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Islands and a Carceral Environment: Maltese Policy in Terms of Irregular Migration

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Although security has become a common framework for analyzing dispositifs that aim to control irregular migration, island spaces themselves are seldom considered as security dispositifs. The case of Malta, where detention is mandatory upon arrival, epitomizes what could be conceptualized as a “sentinel island” within the European Union. This article demonstrates how the interaction between political discourse, administrative practices, and migrants’ experiences contributes to turning the island into a form of total-institution setting. The empirical data is based on qualitative fieldwork that combines ethnographic observation, migrants’ individual narratives and semi-structured interviews conducted with European and national policy makers.

KEYWORDS Irregular migration, Malta, European Union, island, securitization

Due to their location, islands such as Malta, Lampedusa, the Canary Islands and the Greek Islands “offer themselves as strategically-located staging-posts and entry-points” (King, 2009). As members of the European Union (EU), they must implement a series of security measures to address what is labeled as “irregular migration.” This process highlights the development of border-control policies and points to the evolution of the shape of frontiers, as punctiform rather than linear (Cuttitta, 2007).

Among the islands concerned, this article focuses on Malta. With its accession to the EU in 2004, the Maltese state became an outpost of European border-control policies as well as a gate of entry for sub-Saharan migrants attempting to reach Europe. The Dublin II regulation makes the Maltese
authorities responsible for almost all of the asylum claims made by individuals who enter the EU through Malta. Regardless of the status they are granted, migrants do not have any legal options for settling elsewhere in the EU\(^1\) (King, 2009). Claiming that the number of irregular arrivals goes beyond the “tiny island’s capacities”—with a land area of 316 km\(^2\) and a resident population of around 410,000 inhabitants—Malta has consistently asked for assistance from its European counterparts (Lutterbeck, 2009).

By using Malta as a case study, this article explores the interaction between islands and migration. While nissology is a discipline that is gaining increased recognition (Baldacchino, 2006), few studies investigate the particularities of migration management on islands (Mountz, 2011). I concur with Russel King that “islands have long been productively utilised as a semi-laboratory setting for the study of ecological, epidemiological and social processes, including migration” (King, 2009). In an attempt to avoid the perception that the geography of islands determines and necessitates island features, one of my objectives is to deconstruct the major characteristics of islands such as smallness and isolation. As such, this article analyzes the social construction of island life, known as islandness.

The purpose of this research article is to examine the securitization of migration (Bigo, 1998) within an island context. From this perspective, it provides an ethnographic analysis of the exercise of security in everyday life on an island-border of the EU. Following a Foucauldian approach, this article studies the management of a population by using the concepts of dispositif (Foucault, 1977/1980) and biopower (Foucault, 1975/2003). Both concepts highlight the exercise of power over people rather than over territory and over a group rather than over individuals (Foucault, 1978/2007). I combine the Foucauldian approach with the concept of the total institution (Goffman, 1961)—which refers to the management of people in a closed space—by analyzing the interactions between staff and inmates.

Empirical data is drawn from ongoing research that started in 2010. Based on an inductive methodology, my fieldwork combines ethnographic observation in reception centers,\(^2\) including over 50 semi-structured interviews conducted with migrants, policy makers, and representatives of international organizations.

A SENTINEL ISLAND

Traditionally classified as an emigration country, the Maltese state began to experience a transition toward becoming an immigration country during the 1970s. However, irregular immigration only became a public issue when the island-state joined the EU (Rodier & Teule, 2005). As a member state that is situated on the external borders of the Union, Malta had to implement a reception policy. However, migrants traveling by boat have been constructed “as transients and sojourners rather than settlers” (Falzon, 2012).
Moreover, Malta is still the only EU member state that applies a mandatory detention policy upon arrival (Mainwaring, 2012). As such, the case of Malta provides a political laboratory to study practices for penalizing irregular migration.

As an island-state, Malta epitomizes what could be conceptualized as a sentinel island. In absolute terms the number of arrivals in Malta is insignificant. However, the phenomenon is relevant when considering its symbolic dimension. Following Peter Andreas, I argue that “the escalation of border policing has been less about deterring than about image crafting” (Andreas, 2009, p. 9). Indeed, the concept of the sentinel island is not related to whether the Maltese island-state actually prevents irregular migration. According to Cetta Mainwaring, Maltese detention policy has had the intention of “constructing a crisis,” both at the national and European levels (2012).

Apart from Malta, other islands, such as Lampedusa, also play the role of gatekeeper for the EU. However, migrants arriving in Lampedusa are then transferred to mainland Italy. In Malta, migrants are kept in detention facilities on the island for much longer. This specificity partly results from the regime of sovereignty. Given that Malta is an island-state, there is no mainland to which migrants can be transferred. They are unconditionally detained for periods of up to 18 months. Consequently, the Maltese sentinel constructs an atmosphere of total control that reifies the imagined characteristics of the island as a closed, restricted, and isolated space.

In this article, I will first show that the dispositif turns the island into a form of total-institution setting in which migrants are supervised. I will then argue that this setting allows the exercise of a tightened biopower over migrants.

THE ISLAND AS A TOTAL-INSTITUTION SETTING

Once they have arrived in Malta, irregular migrants experience a carceral environment: incarceration, detention, and placement in open centers. In this article, the combination of these measures is studied using what Michel Foucault has conceptualized as a dispositif: “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid” (1977, p. 194). I intend to demonstrate that upon arrival on the island, the dispositif places migrants in a total institution, defined by Erving Goffman as “a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (1961, p. 1). This analysis of the total institution is based on an inductive research process and drawn from observations and interviews that I conducted with migrants.
Incarceration

The first encounter between migrants and the Maltese authorities takes place at sea, when the Army Patrol intercepts or rescues people traveling by boat. Once they have disembarked on Maltese shores, the new arrivals are incarcerated at the Immigration Police Department where they go through an identification process. Their fingerprints are taken, and they are photographed and searched. Their personal belongings, including mobile phones, are taken and kept by Immigration Police Officers. They are asked to provide the Maltese authorities with their basic information: country of origin, age, gender, and marital status. A police number is allocated to each new arrival, which is made up of their year of arrival, the letter allocated to the boat they arrived on (ordered alphabetically in relation to the other boats that have arrived the same year), and the number of individuals found on the boat (for example, 05.B.13). Each person receives a plastic bracelet with his or her police number on it.

Migrants’ initial experiences of Malta are that of a police-related procedure. Incarceration symbolizes the entry point of the sentinel island where migrants are penalized for arriving in an irregular manner. Incarceration also equates to the dehumanizing admission procedure of the total institution, whereby “the new arrival allows himself to be shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine” (Goffman, 1961, p. 166).

Incarceration also underlines the effectiveness of the migration management implemented by a sentinel island. With regard to migration control policy in a maritime context, King considers that “compared to land borders, with their checkpoints at road crossings and airports, and the possibility of erecting physical borders such as fences and walls, sea borders are more open and access can be stealthier, under cover of darkness” (2009). Even though supervising maritime borders is challenging, the geography of islands allows authorities to control physical entries much more effectively. The island itself can serve as a checkpoint. In the case of Malta, this possibility is currently being exploited.

By incarcerating every irregular arrival, the Maltese authorities are able to identify each individual who has entered the island territory by boat in an irregular manner. The unconditional incarceration procedure, which takes place upon arrival, then allows the Maltese government to detain the population of irregular migrants.

Detention

Once the preliminary identification process is completed, the incarcerated are transferred to closed centers. There are two main detention centers in Malta: Safi Barracks and Lyster Barracks. These detention facilities can hold
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up to 2,000 detainees. Kept in military barracks, detainees are supervised by Detention Service staff, made up of retired soldiers and police officers, with overall organization of the process managed by the Ministry of Home Affairs. New arrivals are detained while their application is being processed and the time that they spent in detention can last up to 18 months. Political representatives justify mandatory detention by leaning on Malta’s island characteristics:

Owing to its strategic position, exposed coastline and size, Malta is definitely much more vulnerable than other European countries when it comes to irregular migratory flows. Moreover, the Maltese islands are characterised by size (316 km²), a high population density of 1200 person/km² and a built up area of 23 per cent. These characteristics not only reflect the country’s physical restrictions but result in a range of social, cultural and environmental challenges. [...] It is therefore in the national interest, and more specifically, for reasons concerning employment, accommodation and maintenance of public order, that a detention policy be adopted in cases concerning the arrival of irregular immigrants. (Government of Malta, 2005, p. 6)

Based on the fact that Malta is a small island-state, official discourse in Malta assumes heightened vulnerability compared to other EU member states when it comes to the management of irregular migration. As such, it argues that its detention policy is necessary in order to protect Maltese citizens. Mandatory detention is therefore the result of a political will to manage the number of arrivals. From a Foucauldian perspective, detention symbolizes the power exercised on individuals by a security apparatus. It “operates on the field of possibilities in which the behaviour of active subjects is able to inscribe itself” (Foucault, 1982/2000, p. 341).

When migrants first arrive in Malta, they spend a number of months living in a prison-like environment despite not being classified as having committed any crime. The closed centers embody the sentinel island’s total control. While migrants are kept in detention, they are prevented from moving forward both spatially and socially. Detention also reveals how migrants’ bodies are central to the management of irregular migration and its implementation (see article on the Aegean islands in this special issue). Initially, migrants physically experience the island as a closed isolated and tightened space. Therefore, the containment of the bodies epitomizes the island’s confinement.

The impact of detention on migrants in Malta has been recorded in the report *Becoming Vulnerable in Detention* (Jesuit Refugee Service, 2010). The report reveals how detention affects the mental health of detainees. Mental illness in the migrant community has been such an important problem that a separate ward has been opened at the Mount Carmel Psychiatric Hospital
specifically for migrants (Debono, 2013). This results from the dehumanization process that detainees go through. According to Daniela Debono, the experience of detention makes migrants feel “less than human” (Debono, 2013), which shows how the total institution has a deep impact on individuals’ perceptions of themselves.

Eventually once their asylum claim has been completed, detainees are released from detention. They are placed in so-called open centers regardless of whether they have been granted a protection status or not. These institutions allow residents to enter and exit the premises. However, since supervisory staff observe and manage the group of residents, open centers also fit into the total institution category.

**Placement in Open Centers**

Open centers have been created in a context where the number of people arriving by boat has been labeled as an “emergency.” In 2012, three main open centers—Marsa Open Centre, Hal Far Tents Village, and Hal Far Hangar—housed around 1,600 migrants. Marsa Open Centre is a former school that had been closed due to health concerns but that was later reopened to host migrants in 2005. Hal Far Tents Village was created in 2006, when tents were erected on a field in the area of Hal Far, a former military base close to the airport. These tents have since been replaced by containers. In 2008, close to the tents village, in the almost uninhabited area of Hal Far, an old airplane hangar, which was still imbued with kerosene, became a site for warehousing migrants. The hangar itself is no longer used to accommodate migrants, but migrants are still living in a number of containers surrounding the hangar. A young Somali who lived in the hangar in 2010 explained his experience:

> It is very difficult to live in Malta. No work. No education. In Somalia, you can’t study either. My Mum often asks me whether I work or study. I answer her “No Mum, I sleep in a hangar.” She says: “What? A hangar?” I go: “Yes Mum, a hangar.” In Malta, it is as if you were still in Africa. In Europe, I can learn. Here it is like a desert. You’ve got peace. OK, but I get 80 Euros a month. How can you live with 80 Euros a month? It takes 45 minutes to go to Valletta. You have to wait the bus for ages. Many people are not happy in Malta. Even the Maltese, they are not happy with migrants. They are scared of being invaded. But how can they think that we are invading them if we are living in a hangar? […] We are far away from everything here. It is like you put milk into water; milk mixes with water. But if you put oil into water; oil does stay above water. We are oil above water and we can’t mix with the rest. (Resident, Hal Far Hangar, 19 January 2010)
Even if it may be possible to indicate their location, in reality migrants find themselves housed in centers “outside of all places” (Foucault, 1984), isolated from the social activities of everyday life. They are on an island within the island (oil above water). Their isolation is increased by the way the open centers function.

Under the Ministry of Home Affairs, a governmental agency called AWAS (the Agency for Welfare of Asylum Seekers) is responsible for managing the open center. Its personnel verify that residents are maintaining the cleanliness of the location and aim to avert any irregular behavior. A “basic split between a large managed group, . . . and a small supervisory staff” (Goffman, 1961, p. 7) is implemented. The main responsibility of AWAS employees is to carry out the signing procedure. As the cornerstone of the functioning of the open center, this procedure requires every resident to register three times a week at the office of the center in which he or she is living. Signing is compulsory for all residents in order to receive shelter and their financial allowance. By binding the allowance from the state to placement in the center through a signing procedure, the regulation of open centers makes residents dependent on a bureaucratic institution which establishes a system of “surveillance” (Goffman, 1961, p. 7).

However, placement in open centers is not compulsory, and some sub-Saharan migrants also live amongst the Maltese community. Outside the dispositif, migrants in Malta work, rent accommodations, and in most cases are documented. However, they still claim to experience a prison-like situation.

A Total-Institution Setting

The geographic characteristics of the island could explain why migrants feel restricted and controlled, even when they reside within the community. The small and delimited territory surrounded by water could contribute to the feeling of enclosure. An Ethiopian migrant I met at the bus stop in Hal Far next to the Tents Village Open Centre told me about his experience of living on the island:

I arrived in Malta in 2011. I spent several months in detention. They rejected my case twice. I have no documents, no paper, and no passport. I work here. I rent a place. But I have no right and I can’t leave. Inside and outside detention, it’s the same. We are locked up here. Malta is a prison. (Ethiopian migrant, 14 May 2012)

The metaphor of the prison refers more to the carceral environment that he experienced upon arrival than the geography of the island. As mentioned above, migrants’ insights into Maltese society are based on their interactions with soldiers, police officers, and open center personnel (apart from those of nongovernmental and international organizations). Once migrants are
living in Malta, they do not have the right to settle anywhere else in the EU. This is a direct consequence of the Europeanization of migration policies, applied on an island-state, strengthening the prison-like environment. Moreover, the promotion of mandatory detention by political officials constructs a category of “black and illegal” people, which creates suspicious attitudes among the island’s inhabitants. Indeed, both of Malta’s main political parties have agreed on the necessity of its detention policy. A spokesperson from the Labour Party (in opposition at the time of the interview; now in government) highlighted the following argument:

I am not going to criticise that, because there is a political agreement on the detention policy. It is necessary with us, given our size, given our population and given the density of our population. (Spokesperson, Labour Party, 15 February 2010)

The consensus on detention across the Maltese political system presents irregular immigration as a phenomenon from which the small island has to be protected. The identification of sub-Saharan migrants as a threat therefore has a particular impact on society. As Mainwaring puts it, “Detention and its associated practices thus serve to criminalise migrants and refugees and negatively affect the way Maltese people perceive them” (2012, p. 694). She then highlights that “the Maltese people’s initial sympathetic response to the plight of irregular migrants arriving on the island has turned hostile, increasingly xenophobic and racist” (Mainwaring, 2012, p. 695). Indeed, according to the 2009 European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, Malta is the country in which sub-Saharan migrants reported the highest rate of discrimination, with 66 percent of individuals interviewed declaring that they had experienced discrimination during the previous 12 months (Council of Europe, 2011a). Africans have been identified as the most discriminated and vulnerable migrant community in Malta (European Network Against Racism, 2010). Discriminatory practices apply when it comes to accessing public spaces such as buses, bars, and night clubs. The fieldwork diary notes below give an insight into the daily exercise of power over Black people on the island:

I was standing just outside the entrance of a nightclub in Paceville. There was a bouncer at the door looking at the customers that were entering. Several people walked in and the bouncer let them in without asking any questions or searching them. At some point, two black men approached the entrance. They were about to go in as everyone else has done before them. However, the bouncer stopped them and asked them for their ID card. (Fieldwork diary notes, 30 January 2010)
The already-high perception of racial discrimination is further enhanced by Malta’s geographic and demographic characteristics. Because the territory is small, delimited, and densely populated, sub-Saharan migrants living in the community are very close to the Maltese population in spatial terms. When migrants are supposed to be free from the *dispositif*, they experience everyday life in Malta as if every Maltese person were a supervisory staff of a form of total institution. In the “total institution of Maltese society,” the number of staff and inmates are inversely proportionate, which further strengthens supervision as “any member of the staff class has certain rights to discipline any member of the inmate class” (Goffman, 1961, p. 42). The right to discipline is based on the automatic identification and classification that sub-Saharan migrants experience in everyday life on the island. During an interview, a migrant from Mali who has been living in Malta for more than 10 years, told me about the feeling of being identified. He spent more than a year in detention and was released without being given a protection status. Since 2010, he has been part of an unofficial regularization process:

> Now we have documents. We can even get a passport. But our body is still illegal. Our skin is still illegal. (Malian migrant, 25 April 2012)

Indeed, in the Maltese language, sub-Saharan migrants are often referred to as *klandestini*. The illegality of the skin color—mentioned by the migrant interviewed—refers to the total institution’s automatic identification of the inmate: “[the identification] is at the centre of a basic means of social control” (Goffman, 1961, p. 84). “Having to control inmates and to defend the institution . . . the staff resort to the kind of all-embracing identification of the inmates that will make this possible” (Goffman, 1961, p. 85). His mentioning of the body is also highly relevant. In line with Didier Fassin, the above interview shows that “the body has become the site of inscription for the politics of immigration, defining what we can call, using Foucauldian terminology, a biopolitics of otherness” (2001, p. 2). The biopolitics is not only exercised but also internalized. Migrants themselves also perform the total institution that they have incorporated. The fieldwork diary notes below show how migrants can themselves reproduce the carceral environment that they have been enduring:

> I was walking on the street in Saint Paul’s Bay along with a young Sub-Saharan man. We came across a West African girl. I didn’t know her but the man I was walking with did. He waved his hand at her and told me: “I know this girl! She is 05.G.09. She was on the same boat as me.” (Fieldwork diary notes, 15 May 2011)

The police number is a key aspect of migrants’ lives in Malta. Whenever migrants approach the Maltese bureaucracy, they are required to provide
the caseworker with their police number. Outside the Maltese administrative network, the use of police identifiers during an encounter between two sub-Saharan shows how the total-institution setting has been internalized by the migrants themselves. It also reveals that the process of dehumanization goes beyond the bars of the closed center. As Daniela Debono highlights by quoting one of her interviewees: “Detention has never left me. I was treated like a dog, but I also became a dog, an animal. And when you become an animal once, you are ashamed for life” (2013, p. 62). The nonhuman reference exemplifies the effectiveness of the total-institution setting.

However, migrants also resist the prison-like environment. Even though in theory they do not have the right to settle outside Malta, in practice many of them do in fact leave the island. Indeed, of the 16,617 migrants who have arrived in Malta since 2002 (UNHCR, 2012), approximately only 4,000 still live on the island (Times of Malta, 2012). Estimated figures suggest that some sub-Saharan manage to leave, as discussed during an interview with the director of the United Nations Refugee Agency in Malta:

It is a very important aspect of the reality in Malta that many people have moved on their own and many of them have succeeded. Because we know that they have been away for years. […] It is a big feature of the situation here. Many have gone. They say thousands. (Director of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Malta, 3 May 2012)

Beyond departures, there are pockets of resistance on the island. Some cultural spaces, such as bars, music shows, or churches, bring Maltese and sub-Saharan together, meaning that migrants are not totally isolated. Moreover, in 2010, a network was founded by sub-Saharan migrants in order to raise their voices in the immigration debate. However, instances of resistance remain at the margins of society.

Despite the challenges made at the margins, migrants’ experiences and perceptions still support the idea of a continuum between the state’s dispositif and Maltese society. The continuum performs the role of a total-institution setting and constructs the reality of the island from the inside: a closed territory with a tightened exercise of power.

A TIGHTENED BIOPOLITICS

The island’s total-institution setting controls its migrant population, constituting a form of biopower. According to Michel Foucault, biopower is a technology of power. It should be understood as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (1978, p. 1).
TABLE 1 The Protection Status Determination Process in Malta

The following five different statuses are issued in Malta:

Refugee status is given to asylum seekers whose case fits the 1951 Geneva Convention criteria. A refugee is defined as a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country or return there because there is a fear of persecution.” In Malta, refugees have to renew their refugee status every 4 years and have access to the same rights as nationals.

Subsidiary protection, introduced by EU Council directive 2004/83, is given to asylum seekers who do not qualify for refugee status but who are still at risk if they were to go back to their home country. Valid for 1 year, this protection provides beneficiaries with relatively fewer rights, compared to refugee status.

Temporary humanitarian protection is given on humanitarian grounds (to unaccompanied minors or sick persons). At the discretion of the Refugee Commissioner, this is a form of national protection status that is valid for 1 year.

Rejected asylum seekers do not get any protection. However, many of them do not return to their home countries. The Maltese government provides them with temporary documents that they have to renew frequently. They are allowed to work in Malta but they can be repatriated at any time.

Following an unofficial integration scheme in 2010, certain rejected asylum seekers that have been living in Malta for some years are granted a temporary humanitarian protection “new.” This is a local type of regularization process. The status is valid for one year. To renew it, the Refugee Commission interviews migrants and assesses their efforts toward integration: namely, whether they have learnt English or Maltese and whether they have a job.

Within the managed categories of “black illegal migrants,” further categories are created, differentiating migrant groups from each other and designating those that will eventually be allowed to leave Malta. The technologies that are used to categorize migrants are the status determination process (see Table 1 for more details on protection statuses) and the relocation program. The relocation program is an EU funded pilot project that has been created following the Maltese request for “burden sharing.” It aims to allocate certain migrants living in Malta to other EU member states.

Status Determination Process

As the major apparatus of categorization, the status determination process is completed while migrants are detained in a closed center. The Office of the Refugee Commissioner, created in 2002, is responsible for processing asylum claims. While asylum seekers are detained, they fill in a preliminary questionnaire in which they indicate their reasons for applying for asylum. Following this preliminary stage, applicants are interviewed, usually in a
closed center. The case is then reviewed and a protection status is either allocated or not. There are five different types of protection status issued in Malta: refugee status, subsidiary protection, temporary humanitarian protection, rejected asylum seekers, and temporary humanitarian protection new (see Table 1 for more details).

The legal categorization of migrants constructs a pyramidal hierarchy in which refugees are placed at the very top and rejected asylum seekers, at the very bottom. Rejected asylum seekers remain within the island's total-institution setting, as underlined by the director of the United Nations Refugee Agency in Malta during an interview:

Rejected asylum seekers are stuck in Malta which means that they are really in a legal and social limbo. Because they can't go home, if they could go home, Malta would already have sent them. They can't leave as they have been rejected. Because they were rejected, they can't have documents and they can't stay either. As rejected asylum seekers, they're not considered as legal here. (Director of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Malta, 12 May 2011)

Rejected asylum seekers are deprived of “the right to have rights” (Arendt, 1951). What mostly differentiates them from migrants with protection status is the denial of mobility rights. Owing to the absence of a recognized protection status, they are not in a position to apply for travel documents. Therefore, they have no legal option for leaving Malta. They are forever confined inside the island. However, in practice, certain rejected asylum seekers manage to find ways of escaping.9 Conversely, refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection may apply for travel documents and therefore have mobility rights.10 However, migrants exercising their mobility rights are likely to be sent back to Malta. The Eurodac regulation allows for the identification of migrants and their return to the country that granted them protection. This regulation shows that the exercise of biopower goes beyond the island’s territory and is embedded in a European dispositif. As Duez highlights following a Foucauldian perspective, the EU has elaborated in-depth knowledge on the itineraries of certain persons who have been perceived as dangerous (Duez, 2005). Police and administrative practices have shaped an image of a migratory peril heading towards European territory (Duez, 2005). In this context, biopolitics is meant to “defend society” (Foucault, 1975) through mobility tracing.

Mobility is crucial for migrants, especially because the level of rights they can access in Malta is generally low (see Table 1 for more details). Refugees have the same rights as nationals; however, less than 3 percent of asylum applications lead to refugee status (UNHCR, 2012). More than 50 percent of applications are awarded with subsidiary protection (UNHCR, 2012). However, this protection status does not entitle beneficiaries to apply
for naturalization or family reunification. Temporary humanitarian protection results from an administrative procedure and does not guarantee any rights. The lack of rights is symptomatic of the total-institution setting in which migrants are not considered as subjects but as objects.

Beyond access to the mobility rights, a selection process is also implemented to identify which migrants will be allowed to settle in another EU member state.

**Relocation**

Once they have arrived in Malta, irrespective of their protection status, no legal options are offered to sub-Saharan migrants for settlement elsewhere. However, as Mainwaring highlights in this special issue, Maltese policy makers have underlined the “tiny island capacities” to develop a discourse on “exceptionalism.” Their claim has been taken into account by the EU. In 2010, the European Commission designed an experimental mechanism especially for Malta to allocate beneficiares of international protection to other EU member states. However, relocation is not compulsory and depends on the willingness of member states, who fix their own quotas and criteria.

The relocation program is based on a selection process, given that member states have the right to identify the individuals they are willing to relocate. The first criterion, which is unconditional, is to be a beneficiary of international protection (either refugee status or subsidiary protection), which means that the status determination process described above is part of the relocation program’s selection procedure. Beneficiares of temporary humanitarian protection and rejected asylum seekers are, prima facie, excluded from the program, whereas beneficiaries of international protection have the right to register for relocation. A preselection procedure is then conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) based on the different criteria indicated by member states. Once the UNHCR has completed the preliminary screening and in order to finalize the selection procedure, the individuals selected are interviewed or reviewed on paper by delegations from EU member states.

The selection criteria established vary from one country to another. For example, the French authorities sought to relocate beneficiaries of international protection with basic knowledge of French, specific professional skills, and family links in France. Further examples of different selection criteria were given by an official from the Representation of Malta to the EU during an interview in Brussels:

Some will say, for example, I want two families, and the number of families is limited. Some will say vulnerable persons, so women, children
... (It is either alternative or cumulative). Some can say for example, not Somalis but some can say, vulnerable refugees but not Somalis. So, you know, it always limits. You can have limits on nationalities, you can have limitations on composition: families and so on or just vulnerable people, you know, just women. Hum ... The worst is when, for example ... they ask for single women who are not Somalis. The number of women is already limited, the number of single women is even more limited and if you remove Somalis who make up a large proportion ... These are the sorts of difficulties that come up. Some will say, only refugees, women who are refugees. The number of women is small. The number of refugees is also very small [...]. The criteria are the main problem [...]. (Official from the Maltese Representation to the European Union, 13 January 2012)

The interview extract above shows the extent of the selectivity of migrants: gender, marital status, health conditions, nationality, and level of protection. The selection of migrants for relocation refers to a technical process: “the biopolitical everydayness of life in these camps, dominated as it is by the organisation of screening, and assignment of their residents in space and according to categories” (Agier, 2010, p. 37). Moreover, the number of beneficiaries of international protection in Malta is relatively small and the selection criteria very restrictive, further deepening migrant categorization. Migrants themselves cannot impact the selection process in any way. They are picked by countries according to a discretionary categorization procedure. The following fieldwork observation displays the very biopolitical aspect of relocation:

I am teaching English with Red Cross at Hal Far Tents Village during the week. On Sundays, I teach French at Hal Far Hangar to a group of 20 Somalis who applied for relocation. We are mainly working on their French pronunciation. We also discuss France. They ask me about the French administrative system, the regions, and the different cities. Whenever I enter the centres, I can read notes posted on every open centres’ office: Resettlement is not a right. (Fieldwork diary notes, 16 January 2010)

The “no right” notices highlight that being selected for relocation is a privilege. As Goffman suggests, “The question of release from the total institution is elaborated into the privilege system” (1961, p. 51). Applicants for relocation do not know whether they will be eventually allowed to leave Malta and they are not aware of when or where they are going. As for the ones who cannot apply, their life is put on hold. A Congolese migrant, who arrived in Malta in 2004 told me about being “on hold”:
I have lost eight years here. Malta took eight years of my life. What’s the point to get a status in Malta? Unless you get relocated, there is no point
(Congolese migrant, 10 April 2012)

He spent 19 months in detention and did not receive documentation upon his release. “Tolerated” by the government, he spent some years living and working in Malta. He did not leave the island at all between 2004 and 2012. The “time lost” that he described is related to what Erving Goffman calls a “sense of dead and heavy-hanging time” (1961). Moreover, in his own words, there is a clear division between the people with a protection status who are eligible for relocation and everybody else, between those who will remain on the inside and those who will have the privilege of leaving.

Because of the extensive selection process that results from relocation, the island turns into a sorting center for beneficiaries of international protection. Designed for the sole benefit of Malta, the relocation program not only recognizes the exceptionality of migration management on the island-state but also creates it.

CONCLUSION

Considering that there is no automatic causal relationship between island geography and migration management, I argue that islands themselves are no exception vis-à-vis the arrivals of migrants. However, policy makers are tempted to use the island’s geographic characteristics in order to implement a dispositif aiming at managing migration. The dispositif does not prevent migrants from entering or leaving the island. However, the dispositif makes Malta a sentinel island in the EU that contains migrants upon arrival. As such, the dispositif constructs a total-institution setting that controls the lives of migrants. In turn, the island-society, in an attempt to protect itself, mirrors certain aspects of the total-institution setting. In their daily activities, migrants are controlled by locals through the exercise of racial discrimination. The only option offered for settlement outside Malta is an EU-funded program that selects migrants for transferal from the island. Designed especially for Malta, the EU project recognizes the island’s specificity and contributes to constructing islandness.

Practices related to incarceration on islands can be underlined by drawing a parallel between past and present carceral islands. “Historically, islands have long served as prisons” (Mountz & Briskman, 2012, p. 21). Whether it be to detain military prisoners in Alcatraz, indigenous people on Palm Island, political prisoners on Robben Island, or African slaves on Goree Island, history provides numerous examples. Increasingly, islands are being used to detain migrants traveling by boat: Guantanamo Bay, Christmas Island, Lampedusa, and Malta are some of the most significant examples. The regime
of sovereignty is different from one island to the next. However, they share the common characteristic of hosting detention facilities for the purpose of irregular maritime migration management. In the cases of Guantanamo Bay, Christmas Island, and Lampedusa, detention facilities are situated outside of the mainland territory and function to protect the nation-states. In Malta, on the other hand, island detention aims to defend both national and European entities, condensing the control exercised on migrants. As a technology of government, island spaces are used to create carceral environments and divide populations. Over time, island detention has been reiterated, readapted, and reshaped to separate categories of people who have been identified as a threat to society. Small islands have been central in the construction of the image of other and the curtailment of their rights in Western societies.

NOTES

1. There are actually some restrictive possibilities to leave Malta, which will be explained later on.
2. Access to closed and open centers was guaranteed because I was volunteering with the Malta Red Cross.
3. For instance, in 2008, 31,252 migrants arrived in Lampedusa (Council of Europe 2011b), while 2,775 arrived in Malta during the same year (UNHCR, 2012).
4. In 2002, Malta decriminalized irregular entries. Since then, detention has been an administrative sanction.
5. Some rejected asylum seekers could also be repatriated to their country of origin. However, Malta repatriation policy is still underdeveloped.
6. The unofficial regularization process: In 2010, 847 rejected asylum seekers who had been living for 5 years in Malta, had been learning English and Maltese, and, working legally, were rewarded a temporary humanitarian protection (Interview Refugee Commissioner, 4 April 2012). I call it unofficial because it has not been labeled as regularization by the authorities. The type of status granted is also only valid for 1 year and does not give any right to permanent residency.
7. Migrants either travel legally with a 3-month Schengen visa or leave the island illegally.
8. A resettlement program has also been implemented by the United States since 2008, and around 900 beneficiaries of international protection have been resettled from Malta so far. There are also some ad hoc bilateral agreements taking place between Malta and other countries. However, this article only deals with the EU relocation program for Malta (EUREMA) as the scope of this research is concerned with EU policies.
9. Migrants travel by plane with fake documents or by boat with smugglers.
10. Beneficiaries of temporary humanitarian protection may apply for travel documents only on humanitarian grounds, and their mobility right is not guaranteed.
11. Under EUREMA I, 225 persons were relocated from Malta in 2010 (102 to Germany, 93 to France, 10 to the United Kingdom, 8 to Slovenia, 6 to Luxemburg, 6 to Portugal). An extension of the pilot program is ongoing. Under EUREMA II, 97 bids for relocation were offered to Malta in 2011 (4 to Bulgaria, 5 to Hungary, 6 to Lithuania, 6 to Luxemburg, 50 to Poland, 6 to Portugal, 10 to Romania, 10 to Slovakia). Figures were provided by the Representation of the European Commission in Malta in April 2012.

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