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Resistance to Fortress Europe's fascism in contemporary comics

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1 With the increase of migration towards the EU through the Mediterranean Sea around since 2015, more and more graphic reportages and novels have been published to cover this controversial phenomenon in an understanding and accessible way. Many of them show new forms of fascism which migrants and citizens try to resist, and that they oppose by the specific means of graphic stories, which I'd like to present through a quick selection of examples.

2 I/ Migration and solidarity against new forms of fascism

A) Migrants are resistant 3

Refugees flee war, hunger... but also conscription or violent dictatorship; their **departure** itself is then an act of resistance.

- That's the topic of *Haythman, une jeunesse syrienne*.

Their long trip to Europe, full of ordeals, also requires a huge capacity of **resilience**.

- 4 That's well shown in the 3 volume *Odyssey of Hakim*. After a summary of the first volume as of a long tortuous journey, the daughter of the author comments: "he's a superhero"!
- 5 We can also see it in a short animation by *Positive Negatives*, an NGO which produces comics and animations about humanitarian issues. For "North Star Fading" by *Karrie Fransman*, they worked from the testimonies of 4 Eritrean refugees. → 2'12: the zoom technique shows very well an endless journey through many obstacles whereas the narrator's voice emphasizes the many losses but also the tremendous will power that fuels the character, who sounds like a fighter despite her pain.

But even arriving at the final destination where asylum can be asked isn't the end of the epic: this film ends with the violent expulsion of the woman regardless of her story; some works focus on the administrative maze that still awaits refugees. 6 That's what the Iranian cartoonist *Mana Neyestani* does in his *Short Manuel of the Perfect Political Refugee* with lots of humour, another kind of resistance to mistreatment and rejection.

7 But some migrants finally say that Europe is just as bad or even worse than their home country; it can be explained by new forms of fascism which make refugees' lives extremely difficult.

B) New fascism in Fortress Europe 8

I'm following the recommendations of an excellent article by *Enzo Traverso*: not to limit the term *fascism* to Mussolini's and Hitler's regimes but to acknowledge new forms, later and in other countries, of similar authoritarian, manipulative and racist systems that can develop within democracies and be called *post fascism*.

9 Without necessarily mentioning fascism, lots of graphic books show the **spread of far right** in Europe. They show several leaders making racist speeches that can be considered as extremists but which are also quite widely shared, despite no connection with reality, most of the time.

10 On this page, we can see Marine Le Pen changing the narrative, alluding to the French Resistance to justify xenophobia, pretty much like [Enzo Traverso \(p. 117\)](#) describes it in his article, showing how islamophobia can claim to be a defence of human rights, in order to expel those seen as a foreign threat. Several books blame the responsibility of politicians who, relayed by the media, cultivate people's prejudices to be elected, regardless of violent consequences; that shows the wide spread of xenophobia over the years also described by [Enzo Traverso \(p. 113\)](#)

11 One of the consequences of the strength of far right in the EU is its policy of **externalizing its borders**, very well described in a [report by Transnational Institute](#) and of which some aspects are illustrated in graphic books.

- 12 Two Italian ones insist on its **consequences in Libya**, where migrants are held to ransom, bought by traffickers, 13 tortured, raped, killed... all crimes admitted in an [EU's leaked report in 2019](#) as facilitated and financed by its deals.
- 14 Some migrants nevertheless manage to try a dangerous crossing of the **Mediterranean Sea**, where lots of them get drown, which is presented as a direct consequence of the EU's policies by a graphic reportage first published in *La Revue Dessinée* in 2015.

15 Even within the EU, laws don't always apply to migrants.

- 2 graphic reportages show how France and Italy don't respect Dublin's agreements in order not to give asylum to refugees who keep being expelled to the other side of the **border**, as if they were part of a careless, useless and endless game.
- 16 **Camps** are another place where human dignity isn't respected and which [Jean Ziegler](#) compared to concentration camps back from Lesbos in 2020. [Fabien Toulmé](#) drew those in Hungary, where migrants are forced to go despite the lack of room, facilities and food, distributed in the most scornful way: thrown over the fences as if to fierce animals – and only ham sandwiches, in order to hurt Muslims.

17 In the case of camps built by migrants and NGOs, as in Calais' Jungle, they are regularly destroyed with completely disproportionate violence, as shown in *Threads*, like a war scene.

C) Resistance by Solidarity groups

18 But migrants also find solidarity in the EU, from NGOs, partners of the publication of some graphic books, associations, groups like *No Borders*, individuals...

- The double page about a demonstration outside a detention camp, with the chants of masses of people finding an echo behind the high fences question their legitimacy and illustrates the very slogan of solidarity.
- 19 In *Threads*, the amount of donations and the organized chain of volunteers give other images of horizontality and verticality which characterize the miles of high fences built up in Calais, as the introduction of the book shows.

20 This solidarity IS an act of resistance as it is sometimes prohibited, which some reportages recall.

21 It justifies the parallel made with those who hid Jews during the WWII in *Humans*, as well as the quote of Lucie Aubrac, a resistance icon, at the beginning of a collection of short stories about undocumented immigrants (*Paroles sans papiers*, Delcourt, 2007).

22 II/ But **how do graphic stories** themselves **fight fascism**?

A) They oppose a **resistance to EU's story telling** 23

It is obvious in *The Unwanted* by Don Brown, in the **contrast** between migrants' hope in a Europe of love, which IS part of its birth myth of a transnational union to secure peace, and the reality they immediately face, of the hostility of people suffering from unemployment and austerity, and of the authorities pretending to act for their security against the enemy they made up.

24 The editorial of the Ducth online review *Drawing the Times* exposes another contrast with bitter irony: the one between privileged EU citizens and the rest of the world, selfishly ignored at great expense, with no other justification than a fascist political choice, since it makes no sense in terms of demography nor economy, as "*The Borders of Shame*" recall, while *Threads* denounces, moreover, the EU's responsibility in the crisis it does not want to soothe.

25 « *La Bolla of Ventimiglia* » makes a clear accusation of racism, also contradicting the ideal of the EU as the land of Human rights.

This negative image of the EU is based on the representation, looking like a **revelation, of unreported realities**.

- 26 It's clearly the case of the management of some **borders**: 2 journalists of *El Pais* (in Spain), investigating on the cracks – *La Grieta* – of the EU could sometimes not photograph some borders, like the one between Greece and Turkey, which they did "illegally" all the same, to show "the worst face" of the EU, as they write later about a border point between Hungary and Serbia.
- 27 In *Threads* Kate Evans reproduces scenes of **police violence**, which could not be filmed, but can still be drawn, giving a great value to her work.
- 28 Cameras are also banned in **detention centres** and that's precisely the project of *CRA*, covering an *Open Access Now* campaign, not to let these places out of scrutiny and accountability but to reveal what many people ignore, and which debunks, once more, the European dream.

The **real face** of the EU repeatedly appears as a **fascist** one:

- 29 through **explicit comparisons** like in *Paroles sans papiers*, that practises, through a system of introductory quotes, a kind of comparatist history (to which Enzo Traverso refers p. 106, mentioning Marc Bloch and which is also the method defended by the Italian group Action30, presented by Pierangelo Di Vittorio). To introduce an archive section, it quotes successively a fascist law of the Vichy regime about accommodating Jewish people and a pretty similar one about putting up foreigners, proposed by the French State Secretary in 1996. Another parallel is made in another collection of short stories, *Immigrants*, when a gipsy says that police's behaviour made him think of Auschwitz's camp.

- **30 Drawings** can also suggest a lot. For instance, the way barbed wire is put forward reminds us of its use in trenches and concentration camps, which made it a symbol of violence, oppression and fascism, according to the philosopher [Olivier Razac](#).

31 “The Borders of Shame” also illustrate the expression Fortress Europe in a way which reminds us of science-fiction dystopian towns, with a dark massive structure in the shape of Europe overwhelming tiny humans unable to get into it and, as for lights, not those of the Age of Enlightenment, of the starred flag, nor of a light house, but only of police systems. [Jeff Pourquié](#) and [Taina Tervonen](#) also repeat the image of the people drawn into the Mediterranean Sea in such a way that it looks like ghosts that should haunt EU’s conscience since it is largely responsible for their deaths.

32 Raising awareness clearly is the aim of many graphic works. It is expressed at the beginning and at the end of [CRA](#), with the idea that it should imply, as a result, a sense of responsibility of changing things, among the law makers but also among the citizens and voters who can refuse fascist policies to be enforced in their name.

The editorial of the Special Refugees issue of [Drawing the Times](#) formulates the hope that concern for migrants could come from a feeling of shame, guilt (and possibly revolt) at considering the lack of hospitality and humanity of our home land, making it OUR problem, not some of the many distant ones we can hear of every so often.

But the lack of empathy it otherwise dreads, considering the flow of images delivered by a great number and variety of medias, can also be tackled by the very powers of:

B) Humanist graphic stories **33**

In [Salvezza](#), a couple of refugees who have gone through hell in Lybia want to tell their **story** so that it never happens to anybody again. Lots of the graphic works I’ve been studying are based on similar projects: giving a voice to refugees (thanks to a tight and respectful collaboration) and means of being heard (and seen), despite of being the ‘unwanted’, as a first step towards a change – of mentalities before a change of policies.

In many cases, it explicitly implies making a difference with the way migrants are usually considered:

- with ignorance, which is an obvious fuel for hatred
- **34** as abstract figures, beyond which reporters want to go, to confront real life
- **35** as a general category, whereas the stories told allow to empathize with individuals, as well as being representative of many destinies, but in their complexity.

People still need to **engage** with the stories, though, not to stay at a distance like the police woman in [Threads](#), whom [Kate Evans](#) blames for not really giving them credit, which is denounced as a common obstacle in the graphic works dealing with asylum applications. The problem here may not be not to believe in migrants’ stories, though, but to only have a general idea of the mass they are lost into, and not to be touched by them, therefore, as something happening near us, to people actually not very different from us.

36 That’s when the power of **GRAPHIC** stories proves especially useful.

Being an art of ellipsis (as *Scott Mac Cloud* defines it) – building a story from image to image but also through the gaps in between – allows it to be concise, while engaging the reader in the sense making process. The short stories of *Positive Negatives* are very good at it, as *Kathy Burrell & Katherine Horschelmann* have analyzed it in an excellent study. If we take the example of one of the 13 “*Meet the Somalis*” stories, all concentrated in 4 pages, we can see how quickly yet with fluidity it takes us into people’s lives (here the one of *Anwar*), starting from their childhood or an everyday life scene everybody can sympathize with.

37 The style of the drawing is also important : quite close to the *ligne claire* that Hergé made famous, with a simple line and coloring, it detaches faces and situations, makes them look familiar as well as universal, and puts them at the right distance to touch us without the violence of films or pictures that can be seen in the news but which might also appear too shocking for the people to really want to know more about the tragedies.

The art of **portrait** is crucial here. With just a few details, it connects us with the humanity of the characters: their sufferings and legitimate hopes.

Just the eye contact with the character and his body language plays a huge role in fighting racist prejudice and distance, *Kathy Burrell & Katherine Horschelmann* explain.

38 It makes an explicit contrast with the disrespectful treatment of migrants tending to deny their humanity, as *CRA* and “*The Borders of Shame*” represent it by indistinguishable faces.

39 A completely different style of portrait can have similar effects. For instance in *Escaping wars and waves*, which is a collection of full page (often double page) portraits, we need to **stop and have a close look** at each page, not to miss out any detail; sometimes just to figure out the order of reading. This difference with the usual linear reading can appear as a symbolic experience of what we should do to counter the fascist approach of migrants: give up blindness and quick judgement to take time for an encounter.

40 *Baudouin* makes it clear in *Humains*, in the foreword of which the writer and Nobel Price *Jean-Marie-Gustave Le Clézio* asks to look at migrants, who look like us and are our family, just as we can read at the end of *Etenesh*, in a text written by *Nicola Grigion*, who asks to take the time to consider migrants as individuals, with moving stories, not as an indistinct mass that we don’t want to hear about. *Baudouin*, in a few words and lines, shows how much we can see on one’s face, even without any word spoken. He also insists on the encounter a simple eye contact can create.

41 We can also see it in *Threads* where *Kate Evans* shows the time spent on a portrait, taking care of each part drawn, and how it raises empathy, making her think of the mother of the boy who can’t see him anymore but in pictures.

42 The **representation of the portrait-making** also shows that it is a **gift** on both sides: of time, of story-telling and of listening; a trace of an encounter and of humanity not lost.

It is also at the heart of online project of mixed techniques by *Louise Druelle*, *Un an à Calais*, published by the newspaper *Libération* in 2015. She starts with the paradox of hardly knowing anything about the migrants living in nearby camps. **43** As *Kate Evans* writes it in *Threads*, connections are quickly made, though, and the portraits she draws and gives become a symbol of a natural fraternity that just needs to go and meet the people, which politicians generally don’t do, as she regrets it in her conclusion.

44 A similar collection of portraits is gathered in *Humans*, with the precise aim of paying a tribute to these people who care about humanity. Beyond empathy, the gallery celebrates the beauty of

resistance and solidarity, embodied by the very series of portraits, completely reshaping the fascist narrative of an invasion of foreign enemies threatening our integrity.

The question remains of the efficiency of images of narratives when human lives are at stake but neo fascism seems so deeply rooted in fears and lies spread by speeches quite out of touch with reality that resistance of art, in close connection to solidarity networks, might be an important weapon, well worth being publicised at a wide scale, as I hope this short presentation suggests it.