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The Strange Lightness of History

Some people are just too small to be human, and maybe that has always been the case. But ever since Western modernity grew to span the world thanks to colonialism and capitalism, the contradiction between equal dignity for all human beings and the inhuman treatment of some social groups has taken the shape of an abyssal fracture, into which a lot of blood has been spilled and much hypocrisy distilled. The zones of sub-humanity have been inhabited by a succession of populations – savages, indigenous peoples, women, slaves, blacks – but they never really came to an end; on the contrary, they were renewed by the influx of new populations that either joined or replaced the old ones. The most recent zone is that of undocumented immigrants. This is why the blood shed in the Mediterranean stretches back a long way, both in time and in space. And it is no coincidence that it is now being shed in the continent's northernmost parts as well as in its southernmost country, South Africa.

The zones of sub-humanity are regions of non-being, where if you are not truly human you cannot claim to be treated as human, that is to say, to be a subject with human rights. You will be, at most, the object of speeches on human rights made by those living in the zones of humanity. As to the latter, it never crosses their minds that the zones where they live would not be what they are if it weren't for the zones where the "others" "underlive" and which those others desperately want to escape, led by the scandalous yearning for a decent life. And the reason it never crosses their minds is because history does not weigh on their conscience, but rather confirms, in their eyes, that only successful entrepreneurs (both individual and collective, past and present) are deserving of the humanity they have been allotted. Philanthropy is good for them, but they have no outstanding debt to anyone.

The truth is, however, that there is no history of vanquishers without a history of the vanquished, who often lost not because they were humanly less worthy, but merely because they either could not or did not know how to defend themselves from the atrocities and the plundering they were subjected to. The blood now flowing in Africa's northern and southern tips is filled with historical injustices and many interwoven (hi)stories. European colonialism did not end with the independence of many of the countries those migrants keep fleeing. It went on in the form of military and economic control and of the instigation of rivalries among ethnic groups the better to ensure access to raw materials or achieve a position of advantage in the Cold War. Many failed states were actively produced as failures, to begin with, by the Western powers, the most recent and tragic case being that of Libya. Didn't Libya use to be one of the safest borders south of the European Union? Was it worth destroying a whole country to make oil more accessible and to accommodate the geostrategic interests of Israel and the US?

But the history of European colonialism is a lot more complex than one might imagine, and this complexity is what helps explain the events in South Africa. To what extent have the colonized learned from the colonizers the arrogance of racism? Although formally an independent country, from the early 20th century up until 1994 South Africa was ruled by one of the cruelest forms of internal colonialism: the apartheid regime. More than just a power relationship based on the inherent inferiority

of blacks, institutionalized racism became an overall way of being and knowing (cognitive racism) that gradually and insidiously shed major distinctions in skin colour until it became all-encompassing. Could that be the reason why black South Africans are seen as the most intolerant people towards poor black foreigners in all of Africa? Could it be that those who freed themselves from apartheid did not free themselves entirely from the regime of being and knowing on which it was based? Could it also be that, in typical racist ideology fashion, a darker shade of skin equals a lower degree of humanity? Could it be that the solidarity of Mozambicans and Zimbabweans in the struggle against apartheid is a part of history South Africans do not wish to remember so they don't have to pay their debts? Are South Africans in danger of becoming misplaced Europeans?