

How to be a Model Citizen

Anthony Haughey

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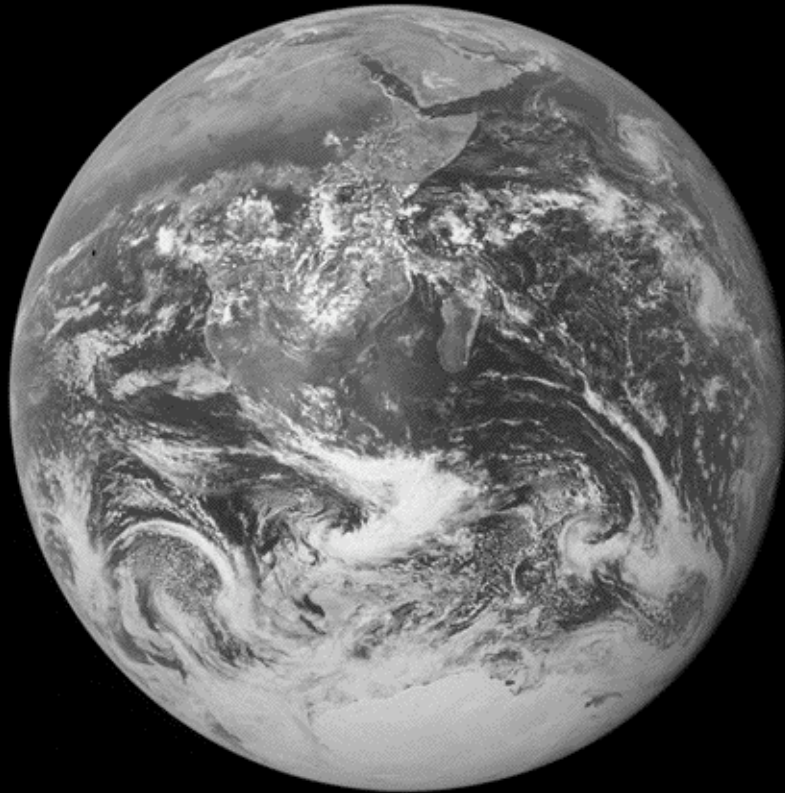
I am haunted by a photograph published in the Guardian and the Times on May 28th 2007. The photograph depicts the horrific plight of twenty-seven African migrants clinging to a tuna pen in the Mediterranean Sea. These “irregular migrants”, as they are referred to by the Maltese government were literally hanging on for their lives after the boat they were traveling in sank half-way between Malta and Libya. Meanwhile the governments of Libya and Malta argued over who was responsible for their rescue¹. One of the oldest humanitarian maritime laws clearly states that it is, “an obligation to provide assistance, regardless of nationality or status of persons in distress at sea².” The twenty-seven migrants were eventually rescued by the Italian Navy and taken to the Italian island of Lampedusa. The shipwrecked Africans had spent three days in open seas.

Nearly 6000 immigrants have died on the Frontiers of Europe since 1988. Among them 1,883 have been lost at sea in the Sicilian Channel between Libya, Tunisia, Malta and Italy³. Migrants pay unscrupulous smugglers 1,500-2000 euros to travel by *floating coffin* from North Africa to Italy. The journey can take more than five days in vessels inadequate for the task, usually wooden fishing boats often with more than fifty men, women and children on board.

In a recent essay Martin McCabe suggested that we might be forgiven for thinking that borders in Europe do not mean much anymore, he comments, “Of course that depends who you are and where you are. ‘Fortress Europe’, with all of its medieval connotations, is still a powerful and structuring ideological formation at work in Union policy. The bodies of young African men being washed ashore on the beaches of Lampedusa near Sicily are testament to this⁴.”

**If our long-term survival is at stake, we have a basic responsibility
to our species to venture to other worlds. Like sailors on a
becalmed sea, we sense the stirring of a breeze.**

Carl Sagan, 'To The Sky,' 1994



I visit the Malta Independent Online⁵ regularly and type “migrant” into the Archive search engine, I am horrified by the litany of disasters at sea this year, almost everyday in the summer months “irregular migrants” are rescued (or not) from near fatal incidents in the Sicilian Channel. These everyday human catastrophes appear to go largely unnoticed by the international media. A Sudanese refugee I met in Malta, who had survived the perilous journey almost two years earlier commented,

If only people back home knew what was ahead of them, they would never leave. Even if you are lucky enough to survive the journey, life in Malta is very tough. We never wanted to come here, we were heading for Italy but we ran out of fuel and our boat started taking on water, we were going to drown. Now we can't go forwards and we can't go backwards, we are stuck on this small island with no job, no money and no life.

In April 2007 artist and curator, Mark Mangion and the British Council invited me to work with refugees in the Marsa Open Centre near Valletta in Malta to make a video work for an exhibition called *Search For a Space*⁶. This refugee centre is an abandoned school, which was condemned, deemed uninhabitable for Maltese schoolchildren because of its decaying asbestos roof. The building sits on the waters edge of an industrial harbor giving the impression that the new residents have barely gained a foothold on European territory.

African men, mostly young, live in the old classrooms. Blankets draped over the side of the overcrowded bunk beds offer a small degree of privacy. In the summer it is impossible to sleep as the Mediterranean sun heats the rooms to inhuman temperatures.

I spoke with many people from Sudan and Somalia who had left home to escape from life-threatening conflicts in Dafur and Mogadishu. These “irregular migrants” who survived the hazardous journey across the Sahara Desert to the North African coast and onwards by boat towards Italy are increasingly choosing longer and more dangerous routes to avoid the pan-European Frontex border patrols⁷. The boats often run out of fuel and meager provisions before reaching the Italian islands.

The Maltese authorities monitor these ghost vessels as they enter Maltese territory hoping they will continue on past the island and reach Lampedusa and Sicily. The boats that flounder within Maltese territory are reluctantly rescued by patrol boats and brought ashore. Men, women and children are separated and immediately imprisoned in detention centres such as Hal-Safi a former army barracks. “Irregular migrants” can be held for up to eighteen months in deplorable conditions before being transferred to an open centre such as Marsa where residents become stranded, still dreaming of citizenship in Europe or beyond.

Saskia Sasson argues that the definition of citizenship has changed, especially in the wake of globalization. Legal rights previously only enjoyed by the nation state citizen are being expanded and challenged by international human rights law, which empowers the individual rather than governments⁸. However when an asylum seeker applies for leave to remain on humanitarian grounds this often leads to inaction, whereby the claimant can spend years in limbo in a detention centre waiting for a decision for leave to remain. I know several asylum seekers living in Ireland who are currently waiting for a decision for more than six years.

Becoming a citizen in the host country is a lengthy process. It can take more than ten years. But this is not the major issue, what migrants really want is freedom of movement. Most migrants maintain a longing to return home when the home country becomes conducive to sustaining personal security and economic viability. Julia Kristeva (1990: 106) identifies this trauma of displacement when she comments, "Between human beings and citizens there is an open wound: the other. Can he or she be considered as a full human being when he or she is not a citizen?"

During the process of becoming a citizen many European countries are adopting national citizenship tests. For example, *Life in the UK Nationality Test* is a series of multiple-choice questions to test the knowledge of aspiring British citizens, an induction to "becoming more like us." This presumes that countries adopting this test for migrants have an idealised notion of the "Model Citizen".

Saskia Sasson describes "informal citizenship" as, "undocumented immigrants", [who] can move between multiple meanings of citizenship." However this insecure position in society, infers no legal rights, but is part of a network of, "community ties and participation in civic activities⁹."

Many migrants I have spoken to and worked with over several years have been forced to leave their home country because of brutal political regimes and in several cases under threat of death. A major issue for asylum seekers arriving in the host country is the immediate isolation and exclusion from society, with little or no access to a public forum in which to express grievances. The ever-present fear of deportation discourages political resistance.



This frustration experienced by asylum seekers was powerfully demonstrated by Iranian poet Abbas Amini In May 2003 when he stitched his mouth, ears and eyes closed in a desperate attempt to draw attention to the voiceless predicament of asylum seekers in Britain¹⁰. This 'mute' gesture became an iconic image circulating widely in the media. Aminis' protest was situated within and for his own constituency. He was offered leave to remain by the British authorities, but he continued his protest and re-stated his commitment to all asylum seekers regardless of where they come from to be treated with dignity and respect.

On arrival in the host country asylum seekers have little or no recourse to civic or political advocacy and are most often represented by the media in terms of anonymous statistics and negative stereotyping. David-Levi Strauss articulates this problem further in his observation that the vast quantity of images and texts circulating the globe mitigates against the possibility of political critique, however he suggests an alternative strategy to this problem when he states, "In order to counter statistical thinking, one must focus on individuals. Not a million deaths, but one death, not a thousand refugees in camps, but one survivor at a time with a name and an image¹¹."

In one of the video sequences from *How to be a Model Citizen*, Ibrahim, a refugee from Sudan assumes the authoritative voice of the interviewer and asks a disarmingly simple yet profound question to three young Maltese men sitting on a beach. In the background the viewer is directed towards the Mediterranean Sea, where every year thousands of African men, women and children risk their lives in a desperate attempt to reach Europe. Ibrahim asks, "Is it good to live in a better place?" The men are perplexed and do not fully understand the relevance or meaning of his question. Finally one of the group replies, "Yes the ultimate aim in life is to live in a better place."



When we are confronted by images of migrants from African countries in the media, it is difficult to reach beyond the anonymous statistics. We have become conditioned to considering migrants as alien, uneducated and poor, even a potential threat to our well-being and not like us. The reality however is very different. They are just like us with families and friends who share the same dream, to live a better life in a better place.

Anthony Haughey, Belfast, August 2007

Endnotes

- ¹ Bompard, P. (2007) found at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article1848148.ece> Accessed 21.8.07
- ² The SOLAS Convention (2006) humanitarian law at sea found at http://www.imo.org/Facilitation/mainframe.asp?topic_id=398 Accessed, 16.8.07
- ³ Article, (2006) *Nearly 6,000 Immigrants Died on the Frontiers of Europe since 1988*, The Malta Independent Online found at <http://www.independent.com.mt/news.asp?newsitemid=43517> Accessed 23.8.07
- ⁴ McCabe, M. (2006) *Topographies of Suspicion and Memory*, in *Disputed Territory*, Gallery of Photography and Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin
- ⁵ The Malta Independent Online (2007) found at: <http://www.independent.com.mt/mainpage.asp>
- ⁶ Mangion, M. (2007) *Search For a Space*, found at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/malta-events-search-for-space.htm> Accessed 23.8.07
- ⁷ Frontex is a European border security network based in Warsaw. It deploys patrol boats, helicopters and surveillance methods to protect Europe's sea borders and intercept "irregular migrants" forcing boats to return to the point of departure
- ⁸ Sasken, S. (2002) *The Repositioning of Citizenship: Emergent Subjects and Spaces for Politics*, in, *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 46,
- ⁹ *ibid* pg. 12
- ¹⁰ Azad, S. (2003) *Abbas Amini Gets Leave to Remain but Continues his Protest*, found at <http://www.irr.org.uk/2003/may/ak000016.html> Accessed 21.8.07
- ¹¹ Strauss, D. (2003) *Between the Eyes Essays on Photography and Politics*, Aperture, New York pg.102-103

Earth From Space Photograph, Caption and Credit

View of the Earth as seen by the Apollo 17 crew traveling toward the moon. This translunar coast photograph extends from the Mediterranean Sea area to the Antarctica south polar ice cap. Almost the entire coastline of Africa is clearly visible. Image courtesy of the Image Science & Analysis Laboratory, NASA Johnson Space Centre, Mission: AS17 Roll: 148 Frame: 22727 found at <http://eol.jsc.nasa.gov> Accessed 24.8.07