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Migration

Not all deaths at sea are equal

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Dave Kellaway reports from Italy, and reflects on the media coverage of the sinking of the luxury yacht Bayesian off the coast of Sicily compared to the way the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean are usually reported

Over the past week the tragic sinking of tech magnate Mike Lynch's yacht has been front page news in the papers and on TV every day in both in Britain and in Italy. By now, we all know about the lives and backgrounds of all the passengers. We know for instance that the youngest person lost, Lynch's daughter, was all set to go to Oxford and that Lynch was ready to play a similar tech advisory role with the Starmer government, as he did with Sunak. His lawyer, who successfully won the case against Hewlett Packard, died. Jonathan Bloomer, the international boss of Morgan Stanley, was also lost. These were people who moved at the highest level of capitalist society and had the ears of government ministers.

Mass media attention

The actual sinking has been endlessly replayed in video clips. There have been detailed graphics explaining the dynamics of the accident. The inside pages of the press have been filled with special dossiers about the tragedy. Experts have been brought in to talk in detail about the design of the vessel and the quality of the captaincy in those vital minutes before it sank. The tens of millions of pounds invested in the yacht have been tabulated for us. Both the Italian and the British authorities mobilized its specialized services to help out straightaway. British diplomats dashed to the scene.

There are likely to be court cases about the causes of the sinking and whether the ship's captain could have done things differently. It appears an adjacent yacht, albeit a lot smaller, survived the waterspout without any major difficulty. Given the assets represented by the yacht and the wealth of the people who have died there will be legal processes involving the insurance companies too for months if not years to come.

Now let us think not about the horrible consequences for the seven people who were tragically lost in the Bayesian but the 66 people, including 26 women and children, who drowned not that far from there just weeks before. Most people would not even know that had happened since it received such scant coverage in the press. Since 2014, it has been calculated that 20,000 migrants and asylum seekers have been drowned in the Mediterranean trying to get to a safe country or to find the same sort of life and security that we all enjoy.

Refugee deaths

We do not know the names of most of these drowned people. Some lists are kept by refugee agencies and charities but are mostly ignored by the mass media. Even these agencies have to end up registering many as unknown. In Lampedusa and other places, the bodies that are washed up are laid in many unmarked graves. We know these drowned people had exactly the same drive and motivation as Lynch's daughter to work for a better life and to fulfil their dreams. We have to rely on a few survivors' accounts that do make the mass media, or fictionalized accounts like the film *Il Capitano* (reviewed here), to get some sense of their story.

There will be no teams of lawyers or insurers haggling over the net worth of individuals or establishing the causes of their deaths. No compensation will be made to them or their families. Instead, they will be treated as “illegals” for exercising their asylum rights as established under international law or the right of movement for their labour – as exists for the capital that Mike Lynch moved around the world without restriction. Their fate will be ascribed to the villainous people smugglers who “manipulate” these ingenuous people. Very few people will publicise the fact that the small boats trade exists primarily because governments like Britain’s refuse to provide safe and legal routes for asylum and spend huge amounts of resources on border security.

Instead of governments rushing all its high tech and specialist resources to the scenes of small boat sinkings, we have the evidence of Greek or Italian coastguards actively trying to avoid taking emergency action. They spend more time trying to argue that the tragedies do not fall within their jurisdictions rather than actually doing their job and saving lives.

Government complicity

Just this week Yvette Cooper, the Labour Home Secretary has stepped up deportations and increased the numbers in detention centres. People are drowning in the English Channel while the British and French authorities conveniently blame each other. It seems that the military technology they use in war cannot be put at the service of preventing any drowning at all in a relatively small sea.

Here in Italy, this week there has been a big controversy on whether immigrants’ children born or brought up in Italy should have the automatic right of citizenship as is the case in many countries. One of the hard right government coalition parties, Forza Italia, (Berlusconi founded party) has broken ranks, and its leader Tajani has indicated it supports such a minimal progressive measure. Salvini, the racist leader of the Lega, a coalition partner, is particularly incensed by Tajani’s new line. Salvini’s new best friend, Vannacci a reactionary ex-general headed up the Lega slate for the last Euro elections.

He has been busy questioning how “Italian,” Egonu, the star player of the Italian women’s volley ball team that won gold in Paris, really is. Paola Egonu happens to be black, she was born in Italy, of Nigerian parents. A few days ago yet another migrant worker died from the heat in the fields of the agribusiness area of Latina. He is the second in three months to die.

Of course, we do not crudely counter pose the tragic deaths of Lynch and his friends with the thousands of migrants. All such unnecessary deaths, whether through freak weather conditions caused by global warming and human error or facilitated by European countries’ migration policies, should be mourned. Some idiots on social media, supposedly proclaiming their leftist credentials, have tried to revel in the deaths of these “representatives of the bourgeoisie.” There have been tasteless jokes and attempts to erect conspiracy theories. Socialists should reject such anti-humanist and childish rubbish.

Our focus is on how the mass media interprets and portrays these two sets of events. We want the mass media to report the tragedy of the migrants drowning from the small boats in the same intensity and detail as it covered the Bayesian sinking. We want an honest analysis of what causes the small boat phenomenon and policies discussed and proposed that could stop the drownings within weeks.

We want deaths at sea to be treated equally.

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