumanised through a combination of regimes of mobility and immobility and through the dispossession of their time. Reception and deportation then become industries in which institutional, private and humanitarian actors cooperate in the name of profiting from the very fact that bodies are mobile (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013). As a result, as Khosravi argued, asylum seekers are reduced to “merely bodily-objects, a thing-like, to be stored, to be removed” (2022, p. 6, translation from the author).

Logistification, as Vianelli intends it, can therefore be considered as a form of government in which temporality is as important as spatiality. Indeed, at the core of this strategy of mobility control is the frenetic movement of people,

whose main objective is to disorient and confuse people, disrupt their autonomous movements and weaken asylum seekers' individual and collective resistance with the aim of creating a more fluid and efficient system. From the testimonies reported in the empirical sections, it emerged not only how asylum seekers daily lives onboard quarantine ships and inside detention centres is shaped by an imposed control on their life-time (from the amount of time allowed outside cabins on the ships, to the speed of their asylum application process and the number of days of detention). It also emerged how these temporal impositions have a “psychotic” impact on asylum seekers' physical and psychological well-being throughout the whole period of containment and detention. This goes back to Khosravi's “stolen time” (Khosravi, 2018, p. 41), which is appropriated by state and humanitarian actors, as well as by the border industry more generally.

Yet, temporal regimes of mobility are not only a product of border agents and industries. Instead, they are also shaped by asylum seekers' agency, struggles and capability to overcome material, bureaucratic and symbolic borders (Daminelli, 2022; Khosravi, 2018). A more accurate picture therefore emerges from the interaction between border regimes and asylum seekers' autonomous strategies of survival and movement.

In the temporal regime of quarantine ships and of the ‘detention-deportation chain’, forms of individual and collective resistance from asylum seekers aimed at interrupting the fluid and efficient time of deportation (Caja et al., 2022; Caja & Mattiello, 2023). They tried to liberate their time through protests, hunger strikes, self-imposed violence, and escape attempts onboard quarantine ships and inside detention centres. Or, in other situations, they attempted to interrupt or slow the time of deportation, as it happened with asylum seekers' refusal to be tested for COVID-19 inside detention centres, thus preventing or, at least, delaying deportation.

Finally, even in front of the death imposed by the border regime, forms of resistance and collective action were organised through another temporal dimension: memory (Di Meo, 2022a; 2022b). Tunisian families, especially mothers and sisters of the people that disappeared in the Mediterranean, challenged the violence of the EU-imposed violence at the Southern European border by demanding justice for their children. All of a sudden, a series of ghosts - alive (the families), disappeared or dead (children and siblings) - are haunting the European border regime, claiming justice through a temporality that state power wants to hide and deny.

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