

■ MARIA PAOLA ROTTINO

# A PAULO FREIRE-BASED COMMUNITY EDUCATION APPROACH IN VENTIMIGLIA: UNDERSTANDING THE COMPLEXITY OF THE MIGRANTS' CRISIS AT THE FRENCH-ITALIAN BORDER

## INTRODUCTION

This article<sup>1</sup> traces the intricacies of complexity and its challenges as they have been experienced through a community education approach based on Paulo Freire's and Augusto Boal's work. This approach has been employed to understand the stories and facts relating to the ongoing flux of migrants at the France-Italy border in the Italian town of Ventimiglia. Although the events reported here occurred in the middle of the migration crisis in 2015-2018, the challenges facing those who were then involved have not been unpinned yet.

Most of the actors involved in this story chose the only humanitarian approach possible to deal with an emergency, which saw around 1,000 migrants suddenly storming into the streets of Ventimiglia; a town with a population of 26,000 inhabitants. A few actors, the so-called left-wing activists, exposed themselves personally and politically. This

1 Many thanks to Anna Costantino, for her participation in the composition of the article, for linguistic and stylistic suggestions.

resulted in them being marginalised by many of the actors representing the authorities and, sometimes, being detained by the Police. The Association “Popoli in Arte”, on behalf of which I write, has taken a different approach to the story. Drawing on Paulo Freire’s pedagogy, the Association, with a volunteering team of four, have chosen a different type of practice, which has taken into account most of the actors with whom the oppressed, that is, the migrants, have come into contact across the French-Italian border. We have decided to face the migration emergency by getting out there in the field and seeking to figure out the vicissitudes and agendas of the immigrants, very often conflicting and clashing with the agendas and the ideological stances of the other actors involved.

Over the years, we have spoken to the immigrants on a regular basis, listened to them while visiting them in their shelters. We got to know their life stories, and the circumstances that have driven them to flee their countries. We heard of and witnessed cases of torture from authorities in Africa and in Europe. We learnt how to identify the duration of their permanence in Europe and their health conditions. We observed their routines and those of the other actors acting in the background of the emergency: NGOs, activists, the French and Italian police, the Catholic Church, and ordinary citizens. We have sought to raise awareness of the situation by facilitating a dialogue amongst the parts involved. This has entailed relentless educational work to formally and informally connect the people involved such as locals, social workers and activists; sometimes more visibly (depending on the resources available), sometimes less visibly. This has not meant that the Association has not supported humanitarian endeavours in specific occasions. On the contrary, our humanitarian work has always coalesced into seeking to understand the present and openly interpret it.

Methodologically, we have taken fieldnotes, which have been regularly shared and discussed by the volunteers’ team. We have gained insights that have allowed us to put together a picture of the migrants’ emergency, which is far from being unambiguous. All this, we claim, might perhaps forge a new form of resistance, which to us means positioning ourselves in the middle of all the positions that have come to shape the

‘migrants’ crisis’, so that we can build a common vision and struggle to transform the unquestioned narrative.

## THE CHALLENGE OF COMPLEXITY

Eyewitnesses. To live at the border between Italy and France on the sea-coast, while being part of an association linked to Paulo Freire’s legacy, has become a real challenge over the last four years. We call it the challenge of complexity and we claim that the following story is a practical example of how critical pedagogy, specifically, a Freirean approach to education, can display its potential in dealing with the crucial issues we face nowadays in Europe.

The beginning. Since June 2015 thousands of migrants have passed through the Italian border town of Ventimiglia; back and forward between France and Italy.

The “Associazione Popoli in Arte” works in the field of community education. It was established in 2007 in Italy with the aim of engendering an international cooperation approach based on mutual exchanges. After several partnerships developed in Brazil, in Guinée Conakry, and currently in Haiti, and since 2015, at home, in Italy, we have become eyewitnesses of the ongoing global changes as they have displayed just outside Ventimiglia. Since 2015 we have sought to keep a record of the facts and events concerning the migrant crisis. Those of us who were specifically involved in the work with the migrants have critically reflected on those notes through weekly briefings and discussions.

The story began in mid-June 2015. The French authorities closed the French borders and blocked a group of migrants who was walking to France. One Sunday morning, the migrants climbed up on some sea rocks, right at the Franco-Italian border (the so called “Low Border of St. Luigi”). According to the French authorities, the Schengen Agreement<sup>2</sup> relating to the freedom of circulation of people in Europe had been broken. That triggered a state of alert. The situation was believed to be solved shortly. Unfortunately, that was not the case. The emergency is still ongoing.

2 [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen_en)

## A DOUBLE SECURITY SYSTEM

In 2015 and 2016 the number of migrants passing through Ventimiglia was around 1,000 a day; high for a town of 26,000 inhabitants. However, from the end of 2016 onward the number of migrants in transit sharply decreased.

A double security system has been built around the passage of migrants, both on the French and Italian border: a system that is still operating. At the so-called Higher Border, at the St. Luigi check point, the French Police has set up two containers in which they lock for hours migrants who have been caught moving on foot or by the local train to Nice. It is impossible to establish for how many hours the migrants are kept in those conditions. You can imagine a group of people (up to 30) locked in darkness within a container: men and women, some of whom are pregnant. Their mobiles and, eventually, their documents, and any of their belongings are being taken away. Their detention could be estimated between a couple of hours up to 12 hours. Sometimes their shoes are cut off: the sole is removed in order to refrain them from leaving. On the other side, on the Italian territory, the Italian police has a migrant's check point in place. Migrants who have been caught are sent to Southern Italy by local transport such as town busses. Initially, the raids used to take place at the sunset or later in the evening.

Since 2016, those raids started to take place at any time, even at 11 a.m., and everywhere in town, especially around the train station of Ventimiglia; in bars, public garden and in the street. The goal has always been to catch from 50 to 100 migrants a day and the general goal was to keep the number of migrants in town under the 200 units. Currently, the target has been reached. Therefore, the frequency of the raids has varied. They could take place from two to three times a week. From late 2017 and from 2018 onward the arrivals from Africa plunged significantly because of the Italian and European agreements with Libya and with other countries of West Africa, mainly Niger<sup>3</sup>. However, the Balkan route is still active. Several migrants have lost opportunities to live in Germany or somewhere else in Northern Europe. In those cir-

3 <https://www.osservatoriodiritti.it/2019/02/08/accordo-italia-libia-migranti/>

cumstances, they have started to be sent back to Italy, at times even by plane. From Milan, several came back to Ventimiglia.

## **INFORMAL AND ILLEGAL ECONOMY**

Alongside the transit of migrants, an informal and, quite often, illegal economy has flourished. Such an economy includes a well organised smuggling system, women trafficking, prostitution, drug dealing, along which other expedients for survival emerged. The price for the smuggling of migrants across the border has varied, ranging from €50,00 per migrant to €150,00 during the first week in 2015. Since then, the price stagnated around € 150,00 per migrant. The smugglers are mostly French – North African convicted criminals who speak Arabic and do not always rely on the local Italian criminals. Women trafficking developed later in time because it was only in 2016, to a greater extent than in 2015, that the passage of women migrants became visible, even though women outnumbered men by 10% across the overall number of the migrants. The racket of prostitution, made especially of Nigerian women and targeting the large male population of migrants, was established in 2016. Many young Eritrean women were employed or worked independently as prostitutes for Italian clients in order to earn money to pay their passage to France. Since 2016, the practice of drug dealing has become common among migrants in order to earn money to cross the border to France.

At a certain point in time in 2017, several informal camps were set up all along the river Roya on the West part of the town. There, in the camps, a system of ranks emerged: shoes which were received for free from the local Caritas, or other charity organisations, were re-sold for a prize ranging from €2,00 to €3,00 to new migrants who did not know that these goods were provided for free. This system worked even for blankets that became the walls for shelters or even huts between 2017 and 2018.

## **NOW IN THE DEADLOCK**

For the migrants, the situation has not changed throughout the years.

Rather, it worsened and reached a deadlock. According to the Common European Asylum System<sup>4</sup> and its Dublin regulation (Dublin III, 2013), the first country a migrant reaches in Europe is the one responsible for their reception. In other words, the country of the first landing is obliged to carry out the procedure to declare and acknowledge the refugee status and ensure the reception of a migrant during that entire process. Therefore, the majority of those entering Europe through the Italian territory are obliged by the law to stay in Italy. Unluckily, most of the migrants who reach Italy do not intend to stay and they move illegally towards other destinations. In many cases, they are caught by the French police after crossing the border and are sent back to Ventimiglia. Ventimiglia, as a place of transit, brings to the fore all the backlashes of the Dublin regulation. Alongside with those migrants who seek to go to another country passing by Ventimiglia, other migrants flow into the town: they are the victims of the First and the Second Security Decree (*Decreto Sicurezza*) (L. 132/1.12. 2018 and L. 53/14.06 2019) This has reduced the chances to obtain the legal documentation required to stay and to find their own way to live in Italy. Even those migrants arrive in Ventimiglia knowing that in there they can find better chances to survive than in other towns in Italy.

In Ventimiglia the inconsistency and flaws of the legal procedures and current law is noticeable. If you sit down along the routes of migrants and spend some hours talking to them, you know it. Since 2015, “Popoli in Arte” have been doing this once – twice a week. By volunteering at the canteen of the Red Cross Camp (the Roya Camp), we have managed to visit the places where the migrants have joined together. To listen to the migrants speaking is like taking an intensive course in International Socio-Political Studies. Political activists from West Africa and from Sudan, who have just passed by, are followed by people from many other countries in search of a better life. Then you can encounter Syrians, people from the Middle East and from Pakistan escaping from instable regions; people persecuted for any sort of reasons; many young Eritreans leaving the long lasting and harsh military service under which they should serve in their country. You can also see many Gambi-

<sup>4</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum_en)

ans persecuted in their country for their sexual orientation; merchants, unskilled-workers, young university students, teachers, skilled-workers and so on in what is a very complex mix of people. Since the beginning, some nationalities emerged over the others as domineering, such as the Nigerians. In Ventimiglia we have indeed witnessed a local act within the theatre of global processes.

## THE COUNTERPART, THE ITALIANS

However, another side of the story needs to be unravelled; a side that increases the complexity of the situation. It refers to the involvement of the Italian, one of the counterparts. The population of Ventimiglia adopted a variety of stances, sometimes consisting in very spontaneous reactions. For instance, at the very beginning of the events, a woman turned up at the train station of Ventimiglia with a home-made cake for the migrants' kids. Unfortunately, in that occasion, there were so many kids that she did not know what to do with her cake.

However, curiosity and willingness to help attracted many people, as it happens after an earthquake, for example. Immediately, the Red Cross was officially put in charge to deal with the situation. An enclosed camp run by the Italian Red Cross was set up near the train station. Furthermore, in the summer of 2015, an informal camp had been established on the sea rocks as a result of the early weave of migrants trying to escape from the Italian and French Police. This camp, named Balzi Rossi Camp, was joined by left-wing activists, both locals and from different parts of Italy. At the end of September 2015, this informal camp had been cleared out forcefully through a massive police operation. The Red Cross Camp did not interfere with the life of the Balzi Rossi camp. Yet, from mid-June up to the end of July, the Red Cross started supporting the migrants at the Balzi Rossi Camp. This camp was independent from another camp in town which was set up by the Italian Government a week after the first emergency. The management of this Camp was entrusted to the Italian Red Cross. However, the condition was that only the migrants could access this camp upon leaving their fingerprints to the Red Cross staff. Therefore, in 2015 anyone willing to know better the situation so to help must go through the Balzi Rossi camp.

As we go on with tracing the treads of complexity, it is important to consider how the Italian placed themselves against this landscape. Complexity among the helpers was already visible in the first year, but it emerged as difference and hostility the year after. Progressively, the press, both local and national, trivialised the situation. There has been a tendency to look at the situation simplistically. The migrants became either a question of humanitarian emergency, which portrayed the Italian at their side as ‘the good ones’; or, they were viewed as a law and order issue; that is, an issue relating to hygiene and public decency. From the outset, nobody in the mainstream press wrote about the situation as a political issue and, even less, as a historical turning point. The humanitarian emergency continued to be perceived simplistically.

Interestingly, the various power agencies which supported the migrants on a daily basis, such as the local Catholic Church, did not take any political position. This contributed to reinforcing the narrative that it was a humanitarian emergency. Groups who recognized themselves as part of the NoBorders Movement (then active in Calais, France) were the ones who raised the migration issue as a political one; and they were tolerated for a while. Their work contributed to opening the Balzi Rossi Camp, which they supported. However, from the end of September 2015, they were directly attacked through several measures of control which the police exercised upon the activists<sup>1</sup>. Some of those measures included forbidding some of the activists staying in Ventimiglia and in neighbouring towns as well as charging four activist leaders with being dangerous to the public, which restricted their freedom of movement and speech in public places. In conclusion, the trivialisation of the situation deepened. Thus, in the case of Ventimiglia, the Gianchette Camp, a camp set up inside a Catholic parish and tolerated by the authorities for around one year, from June 2016 to August 2018, was eventually closed down by the *Prefettura*, the local representative office of the Ministry of Interior. No more space was left for those willing to support the migrants. Currently, amongst the inhabitants of Ventimiglia and the authorities order, hygiene and public decorum are the most popular words in the dis-

1 Since 2015, police forces applied penalties against activists which date back to old fascist laws; specifically the prohibition to transit and stay in Ventimiglia.

course surrounding the migration crisis.

## THE INHABITANTS OF VENTIMIGLIA

Complexity has displayed other actors: that is, the inhabitants of Ventimiglia. Ventimiglia is a working-class city, with over 50% of its inhabitants being descendants of migrants from Southern Italy. Ventimiglia is a border town that for decades has provided manpower to neighbouring Monte Carlo, situated at a 15-minute ride from Ventimiglia. Furthermore, it must be mentioned that the Local Council has been dismissed since it was charged with Mafia infiltration no longer than 10 years ago. Furthermore, Ventimiglia claims to be a touristic resort as it has some rather exclusive beaches in the area. It is also rich in history dating back to pre-historical times which enjoyed its peak during the Medieval period. Its cathedral is a great example of Romanesque style. The socio-cultural fabric of Ventimiglia is also complex

Many authorities have dealt with the migration emergency: the Local Council, the local Catholic Church, the *Prefettura* of Imperia, different police corps, and the Red Cross at the regional level, already extensively mentioned. Not all of them have always agreed with each other over the years. However, there is something else to consider.

In a place like Ventimiglia everybody has acquaintances, if not relatives working with or linked to these institutions. This intermingling of relationships has played an important role in the overall drama since these bonds sometimes put in contact actors who could not be more distant for background, age, conditions of life, and roles in the society. For example, there have been cases of policemen who hoped to be off-duty when they learnt that they would be engaged in operations of evacuation of an unofficial migrants' camp. There have also been cases in which devoted Catholics put in contact migrants to human smugglers, or to other activists so that migrants could cross the border to France; or cases in which the Ventimiglia's local Council, run by a left-wing administration between 2014 and 2019, prevented the distribution of food in the streets for a long period whenever this was carried out by Italian activists.

Moreover, the Council was particularly keen in fining the French or German activists who broke the ruling concerning how to deal with the mi-

grants. For years, the German activists have been bringing the migrants food in the street every evening. The Council decided that that duty was to be fulfilled by the Caritas instead in its centre and only at lunchtime, which would allow for the French to bring food in the evening.

The same local administration supported a local Committee in May – June 2016 in order to put pressure on the Minister of the Interior to open a new transit camp run by the Red Cross. Through pressures from this Committee (Committee Article 2), the local Town Hall asked the Ministry of Interior to set up a “Camp of Transit”. This Camp of Transit became the Roya Camp. It was set up along the river Roya, situated 4-km away from Ventimiglia, and allowed access to volunteers outside the Red Cross network. Personally, I go every week to the camp. In order to do so, I have to request a permission weekly from *Prefettura* in order to gain access to the camp. As I go on by doing examples, I hope to be able to elaborate even more on the meaning that complexity has acquired so far in our work.

Yet, I would like to spend some words on those who have helped the migrants in Ventimiglia. They also constitute a whole incoherent world. We have spoken to individuals, both local and coming from outside Ventimiglia, who have had a life-changing experience after these events. We have also witnessed the involvement of national and international NGOs: the *Terre des Hommes*, *Médecins sans Frontières*, Save the Children, Oxfam in partnership with the Waldensian Deaconry, including smaller organisations such as WeWorld). Other actors have included the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), groups and committees, small and large associations like the nearby French *Roya Citoyenne*; anarchists, left-wing activists, militants from the Italian social centres – local as well as from over Northern Italy and from Spain – people who had experienced the life of the camp in Calais (NoBorders Movement) and some sections of the Catholic world: groups of Scouts from around Italy, the Emmaus Communities and the Sant’Egidio Community and so forth. In 2016, Amnesty International collected and published some of the migrants’ stories in their annual report<sup>2</sup>.

All their efforts have been in vain, since every actor was more focused

2 <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR3050042016ITALIAN.PDF>

on themselves than on the cause of opening the borders. This was the case even though they help the migrants in a number of instances and reported issues as they arose.

## REFLECTING OVER OUR PRACTICE

Although being a very small association, “Popoli in Arte” has tried hard to stay in touch with all the actors, by focusing on the political denunciation of these actions and promoting advocacy for the oppressed, faithful to Freire’s pedagogy, as mentioned earlier. Thus, in 2015 – 2016, we promoted training for the migrants and called for meetings which were successful in establishing a local Committee (Committee Article 2). It meant that in 2016 we set up a two-month program of street education, which involved listening to the migrants’ stories and giving them legal advice. This was financed and had as partner the NGO “WeWorld”<sup>3</sup>. It meant to try to liaise with a Charity from Milan and Bergamo, linked to Progetto 20k<sup>4</sup>, and with the Melting Pot Network<sup>5</sup> all together we opened a service in Ventimiglia, the Eufemia Point<sup>6</sup>, a space for the free recharging of mobile-phones which lasted one year and half (July 2017 – December 2018). It meant to establish links with activists on the northern Italian borders (Como, Brennero, Trieste) by putting them in contact with each other and organising a meeting which took place in Trento (June 2018). It meant for us to attend compulsory courses in order to become legal guardians of minors. It meant to liaise with and establishing partnerships such the Red Cross such as the Monegasque one. It meant to be in touch with many activists on regular basis and to readdress the issue on a political level. It meant to participate in and support a Rally which took place in Ventimiglia on July 14<sup>th</sup> in 2018, which was organized by Progetto 20k from Bergamo and Milan. It meant to participate in a series of events, which were organized by various NGO’s, by the Catholic Church, by the Town Hall and other institutions.

“Popoli in Arte” is always ready and willing to unify the parts which sup-

3 <https://www.weworld.it/progetto-sostegno-migranti/>

4 <https://www.facebook.com/progetto20k/>

5 <https://www.meltingpot.org/>

6 <https://www.produzionidalbasso.com/project/eufemia-info-legal-point/>

port the cause of the migrants. We try to keep updated on everything has been happening in town concerning the migrants' issue; we try to capture the mood of the residents, activists and volunteers in order to gauge whether actors can be liaised and connected in a common endeavour. Unfortunately, we did not reach any resolution on this.

We are fully aware that we do not have enough strength and notoriety to be acknowledged as a point of reference for all the actors involved. Nevertheless, "Popoli in Arte" has continued to be involved in the migrant situation by staying on the field and resisting; by listening to the narratives reported by the actors involved seeking to understand the decisions they made and looking at how those decisions evolved into action. "Popoli in Arte" claims its own understanding of resistance. To us, this means fostering a dialogical relationship with everybody; remaining vigilant towards the narratives portraying the migrants issue only as a humanitarian issue or as an issue of law and order. To us, resistance is to remain in the middle-ground so that we can eschew bias.

The possibility of a dialogue between all the actors has become weaker and weaker; and if the dialogue is difficult with whoever is on your side, it becomes even harder with those who have military power and come to Ventimiglia to exercise it. Political claims have hardly been listened to, since they tend to be criminalized by the media, overrun by mainstream concerns with law and order. Those claims also tend to be silenced by police measures, but also tend to be exploited and misled by radical groups, which, even being allegedly on the migrants' side, force them towards political positions which do not belong to the migrants. Even though the situation is so critical, it does not mean that we intend to give up. For us, political claims must be raised in the name of Human Rights, by assuming the risk of questioning. We are aware that an activation of the Oppressed is slow to take off, as we have seen in several movements in South America during the decolonization years.

In conclusion, Freirean approach has helped us identify and overcome ideological positions. It has allowed us to describe and understand specific power relationships and to re-invest in different strategies in order to allow people to join together, and to nourish the hope for world citizenship.

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**Maria Paola Rottino** is co-founder of the Associazione "Popoli in Arte". She is also co-founder and member of the Italian Freire – Boal Network. She came across community education<sup>7</sup> drawn on Paulo Freire's legacy in 1999 – 2000 while living in the North East of Brazil. Since then, she has been strongly engaged in the educational and social fields in Italy by putting into practice, adopting and sustaining a Freirian approach in schools, and in social and political contexts. Currently, she teaches Italian and Latin at the Liceo Cassini, a secondary school in Sanremo, in Italy.

7 In community education there is an exchange au pair among the educators and the learners/ members of the community. The educator becomes engaged in the story of the Oppressed not only as a professional but also as an activist. The educator does not give answers. Rather, their role is asking the members of the community questions. He/she guides the community through a reading of the meaning of words and through an analysis of the status quo and their contradictions. The educator leads the community through an understanding of the topic on which the community have focused so that their members progressively understand their oppression. Once the community become aware of their oppression, the educator supports the process of self-organization.