Sympathetic to whom? Analyzing the dissonance between ‘human rights’ values and migration policies in the U.S. and Italy

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**Introduction:**

The movement of people across borders and oceans has become an increasingly difficult dilemma to address as globalization spreads and in turn, influences different push and pull factors that motivate people to migrate. Especially if those factors are political unrest, war, violence, and corruption. From the drug violence in Mexico to the Syrian civil war, millions of people are seeking to flee from the danger in their home countries and re-locate somewhere more stable. Unfortunately, not all migrants are equally welcome to their respective destination countries.

Initially, one would think that a first world democratic country would be ready and willing to help people who are trying to escape things like war or violence. After all, these countries like the U.S. and Italy espouse strong democratic values of upholding human rights and protecting those rights. However, when it comes time to respond to cries for help, the human rights values that are supposedly cherished often take a backseat to some different priorities. With the rise of populism and protectionist politics, it’s possible that the concept of “human rights” is taking a different and perhaps more selective meaning.

In this paper, I analyze news articles covering migrant crises in both the U.S. and Italy to see what kinds of attitudes towards migrants are being portrayed by the news media.

**Human Rights Discourse:**

The scholar Walter Mignolo states that the concept of human rights assumes that we are all born as equals, but as we grow into society we do not remain equal for the rest of our lives (2009). In the present day, there is a lot of discourse that treats “human rights” as a universal value. However, the concept of “human rights” has been historically used as an imperial tool to promote ideals and values of an exclusive group of people during the colonial era. People were often considered sub-human because of traits like race, sex, religion, and even class. This leads to an exclusionary discourse around these “rights” and socially constructed criteria that must be met in order to be deserving of these “rights”. While many would like to believe that “human rights” is considered a universal value now, the reality is that there are still problematic and discriminatory discourses surrounding the concept of “human rights”. The preponderance of racial slurs and dehumanizing descriptions of marginalized populations are only a few examples of how “human rights” are not considered universal by all.

This oscillating attitude of who deserves these “human rights” has created major problems within spaces that the scholar Alan Bersin describes as “El Tercer País” (1996). Literally translating as “the third country,” Bersin originally used this term to describe the border between the U.S. and Mexico. This point of connection between the two states is the place of all kinds of exchange, from international trade to drug trafficking. In spaces like this, it becomes difficult to determine which actors should be responsible for which problems. With the spread of globalization, there is an increasing amount of political limbos that look just like “El Tercer País” that Bersin describes. Examples include physical border areas, international waters, and refugee camps.

The problems occur when people are stuck in these areas and there is no clear protocol for how to help them, or if to help them at all. For instance, the refugee camp called “The Jungle” in Calais, France is one of the largest refugee camps in Europe. This area experienced a massive influx of migrants from countries like Eritrea, Pakistan, and Syria as they try to reach the United Kingdom through the Port of Calais. Journalist Emma-Jane Kirby reported the following issue when covering the conditions in the camp:

“French authorities have a difficult balancing act - they cannot leave the migrants to starve but equally, they cannot offer too much humanitarian aid in case it encourages even more to come here.”

What is so astounding about this quote is that the French authorities are truly torn between offering help and driving them away. If these people were French citizens or even citizens of a fellow EU nation, the French authorities would probably not have this kind of dilemma. However, since the migrants taking up space in Calais are from a mélange of foreign nations, it makes it difficult to pin down who should take responsibility for all these displaced people.

In this instance, the French authorities are caught between two ways of approaching the migrants in the refugee camp. On one hand, their duty is to their country, and they must act in the best interest of France. Realism would dictate that the best interest of France is to preserve resources and power for their own citizens. If they give humanitarian aid to the migrants in the refugee camps, it will cost the French government and will only perpetuate the problem by attracting more migrants. On the other hand, upholding human rights is also a value that France claims as in its best interest because of its EU membership. In this lens, providing humanitarian aid to the refugees in Calais also serves France’s best interest because it will promote a humanitarian value that is crucial to the kind of world they want to promote.

There is a similar dissonance experienced in the U.S.A recent example is the Trump administration’s crackdown on not only migrants but anyone with ties to “threatening” nations. On January 27, 2017, President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order that suspended the U.S. Refugee Program for 120 days and prohibited citizens from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen from entering the country during a 90 day period. In the language of the executive order, “this pause is necessary to ensure that dangerous individuals do not enter the United States while the Executive is working to establish adequate standards… to prevent infiltration by foreign terrorists” (Executive Order 13780).

All of this is occurring while the U.S. claims to value human rights within its borders and throughout the world. In fact, according to the Immigration and Nationality Act passed in 1965, no person can be “discriminated against in the issuance of an immigrant visa because of the person’s race, sex, nationality, place of birth or place of residence”. Though the executive order was publicized as a national security measure, it was met with a flurry of protests criticizing it for profiling and discrimination. The effects of this order resulted in chaos in airports all over the country. Many people who were withheld in airports for questioning were green-card holders and refugees coming from places like Syria who have already undergone a strict vetting process to get to the point of re-location (BBC 2017).

In this case, the U.S. government is attempting to act in the state’s best interest by supposedly mitigating the chances of a terrorist attack coming from one of these banned nations. However, at the same time, this order undermines the values of human rights that the U.S. prides itself on as a first world democracy. The order’s national security purpose is also strongly criticized because there is not a strong enough link between perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the U.S. and the nations targeted in the executive order. The hijackers during the September 11th attacks were citizens of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Lebanon (CNN Library, 2017). The terrorists who planted bombs during the Boston Marathon in 2013 were brothers of Kyrgyzstani-American nationalities (Radia, K). Furthermore, according to a report from The New America, a majority of the terrorism-related cases in the U.S. since 9/11 involve either U.S. born citizens or naturalized citizens (Bergen et. al 2017). Due to the dubious link to preventing terrorism, many suspect that the nations mentioned in the executive order are simply targeted because they are Muslim-majority countries.

These examples found in current events made me wonder why some first world democratic countries were passing policies that undermined human rights values while at the same time they speak so urgently about the need to uphold these values. I hypothesize that this dissonance may be linked to the type of discourse used to describe migrants in these respective countries and contexts. As Mignolo pointed out in his caveat to human rights, the idea of who gets to be considered “human” and by whom has been used and is still used today to exploit marginalized populations. In this project, I analyzed the discourse in news media to see if any themes of dehumanizing language towards migrants are present, and if so to what extent.

**Methods:**

I analyze news articles specifically covering the issue of migration and see if the language used to describe migrants holds patterns that could explain the dissonance between peaceful words and harmful actions. The articles cover migration issues in the U.S. and Italy. I chose these countries because they both claim to recognize the importance of human rights and they face a similar migration situation.

The U.S and Italy are both members of the UN Human Rights Council, showing that they value human rights for the good of the international community. Both countries also acknowledge the importance of upholding human rights as part of their national mission. For example, the U.S. Department of State says in its mission statement: “… our security relies on a global effort to secure the rights of all. As an E.U. member state, Italy is bound to uphold the values of this international institution and human rights are highly emphasized. On the E.U’s website, they state: “The European Union is based on a strong commitment to promoting and protecting human rights… Promoting human rights work can help to prevent and resolve conflicts…”

These two countries also have a similar experience with immigration from neighboring countries and the ethical consequences of irregular migration. Immigration has always been a hot topic in American politics due to the large influx of migrants attempting to cross the 2,000 mile-long U.S.-Mexico border. It is not possible to know the exact rate at which people cross the border, but during the year 2016, there were over 400,000 border apprehensions. Beyond apprehensions, there is also the number of migrants who have perished trying to reach American soil. This is also a difficult number to estimate, but to provide a small idea of what this statistic could be, the remains of 135 migrants were found in the Arizona desert during the fiscal year of 2015. This number jumps to 2,832 when counting all remains left in the desert since 2001 (Gonzalez, 2017).

Italy has also been a focal point of the European migrant crisis. Due to its proximity to North Africa and expansive coastline, Italy experiences a vast influx of people trying to reach its coasts by boat. An estimated 106,000 migrants have attempted to sail from Libya to Italy in 2016, and many of them die at sea due to the ill-equipped vessels (Baker, 2017). In an attempt to stop these fatalities, the Italian government in conjunction with the European Union has launched an effort called EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia. This is a four-stage operation calling for analysis and deterrence of smuggling activity. The efforts include deploying forces to search smugglers vessels, turning the boats back to Libya, and finally withdrawing forces upon operation completion. EU Defence and Security Official Pedro Serrano has stated that Operation Sophia has directly saved around 30,000 migrants left at sea, and it has also led to the apprehension of 100 smugglers (European External Action Service, 2014).

However, despite these advances in deterring the smuggling business in Libya, Operation Sophia has been criticized for its lack of solvency. When migrant boats are sent back to Libya, the people are taken to controversial detention centers where they are subjected to egregious human rights abuses. Human Rights Watch has reported various instances of extortion, torture, violence, and dismal sanitary conditions (Human Rights Watch, 2014). If migrants are kept in a perpetual state of destitution when they return to Libya, efforts to deter migrant deaths while crossing the Mediterranean will prove to be in vain.

**Data Collection and Coding:**

I used the research database Lexis Nexis to gather news articles published between May 2016 and July 2017 that cover the issue of migration in the U.S. and Italy. I began by collecting articles that contain one of the following keywords in either English or Italian depending on the news source:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **English** | **Italian** |
| Immigration/Migration | Immigrazione/Migrazione |
| Illegal + Immigrant | Clandestini |
| Refugee | Profugo |
| Border | Vu cumprà |

I chose these words to make sure that the articles contained relevant coverage of migrants in their respective cases. While not all the code words in Italian are exact translations of the English code words, they do hold a similar meaning and stigma. For example, “vu cumprà” is a butchered Italian spelling of the phrase “vuoi comprare” which means “do you want to buy?” This word has turned into a slur that is used to refer to migrants who are commonly seen selling trinkets on street corners (Squires, 2014). This word uses the dichotomy of citizen and noncitizen to portray migrants as people who are slow to assimilate and therefore will only fit in as a nuisance. There is a similar stigma behind the word “illegal immigrant” in English, since it uses the concept of legality to distance migrants from the rest of the “native” U.S. population.

I have completed data collection and ended up with a total of 400 articles (200 U.S. media and 200 Italian media). Though I have not been able to code all of the data I collected, I do have preliminary observations for some U.S. media articles with code-word “border” and “illegal immigrant” as well as Italian articles that contain the code word “vu cumpra”.

**Preliminary Observations:**

I was able to code 75 articles from the U.S. media and 25 articles from Italian media. Using Grounded Theory, I read through the articles and then went back to review my notes to see what themes were the most prominent across articles. In the U.S. context, I found repeating themes of the economic argument of migration, criminalization, and counter-narratives throughout the articles I read.

ECONOMIC ARGUMENTS

Economic arguments were used throughout different articles both in support of and against undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Regardless of the position, however, using these arguments all relied on how much economic gain or loss the U.S. would incur as a result of having undocumented immigrants living and working within the country. Articles that portrayed undocumented migrants as favorable constantly referred to the economic gain that they bring to the country in the form of labor. In addition, they pointed out the steep price tag that comes with increased border protection policy. Below are some examples of economic focus:

Once again I'm confounded, but not surprised, by the lackadaisical stupidity of state legislators. Their recent proposal to grant illegal immigrantsbasically free college education and squander even more money that they don't have, denying Illinois taxpaying families' children that ability also is reprehensible and disrespectful of their constituents and their supposed duties to this state. (Forgas, 2016)

We need an immigration system that gives priority to skilled over unskilled workers, rather than today's policy that favors family preferences for green cards. This sort of system would promote assimilation (because skilled workers have an easier time integrating into the workforce and society), increase economic growth (because skilled workers have higher "value added" than unskilled labor) and reduce poverty (because many unskilled immigrants have incomes below the government's poverty line) (Samuelson, 2016).

Whether it is to justify the money spent on border security expansion or to say that providing a path to citizenship could benefit the workforce and economy in the long run, these kinds of arguments remain focused on the cost of immigration and what kind of expenditures suit the country best. This distances the issue of migration from its human rights implications and instead puts it in terms of the financial bottom line.

CRIMINALITY

In the Italian context, the theme of criminality was also present through the articles I’ve coded that contained the keyword “vu cumpra.” Articles mainly covered the need to regulate these migrants who primarily sell counterfeit goods on the beaches and tourist areas. Many articles that contained this keyword described migrants as a nuisance that must be dealt with.

There was also a theme of criminality in articles that covered immigrants in the U.S. The articles focused on the different types of crime that permeate the U.S. Mexico border, mainly illegal drug trade, human trafficking, and gang violence. Primarily, this kind of coverage included quotations from President Trump such as his infamous remarks that the U.S. has to keep out “bad hombres” (Perez, 2017) Below are some examples:

Any concerned citizen voter who wants to validate Trump’s stand on illegal immigrant crime can simply go to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons inmates statistics website… 42,401 prisoners in the federal prison system were foreign nationals... In the federal prison system there were 28,264 Mexican nationals incarcerated” (Olen, 2016).

Ten illegal-immigrantmembers of the notorious MS-13 gang - including one who was previously deported – were indicted Thursday in a wave of Long Island violence that included the slaughter of two teenage girls” (Cohen, 2017).

This focus on criminalization perpetuates the dehumanizing attitudes towards migrants. Disproportionate coverage associating migrants with criminality could also be a link to dehumanizing migrants through this kind of discourse. These articles also make a point to say that all undocumented immigrants are criminals to begin with since they bypassed the system and broke the law in doing so. This kind of discourse is dangerous because it plants the idea that someone’s mere existence in the wrong context could be a crime. An example of this would be child arrivals to the U.S. who are undocumented but through no choice of their own.

COUNTER NARRATIVES:

Another theme that ran across the U.S. articles is the strong attempts to debunk any stereotypes and negative generalizations of immigrants. Headlines like “Don’t blame illegal immigrants for crime waves” (Nowrasteh, 2017) and “Facts about immigration are foreign to GOP leaders” (Rodriguez, 2016) also draw attention to crime reports and statistics, but point out that these reports also include migrant crimes, which should not be equated to violent or drug crimes.

As noted in a 2015 report by the American Immigration Council, not only are legal and undocumented immigrants less likely to commit serious crimes or be incarcerated than the native-born, "high rates of immigration are associated with lower rates of violent crime and property crime. (Rodriguez, 2016)

Furthermore, many articles also covered initiatives in local governments to allow undocumented immigrants to receive driver’s licenses, or even health insurance (Davis, 2017). Articles also included reporting on DACA recipients, and portraits showing that they are not criminals or welfare free-loaders, but just normal contributors to society regardless of their citizenship status. Articles also continually showed coverage of President Trump’s supposed shift in deportation goals regarding dreamers, as he wanted to deal with them “with a great heart” (Perez, 2017). Uncovering this theme could be a sign that perhaps as these dilemmas become more pressing, there will be more coverage that delves deeper into the perspectives of migrants and the effects of these austere policies and societal stigmas on their lives.

**Limitations and Future Directions:**

While my preliminary findings are interesting, this study remains incomplete because only a quarter of the articles were coded and translation of Italian articles is still needed in order to glean accurate themes. The methods I use also carry some limitations. First of all, attempting to single-handedly code over 400 articles is not very sustainable. Not only because qualitative coding is time-consuming, but also because it is difficult to control for researcher bias. In using Grounded Theory, I was able to uncover emerging themes that appear across articles as opposed to prematurely choosing what kinds of themes or stigmas I should look for in articles. However, though I have tried to be as objective as possible while coding, it is very likely that I overlooked some themes that may have been apparent to someone from a different background reading the same articles. It would have been helpful to have a research partner or even group to try and cross-check each other and make sure the themes that I perceive are also communicated to others beyond my own perspective.

The second limitation of my coding method is that humans are prone to error and fatigue. At the time I designed my research project, I was not aware of computational methods that could be used to code qualitative data for things like sentiment. This kind of approach would have been much more sustainable as well. If I continue this research in the future, I would explore the use of a qualitative coding software and potentially even use it to cross-check my individual findings. It would be interesting to see what kinds of themes are similar or different in the two different methods.

Future directions for this research include comparing the themes across articles published in the same publication to see if certain news outlets are more prone to using certain types of discourse when covering migration. Additionally, I’d like to see if the type of discourse present in these publications correlates with the introduction or enacting of certain types of migration policies at a local and national level. If dehumanizing discourse is continually used in mass news media, it may result in more austere migration policies and more hostile societies. Discourse analysis is important because the findings can help identify and prevent these kinds of narratives from having a monopoly on the public. Perhaps there are some more localized regions where this is already happening. By being critical of the words used by media and words consumed by the public, this study could help make a case against prevalent stereotypes and fear mongering in the news.

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