Rendering Space and People Economic: Naguib Sawiris' Refugee 'Country'

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

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ABSTRACT

This contribution explores the intersection of humanitarianism and neoliberalism as 'recipes' to address the 'migration' or 'refugees crisis' in the Mediterranean. It takes the recent proposal of Egyptian billionaire Naguib Sawiris to buy a 'refugee island' as a starting point for a discussion of the increasing propensity to view refugee communities through their economic potential in a neoliberal marketplace. Such an understanding in turn feeds into the continued construction of the Mediterranean as a particular neoliberal market space.

the sovereign is not in the same position vis-à-vis *homo œconomicus* as he is vis-à-vis the subject of right. The subject of right may well, at least in some conceptions and analyses, appear as that which limits the exercise of sovereign power. But *homo œconomicus* is not satisfied with limiting the sovereign's power; to a certain extent, he strips the sovereign of power … *Homo œconomicus* strips the sovereign of power inasmuch as he reveals an essential, fundamental and major incapacity of the sovereign, that is to say, an inability to master the totality of the economic field. (Foucault, 2008: 292)

In the context of recent debates on Europe's 'migration crisis', the Egyptian billionaire, Naguib Sawiris, came up with a proposal to address the 'crisis' in the Mediterranean. In his 1 September 2015 tweet,[1] Sawiris expressed his readiness to buy a Greek or Italian island and 'call its independence and host the migrants and provide jobs for them – building their new country'. Sawiris' proposal is remarkable in that it not only constitutes Sawiris as a *homo œconomicus* (Foucault, 2008). But the proposal also illustrates the intimate ways in which humanitarianism, in its contemporary manifestations, is entangled with logics and programmes that render subjects, spaces and relationships *economic* (Lippert, 1999). This forum contribution aims to reflect upon the production and reproduction of a humanitarian vision that envisages a 'future' for the refugees that is increasingly defined in *neoliberal* terms.

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In 'Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility', Thomas Haskell (1985a, 1985b) unpacks the growing convergence of humanitarianism and capitalism in western Europe and North America at the end of the eighteenth century. Focusing on 'the origins of humanitarian sensibility', Haskell (1985b: 547) identifies 'the market' as the principal 'institution' that has brought together capitalism and humanitarianism. For Haskell (1985a: 342), the growing interest in humanitarianism with the advance of capitalism has not so much to do with 'bourgeois interests' in the maintenance of its hegemony through humanitarian reforms as the 'market discipline, and the penetration of that discipline into spheres of life previously untouched by it'. The ties between capitalism and humanitarianism, as Haskell (1985b: 547) notes, are produced and reinforced 'by the subtle isomorphism and homologies that arise from a cognitive style common to economic affairs'. Haskell (1985a, 1985b) demonstrates how market principles and values of 'promise-keeping', 'entrepreneurship' and 'responsibility' have been extended to a non-economic field – that is, humanitarianism.

Haskell's analysis provides interesting insights into Naguib Sawiris' idea of a refugee 'country'. Haskell (1985b: 557) observes that the dissemination of the market into the logics and practices of humanitarianism reflects the 'outburst of exaggerated pride in man's role as a causal agent'. This role rests on an increasing confidence and feelings of responsibility amongst individuals wishing to take action during humanitarian crises and develop 'recipes' for those 'strangers' in need of help (Haskell, 1985b: 556–563). Sawiris adopts one such role as a 'causal agent'. This becomes evident in his interview with CNN, during which Sawiris said:

> I actually must admit, it's the picture of Aylan that woke me up. It was a very touching picture. In addition to that, the way these pictures were coming out of Hungary, the way these refugees were being treated by the authorities there, and being, you know, beaten and put into the trains and buses, I mean it was just too much. This was the moment of what I said – I mean I cannot just sit like that and just do nothing, you know, and pretend it's not my problem, you know.[2]

However, Sawiris is more than a 'causal agent' as understood by Haskell. The Egyptian billionaire is a *homo œconomicus* in the Foucauldian sense – a man of enterprise and investment, who, when unsatisfied with the sovereign power's capacity (Foucault, 2008), attempts to 'intervene' in areas of government that are conventionally within the state's responsibilities. In a FORBES interview, Sawiris expresses his contention that European countries and regional governments have limited capacities to solve the refugee crisis on their own.[3] His response is developing a recipe to address the issue by offering to buy an island and create a country for the refugees. As a *homo œconomicus*, he observes a lack of capacity of the sovereign power in adequately governing the 'crisis' and proposes a plan that challenges the sovereign. He does so not by denying the sovereignty of its power, but by means of intervention on the basis of his conviction that the

sovereign power is fundamentally incapable in specific aspects of governance – that is, to sufficiently manage the crisis.

Sawiris' proposal illustrates how contemporary forms of humanitarianism emerge as 'recipes' by individuals who understand, depict and produce *spaces*, *people* and *relationships* through market logics, values and processes. To start with, Sawiris' plan promotes a specific form of geopolitics that consolidates the Mediterranean as an economic space. The Mediterranean island, whether Greek or Italian, has for the last decades been constituted as an economic space – a space of private investment, capital accumulation as well as exchange of services, capital and goods relating to its production as a tourist attraction. Similar economic logics that envisage the Mediterranean as a space to be created and fostered for increasing transnational interactions, exchange of goods and opportunities for investment have been promoted through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Scott, 2005) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (İşleyen, 2015). Sawiris' plan reproduces the spatio-temporal configuration of the Mediterranean island as an economic reality. Similar to the Mediterranean island as a touristic space, the refugee island rests on a geopolitical imagination that constructs territory in economic terms. Addressing the Greek and Italian governments, Sawiris says: 'They sell the island to me and I'll make a temporary shelter for these people. I'll make a small port or marina for the boats to land there'.[4] This statement demonstrates that Sawiris' proposal adds a further dimension to the economic imagination of the Mediterranean island. By declaring himself ready for enterprise, investment and responsibility for humanitarian work through the refugee island, Sawiris also challenges the sovereign power. In promoting market logics of private investment, capital accumulation and service production, Sawiris' proposal not only turns the Mediterranean into a space of economic opportunities and interactions. But it also puts into question the political meaning of sovereignty. As territory takes on an essence that is attached to economic practices, relations and processes, the humanitarian 'recipe' seems to erode the traditional understanding of sovereignty, whereby the nation-state exercises control over territory and manages the population – in our case Greece and Italy. As a *homo œconomicus*, Sawiris makes a claim on sovereign territory, and his economized view of space accompanies a shrinking political image of the relationship between state, territory and population.

The power of market ideas is also manifest in the definition of who is a refugee and what 'future' awaits the refugee on the 'refugee island'. Lippert (1999) observes the emergence of *neoliberal* concepts, practices and programmes in the government of refugees by international organizations starting from the 1980s. Lippert points to a shift from a liberal understanding to a new rationality according to which market ideas of self-government, self-responsibility and empowerment have increasingly penetrated into the imagination of and practices for the governing of refugees. As (Lippert 1999: 313) notes, whereas the liberal vision is welfare-oriented with an emphasis on aid, education and

health services, the neoliberal rationality is unique in that 'refugees are imagined becoming more responsible for their own relief and development and less dependent on regular aid'. Sawiris' idea entails such a neoliberal rationality. As a *homo œconomicus*, Sawiris' 'recipe' ties humanitarianism to individual economic development: 'I'll employ the people to build their own homes, their schools, a hospital, a university, a hotel' says the Egyptian billionaire. [5]

At least two observations follow from this statement. First, Sawiris' vision renders refugees into economic subjects, whose future lives are defined in economic terms. Like 'the Third World refugee', who is expected to use 'the opportunity to cultivate the self-determination to be a productive and autonomous subject' (Lui, 2004: 130), the Mediterranean refugee is imagined as one who is to adopt market values of self-autonomy, resilience and self-responsibility to recover from crisis situations and take an active part in their own well-being and development by making use of employment opportunities in the so-called 'refugee country'. This, as Lippert argues (1999), alters the meaning of responsibility that seems to be transferred to refugees, whereby the state and its conventional obligations vis-à-vis refugees are made invisible. Observing the sovereign power's inability to address the humanitarian crisis, Sawiris takes on the responsibility by showing readiness to provide the physical conditions necessary to stimulate the economic potential of the refugees. Second, refugees' political agency goes missing in the neoliberal humanitarian vision of the Egyptian billionaire. As market ideas are injected into Sawiris' humanitarian vision, the latter distances himself from an understanding of refugees as 'political subjects', who make or have the ability to make political claims and exercise political rights (Pupavac, 2008: 291). Instead, as Haskell (1985a) argues, the humanitarian 'recipe' reduces solutions to basic economic needs, which inevitably leaves little room for discussing the political demands, reinvigorating the political capacity and ensuring the political rights and agency of the refugees.

Naguib Sawiris' idea mirrors the intertwining of contemporary forms of humanitarianism and the market. Approaching the 'crisis' in terms of economic development, such vision constructs and reconstructs the Mediterranean as an economic space, turns refugees into economic subjects, emptying them of their political agency, and moves obligations and solutions away from the state to the individual – the entrepreneur and the resilient, autonomous and self-responsible refugee. This not only consolidates *neoliberal* forms of governing space and population, but fosters its spatio-temporal manifestations in the Mediterranean.

Notes

1. https://twitter.com/NaguibSawiris/status/638753801655177217?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw
2. http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2015/09/13/telecom-billionaire-naguib-sawiris-on-syrian-refugee-crisis-i-cannot-just-sit-and-just-do-nothing-and-pretend-its-not-my-problem/

3. http://www.forbes.com/sites/kerenblankfeld/2015/09/05/egyptian-billionaire-urging-greek-and-italian-leaders-to-sell-him-island-for-refugees/
4. http://money.cnn.com/2015/09/04/news/refugees-island-billionaire/
5. http://money.cnn.com/2015/09/04/news/refugees-island-billionaire/

Acknowledgements

Disclosure Statement

Funding

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