

Rescue in the Central Mediterranean

Migration via sea routes, between university, ships, and schools

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Being in, being out: being onboard between activism, professionalism, and research

When I arrived in Palermo and saw the ship Mare Jonio¹ for the first time, I had only recently discovered what the rescue NGO *Mediterranea* was. I was a “humanitarian volunteer”, driven by the idea of participating in a project to save human lives. As I will argue in more detail below, it was precisely this outlook that set me apart from the organization’s other members, rendering me “other”. Despite this, on 18 March 2019, after a few weeks of work, I found myself on a RHIB² as a “second rescuer”, carrying out the rescue of a boat in distress.

This initial brief experience has profoundly shaped my personal and academic journey. Not only because rescues in the central Mediterranean – and the politics, practices, and narratives to which they are connected – became the focus of my research for both my master’s thesis and PhD project, but also because this gradual immersion in the world of Search and Rescue (hereinafter SAR) has changed my way of understanding and narrating migration, sea and borders beyond SAR and academic spheres.

As I returned from my experience onboard, I decided to dedicate my research to rescues in the Mediterranean. I started by conducting a sort of “returning ethnography”; I interviewed several members of *Mediterranea*, accessed their meeting spaces, and participated in events and assemblies. While writing my master’s thesis, I reflected on the anthropology of the sea, of borders and movements; the research required an interpretative effort on my part, to “enter” *Mediterranea* and understand its specificity.

First of all, it was necessary to investigate and understand the organization’s political claims: for *Mediterranea* the sea is conceived as a new “arena for political struggle”; it represents an important site to negotiate new meanings and new rights, as well as a space that can catalyze new forms of political commitment³. The central claim of the narrative proposed by *Mediterranea*

¹ The ship managed by *Mediterranea Saving Humans*.

² Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat: these are the fast inflatable boats that lead the rescue team from the mother ship to the boats in distress and then transport the migrants on board.

³ It is no coincidence that the project stems from the ideas of figures who have been well-known in “anti-establishment”

thus appears not to be that of “saving the lives” of migrants, as I had initially imagined, but rather of “supporting their escape from Libya”, their freedom. *Mediterranea* proposed a political action⁴ more than a humanitarian one, aimed at forcing a conflict and pushing the system’s borders, in order to offer an alternative vision of the sea: not as a mass-grave or a border but as a liquid road, connecting places. The organization provided a platform to tell the story of people on the move through a geopolitical and historical lens, trying to identify the key causes behind the perilous crossing and exposing the actors and stakeholders who bear responsibility for these conditions. According to its members, at stake was not only “human life”, but also the possibility of bringing the system’s contradictions under the spotlight. *Mediterranea* was born with the intention of appropriating humanitarian practice to create political and legal precedents for change in the border regime in the Mediterranean. The need to bring the “streets to the sea” emerged as a reaction to a discursive “depoliticization” of the sea – a locus portrayed by the media as an empty and apparently naturally deadly border – and the need to show that it had rather become a zone replete with conflict and tensions⁵.

Approaching the world of activism as a complete outsider, I brought a critical perspective to this interpretative paradigm. I felt external and was perceived as such. Although everyone accepted to be interviewed, it was clear that this was based more on the bond formed by our common participation in the same experience, rather than on the feeling of a shared political perspective, or on the recognition of my legitimacy as a “researcher”.

At the same time, however, my own position became “politicized”: not because I became an activist in any of the social centers linked to the project, but because of my growing awareness of the need to “repoliticize the world” (Fassin 2014) to give historical, social, and cultural depth to the phenomena around me. In this sense, it was necessary to look at migration at sea in the Central Mediterranean by problematizing not only the migrants’ journeys but also the humanitarian missions launched by European agencies or civil society. These reflections led to a gradual albeit radical change in my gaze and in my positionality and determined two decisions. The first was to put the climactic ritual of rescues at the center of my PhD project; the second was to gain deeper technical knowledge and theoretical understandings of maritime operations, to become more involved and get back on board.

The Mediterranean is an ever-changing seascape; since the Italian government formed in 2019 (Conte II), the criminalization of NGOs took on different characteristics, with a shift from criminal sanctions to administrative ones⁶, making the process less “visible”. Within this context, more and more NGOs are organizing and deploying vessels to carry out rescues, and I witnessed an increased bureaucratization and “credentialization” (Graeber 2016) of those practices required to access the field, along with a hyper-professionalization of SAR activity.

While between 2018 and 2019 *Mediterranea* activists claimed «we’re not professionals, that’s not what we’re looking for. We’re activists, our struggle is political»⁷, in 2021 it seemed im-

movements in the Italian political scene since the 1980s, and who still retain strong ties to intellectual and associative movements orbiting around left-wing social centers.

⁴ To the point they sometimes define themselves as an NGA – Non-Governmental Action – to set themselves apart from other NGOs.

⁵ Indeed, since the early 2000s Italian and European governments have been introducing discursive and operational practices that criminalize solidarity and humanitarian activity, practices that have become increasingly invasive and “visible”: this process of criminalization became particularly focused between 2017 and 2019.

⁶ For a more in-depth analysis see Giovannetti, M., Zorzella, N. 2020.

⁷ Interview with one of the central figures in *Mediterranea*, carried out by the author in Palermo on 05/03/2019.

possible to board a ship without the necessary licenses and certificates, least of all as a researcher. On the one hand, this was due to the need to adhere to increasingly defined and specific rules that recently defined the legal landscape of civil SAR, reducing its grey zones; on the other hand, it can be ascribed to an increasing normalization of SAR operations that led to the tendency to think within a logic of efficiency and technicality.

The recent increased bureaucratization of NGOs reduced their potential to focus on “acting out of a conflict” through political practices, determined by the emergence of a deadly border and criminalization of solidarity, which in turn enabled more “spontaneous” form of activism.

There is currently a growing concern with “operationally perfect rescues” and a parallel depoliticization of the maritime landscape, where NGOs risk to slip inside the very framework they originally intended to clash with; i.e. they risk to end up supporting institutionalized systems of mobility management thus relieving the State from its responsibilities and legitimizing policies and practices of exclusion through the use of humanitarian discourse (Cuttitta 2017).

It is in this scenario that I embarked again, in October 2021, with a very different organization. This time my role was also radically different: I was an integral part of the crew, my seafarers certificates made me, for all intents and purposes, a professional rescuer. When I explained I was on board conducting a research for my PhD, no-one paid any attention to it: as the RHIB leader, I was not on board to make theoretical considerations but to speak on the VHF⁸, coordinate with the other crew members and organize the tasks during the rescue itself. There was no activist perspective of the rescues among the volunteers and maritime crew: this ship was at sea to save lives, with no intention of sparking conflict. The organization’s communication to the public did not refer to a system that should be opposed or changed, but instead to the need to “empathize” with the “victims” of unspecified “unjust policies”, and who needed to be rescued⁹.

Finally, again thanks to my licenses, I was later hired by a third and much larger organization, as a “SAR technician”. My position had definitively become that of an insider: like the rest of the crew, I was now a SAR professional.

If entering *Mediterranea* required an interpretative effort (I never became a member in the end), now I could become an insider thanks to a practical effort; for example, fighting off seasickness, the difficulties in becoming familiar with the nautical aspects and then with the management of leadership, rescue techniques and hierarchies on board. At the same time, I needed to confront ethical quandaries. In accepting to be a cog in a large humanitarian organization, I was confronted with the need to take complicated and controversial decisions, often contradicting both the “activist” gaze (to which *Mediterranea* introduced me) and the critical anthropological gaze nourished by my reading of the expansive literature on humanitarianism, borders, and migration management.

Being on board: a cross-eyed perspective

My fieldwork on board the ships forms part of my wider research focus on the moment when rescuer and rescued meet. My aim is to examine the political and symbolic ramifications of the climactic ritual of the rescue.

I attempt to construct and problematize the rescuers’ moral economy, understood as «a determined and culturally constructed conception of what a “subject” is, of what the “right” ways

⁸ VHF: very high frequency, the radio through which the RHIBS and the mother ship communicate.

⁹ These expressions were taken from a public statement issued on the organization’s website.

of acting and being are, beyond any self-presumption of functionality and self-presumption of rationality» (Palumbo 2011: 11). In order to do this, it was essential to participate not only in the activities directly related to rescues (training, meetings) but also in the various “recreational” or leisure moments.

Sharing technical knowledge, practices, spaces, and experiences with other crew members gave me access to understanding non-explicit meanings, silences, and the different constructions of the self, developed by different groups. I shared moments of anxiety and tension, of adrenaline and overwhelming fatigue with the other members of the rescue team, not because I was simply observing them closely but because I was going through the same feelings myself. The intimate conversations I had with my “colleagues” in many cases shed new light on problematic aspects that had until then remained elusive. At the same time, I had to open up myself, confront, question and in some cases clash with the others, revealing my perspective both on the work-related and the personal-emotional sphere.

My role was not directly “disruptive” (Ciccaglione and Pitzalis 2015): I was a rescuer; in the words of the head of mission: «A nerd with a practical approach. What we need first of all is that practical approach»¹⁰. The fact that I studied anthropology was just a minor detail.

On several occasions, on the other hand, my critical perspective challenged the assumptions of some of the people around me. This sometimes resulted in paying more attention to, and caring for the rights of the migrants on board, no longer seeing them as mere passive victims but as subjects, adults, equals who were responsible for themselves. This was also in direct opposition to the organization “guidelines”. Over my research period on board, I witnessed small every-day “mutinies” that concurred in gradually building a counterculture with respect to the official one (Scott 2012).

In the meantime, my field diary took shape amidst a number of difficulties, uncertainties and contradictions. Returning home, my brief notes provided me with an outline to follow in order to develop a more organic and retrospective picture of my various experiences.

In the first phase with *Mediterranea*, my attempt at a “total immersion” (Strathern 1999) meant striving to acquire a “militant” gaze. As Stefano Boni (2020) points out, this does not necessarily imply taking a point of view “aligned” with that of our interlocutors (indeed, I have always remained at least partially “outside”). Rather, it involves recognizing that the subjects with whom I conducted the interviews were not just “informants” but actual participants in the research: with me, they concurred to build “my” idea of what it meant to act out a political conflict in the central Mediterranean at that specific historical moment.

In the case of the second organization, the crew members were not activists, nor was there a particularly structured “culture of the organization” (Gellner and Hirsh 2001). Some critical thoughts offered on board sparked shared reflections, but also conflicts and alliances. How to choose who to save first? How to deal with the discovery of many corpses? How to choose between saving the lives of fewer people in safer conditions, or taking risks in order to save a larger number of lives? Does it make sense to put dozens of people in a precarious waiting situation of mere survival in order to save yet more persons? These were some of the ethical and practical choices we faced, around which we shared some important and interesting reflections, which supported me in both facing the most difficult moments, and developing the research itself. Here the words of Boni (2020: 25) seem fitting: «Ethnographers [...] conduct militant ethnography as we understand it, at least in some instances of their research: that is, they intervene autonomou-

¹⁰ Conversation noted in my field diary, 14/10/2021.

sly in a field of conflicting powers by applying methodology and anthropological knowledge with, for or against the studied social fabric». Essentially, the direction and objective of the research seemed to arise autonomously from the relationship between the ethnographer and the studied context, and to naturally lead to those forms of “engaged anthropology” described by Herzfeld (2005).

In the case of the last organization, however, the situation was partially different: in a large reality that was very rigidly structured with clear and defined advocacy policies, my perspective was perceived as that of an activist. Although I was never verbally confronted on that, my position had no space to be asserted openly, despite the fact that various forms of resistance were enacted in that context as well. Confronted with behaviors and verbal practices that refer primarily to “masses” of people to be controlled and managed, to the medicalization and infantilization of subjects rather than to their empowerment, to assistance rather than to the facilitation of autonomy, how should an anthropologist-rescuer-activist position herself?

In heightened emergency conditions, this dilemma emerges from the actual need to implement standardized and shared procedures, since a strict control system of the very rescuers exists also in order to minimize risk in dangerous contexts. On the other hand, such an approach constantly depersonalizes and victimizes the people it is supposed to support. Moreover, it seems to drag on even when the actual emergency – i.e., the moment of the rescue – has passed, and it continues throughout the duration of the stay on board.

At the same time, critical insights can insinuate themselves in these spaces on an informal level, problematizing the deep depoliticization put in practice at the structural level, thus favoring various forms of dialogue and developing a shared reflection on power relations, welfarism, victimization and rights.

It was also possible to foster reflections on a broader level. For instance, when a rescued person was arrested while disembarking, on charges of aiding and abetting illegal immigration (he had been identified as the driver of the boat in distress) I was able to put the organization in touch with a network of activists and lawyers who work to protect the rights of criminalized people on the move, that focuses precisely on such cases¹¹. This was possible thanks to the internal processes of the organization, which some years ago started to include the concept of “protection” in its advocacy lines. But such connection was also fostered by the relationship of “trust” that I established with the head of mission. My hybrid position as a researcher, an activist and a rescuer placed me, in the eyes of the organization, “beyond” those singular dimensions (i.e. either activism, or work, or research), thus legitimizing my position and acknowledging my suggestions.

Given the context I described, one could wonder whether it is possible to consider and appreciate these communicative exchanges as forms of “anthropological restitution” enacted outside of the academic sphere, which stem from the continuous tension between “inside” and “outside”; a type of “experimental ethnography” (Cammelli 2017), based on the idea of writing, thinking and producing knowledge not so much “about”, as much as “with” the subjects we work with. This does not imply that there weren’t moments of strong disconnect when my critical perspective – as an insider yet always also an outsider – encountered either resistance or the impossibility to express itself.

¹¹ Indeed, this network works specifically on the criminalization of boat drivers. Their report is available at: <https://from-seatoprison.info> (Accessed 24/03/2022).

Therefore, I would like to propose to take into account several forms of contribution that are intertwined with each other: on the one hand, the traditional academic form of contribution, which in my case took shape precisely through an active and thorough participation in the NGO's activities and embodying the ethos of rescuer and activist; in this sphere, the researcher can also explore the dilemmas posed by working in a "sensitive" field (Bouillon, et al. 2005), such as whether it is legitimate for a researcher to openly or formally criticize aspects of their working context¹². Indeed, this issue has already attracted considerable academic attention and has been the topic of a wide range of literature. But I would like to emphasize also another type of contribution, which can have a direct impact on the field. During my research, I have never attempted to carry out "applied anthropology" as such; I was not hired as an anthropologist, and I was never expected to contribute with some kind of anthropological knowledge to these organizations. Yet, once I was in that "terrain", I had the opportunity to question the dynamics in which we were immersed with different subjects.

During both types of contribution, I chose to highlight those structural issues that emerge at the "macro" level, while also focusing specifically on micro-practices that seem to build continuous creative paths towards the transformation and resemantization of what SAR activities mean and entail.

This allowed me to stay close to the practices in order to highlight the "gap" between different scales of analysis. Indeed, when the "structuring" power of organizations seems overwhelming, interstitial paths of resistance become crucial and relevant. These paths are built precisely by sharing critical perspectives. In this regard, I was able to exchange productive conversations both with other crew members and with some of the rescued migrants, also profiting from the interaction between those two groups.

In fact, the ethnographic encounter created a space for personal points of view to emerge which could, at the same time, build on each other. The conversation was fueled through my sharing of anthropological knowledge, which in turn was shaped and enriched during those communicative encounters, creating spaces for the emergence of the un-expected. Social relations then assume a central and hermeneutic role and should therefore be appreciated in themselves. Taking an insider perspective, I could acknowledge the importance not just of analytical considerations, but also of the body as mean of heuristic exploration. This way, my research took on the features of a "militant" "auto-ethnography", in which attention to one's own personal experience is useful in order to delve into a deeper observation of social and cultural aspects that would otherwise remain elusive (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

Here the ethical question becomes twofold, referring to the complexity of the relationship between the anthropologist and the research participants, but also to what happens "within" the observer (Behar 1996). The subjectivity of the observer influences the course of the events; it is essential to understand which aspects of the self are the most important filters through which we perceive the world.

In fact, it was only my complete identification with the role of the rescuer – i.e. "becoming" a rescuer – that allowed me to get on board, and to perceive and experience complex tensions, dilemmas and modes of self-construction that I wouldn't have grasped otherwise. This in turn created the conditions for my perceptions to be listened to and acknowledged, and to maintain a perspective that was both reflexive and political.

¹² See for example Colajanni 2020; Eriksen 2006.

By being simultaneously inside and outside the context, I could immerse myself in the field, acquire agency and, finally, re-consider both choices and actions made by others and my own position on board. It is by looking back across a temporal gap, that one's gaze becomes cross-eyed: it looks at the self and the other simultaneously, examines both analysis and practice, and considers existing anthropological knowledge while constructing a new one.

The results of this intertwining can be carried back to the field and offered to one's interlocutors. Rather than serving external communities of educators, policymakers, military forces and financiers, research should be constructed with and given back to the community in which it is carried out. In addition to moving between one realm to the other, the anthropologist can perhaps attempt to be in both realms simultaneously.

Why don't they take a plane? From sea to land

Between 2019 and 2022, I was invited to speak in various presentations and fund-raising events for SAR NGOs, as well as in a number of Italian public high-schools, and asked to share my experience on board the rescue ships: I was invited as a rescuer, not as an anthropologist.

In this final section, I suggest that by combining anthropological reflection with my acquired experiences I offered a "hybrid" narration of migration at sea and of rescues in the Mediterranean.

In many cases I was specifically requested to talk about my experience on board and my feelings during the rescues, as well as about migrants' conditions during the journey and the stories they tell. As a rescuer, i.e. as someone involved on the front line, I was automatically assumed to be a legitimate spokesperson for them. This implied the idea that it was necessary to «stir people's hearts»¹³ to create approval; particularly for events that were meant to rally support for the organizations, there was also an unspoken and widespread belief that establishing an empathic connection with the public would increase financial support through donations.

One important challenge I faced during those events has long been a topic of thorough academic reflection: how to offer nuanced and in-depth anthropological reflections in a short amount of time to an audience that does not work in the field, in order to facilitate the development of a critical perspective not only on migration at sea, but also about humanitarian rescue missions and the way these are framed and discussed in public contexts¹⁴.

Depending on the context and type of event, I also had to evaluate what type of information the organizations themselves were willing to share with the general public.

I resolved to mediate between these intertwined pressures and tensions.

On the one hand, to refer to my personal experience as a rescuer allowed me to engage with my audience on an empathic level, sharing stories of my encounters with migrants. At the same time, by placing those encounters at the forefront I had to concede to a highly depoliticized narrative, where the context is only partially explored and the main narrative focus becomes the rescuer rather than the migrants themselves, or border management issues.

At the same time, once I gained the audience's attention, I tried to introduce some apparently disorienting questions based on the dilemmas I had experienced in my hybrid role (which were unsettling precisely because they were outside the pietistic, crystallized and de-historicizing narrative frame of the rescue story).

¹³ Informal telephone conversation with the organizer of the events at the public schools on 22/01/2022.

¹⁴ For an insightful description of this, see Colajanni 2020, for example.

I took the opportunity to offer unexpected answers and to talk about subjectivity, self-determination, desire, risk, adventure, choice, coercion, strategies, escapes, but also responsibility, politics, “structural” forms of violence and racism, visa management and humanitarianism. By placing these concepts within a broad (and at times over-simplified) framework informed by academic literature in different social sciences¹⁵, it became possible to establish communicative exchanges that went beyond the exaltation of the hero-savior and the victimization of the saved¹⁶, and to trigger new questions.

Conclusions

The possibility to contribute to public reflections on SAR operations was never the primary intention beyond my participation on board of rescue ships – nor do I assume that this is happening. Yet, in this contribution I tried to reflect upon the possibility that research in “close” and “sensitive” contexts can take on other dimensions beyond the academic one, insofar as they involve crucial socio-political issues. However, these dimensions are intertwined; they build on and inform each other, being based on the research subjects’ direct participation in the research itself, while simultaneously engaging in discussions outside of the research site.

This constitutes a way to open to public discussion and to make ethnography more accessible. At the same time, it contributes to debate and spark action, in a process of politicization of research. The knowledge thus constructed can then be translated, disseminated and taken up by the public – who can appropriate or contest it – and finally transformed into practical orientations and decisions.

This envisioned process is not simply achieved through the interpretive and analytical abstraction of lived experience in the field, but is also rooted in a “vulnerable perspective” (Behar 1996) which can, in turn, be investigated to elaborate “explanations” that create an awareness of change and cultural constructs through time and space.

By subsequently acknowledging the different roles I take or negotiate depending on the contexts, I intend to contribute to an ethnographic narrative that lives with the field, that aims to bring out the rescuer’s perspective (related to efficiency in saving lives), the activist’s one (able to question its political implications), and finally that of the researcher. Through the first two, the latter addresses how to apply anthropological reflections in practice, and then how to render anthropological practice political.

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¹⁵ Considering, for example: Feldman, Ticktin 2010; Heller, Pezzani 2014; Stierl 2016; Fassin 2018; Mellino 2019; Mezzadra 2020; Palmas, Rahola 2020; Sorgoni 2022.

¹⁶ In many cases, the legitimacy attributed to the rescuer’s narrative remains highly problematic, as well as the absence of the voice of the migrants themselves (on this point, see, for example, Fassin 2019). In some cases, however, it was also possible to encourage reflection on this issue.

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