



The Hero, the White Savior, and the Smuggler: Criminalized Figures in the Landscape of Solidarity Toward Migrants

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ABSTRACT *One recent shift in the ever-expanding crackdown on migration and implementation of a hostile environment for migrants in the EU has been the criminalization of migrant solidarity. Using various legal tools, EU governments have been trying to hinder solidarity actions from civil society. In particular, a narrative depicting civilians helping migrants as criminals has been elaborated by European organizations and strengthened by far-right groups and dominant press outlets. In reaction, a counter-narrative has been constructed and spread by pro-migrant groups and liberal media, which presents criminalized activists as criminalized heroes and their actions as humanitarian. Based on a critical discourse analysis of academic texts, press articles, and empirical research with pro-migrant activists, this article examines two criminal figures from the civilian search and rescue field: the “activist associated with smugglers” and its counterpart, the “criminalized hero.” Through the lens of figuration of crime and social justice, the article brings a new understanding of the de- and repoliticization processes that occur in the field of humanitarian help and migration. By analyzing these two figures, the paper also contributes to a better understanding of the competing moral orders underpinning criminal and social justice claims in the field of solidarity toward migrants. On the one hand, the figure of the activist associated with smuggler is part of a criminal justice narrative depicting migration as a threat to political, social, and economic stability. On the other hand, the criminalized hero figure includes a counter-narrative to this moral order based on the defense of a social justice frame of solidarity and the protection of human rights. Within the pro-migrant activist’s scene, the criminalized hero and its social justice frame are criticized for reproducing racist and post-colonial practices of humanitarianism.*

KEYWORDS criminalization; migration; solidarity; white savior; figures; search and rescue; Europe

One recent trend in the ever-expanding crackdown on migration and the implementation of a hostile environment (Edmond-Pettitt, 2018) in the European Union (EU) is the criminalization of migrant solidarity (Fekete,

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2018; Tazzioli, 2018). Relying on the criminal justice system (Cook, 2006, pp. 14-15), EU governments increasingly try to hinder solidarity actions toward migrants coming from civil society through various legal tools (Provera, 2015). A well-known example concerns the criminalization of humanitarian search and rescue (S&R) activities in the Mediterranean (Cusumano & Villa, 2020; Daduse & Mudu, 2020). This development notably divides society around the controversial “crime of solidarity” and the claims and actions made in the name of human rights and justice (Carrera et al., 2019; Tazzioli, 2018). Looking at the discourses produced within this debate, one can observe several new criminalized figures emerging that reflect this polarization.

In this article, I argue that understanding the processes of criminalization of search and rescue (S&R) requires not only a focus on the legal instruments but also an understanding of how the figuration of crime is socially and morally constructed through discourse and social imaginaries (see *CrimScapes*, 2020; Cusumano & Bell, 2021). The emerging figures are beneficial in understanding these processes because they reflect on and twist the discursive and moral economy in which the activities and actors at play in the criminalized field are embedded. Moser and Schlechtriemen (2018) define social figures as initially exemplary individuals who emblematically embody a socially relevant identity. Social figures reveal normative conflicts about groups whose social position is not yet institutionalized, by condensing their social and behavioral traits in a typical person.

Based on this understanding of figuration (as a relational process leading to the construction of social figures), different actors discursively produce criminalized figures to channel the public discourse toward targeted practices and groups and their social, political, and moral representations. An analysis of the criminalized figures investigates the interdependencies between the moral economy of humanitarian S&R and the context of criminalization. The analysis reveals how the intersection between the criminalization and brutalization logic of border control, the humanitarianization of the borders, and the “white savior industrial complex” (Aronson, 2017) strengthens a dominant model of social justice in the humanitarian field, which is apolitical and centered on the figuration of white benevolence. In response, some actors within the S&R landscape try to avoid the pitfalls of humanitarianism and white-saviorism. They adapt their practices and discourses in the context of criminalization to an alternative model of social justice in which S&R is considered in its relation to migration policies and border control, and which includes a post-colonial and antiracist perspective. Following Subreenduth (2013), social justice is understood not as a monolithic model but as a plurality of models competing with each other to become or stay dominant or hegemonic. Criminalization as the primary tool employed to fight civilian S&R is understood broadly as

...the application of criminal law, crime control measures and imaginaries of (il)legality in the management of discourses, practices, and populations [...] and is

interconnected with the production and restructuring of moral orders, especially feelings and perceptions of threat and vulnerability. It has come at the expense of other forms of democratic governance, such as social justice, welfare, and humanitarianism. (CrimScapes, 2020, p. 5)

The article is based on original research on the criminalization of migration help, which is part of the European research project CrimScapes, exploring the dynamics of criminalization throughout the European region. The empirical data used in this article includes a review of press articles about criminalization cases of S&R activists from liberal and conservative newspapers from France, Italy, the UK, and Germany (2017-2022), NGO reports, and 14 interviews with S&R activists conducted in 2021 and 2022. All organizations and most of the activists are German and position themselves as critical toward the current migration regime, including in its humanitarian dimension. To account for the construction of criminalized figures in public discourse, this article uses the method of critical discourse analysis as formulated by Jäger and Jäger (2007). According to these authors, knowledge is produced by and circulates through discourses. The different discourses compete for the prerogative of interpretation and discursive dominance. When a discourse becomes dominant, it defines what is true or false, speakable or unspeakable. It is the hegemonic discourse. Dominant media is considered in this article as (re)producing the discourse on the examined figures and is understood as a diverse and plural actor that reflects on dominant political discourse (on a continuum from liberal-left to conservative-right). The article incorporates such critical discourse analysis to investigate different figurations of crime as a relational process, unpacking the tensions between different actors competing to impose the moral frame of European border policy.

The first section shows how the recent evolution toward the humanitarianization of the EU borders policy in the Mediterranean, combined with the current strengthening of deterrent and brutal border policy, led to the “frame-jacking” (Cusumano & Bell, 2021) of humanitarian discourse and the criminalization of civilian S&R. The second section is dedicated to the figure of the “rescuer associated with smugglers” (RAS) and its construction and dissemination in the public space. In the third section, I examine the construction of the counter-figure of the “criminalized hero” and the social justice model it entails. The fourth section analyses the effects of the construction and the dissemination of the counter-figure on the landscape of civilian S&R. The last section investigates how the figure of the criminalized hero is associated with the figure of the “white savior.” The superposition of these figures enables an anti-racist and decolonial critique of the humanitarian social justice model in which they are rooted.

The Humanitarianization and Brutalization of Borders and the Criminalization of Civilian Search and Rescue

One effect of constructing the so-called “fortress Europe” has been the growing number of migrant deaths in the Mediterranean. Since the 1990s and more visibly since the 2010s, scholars and activists have publicly condemned the deadly consequences of the border policy and started a practice of counting the deaths at the border to highlight the severity of the situation (Heller & Pécoud, 2017). This practice led to the construction of a counter-discourse against the hegemonic discourse of securitization. Disseminated by NGOs, activists, and scholars, this counter-discourse points out the inhumane and deadly consequences of the EU border regime and urges European authorities to humanitarianize the border, for example by enabling safe passage to Europe. The frame of the counter-discourse, which is based on moral condemnation of letting people die at sea, tends to adopt a narrow definition of humanitarianism as driven by its apparently apolitical principles of saving lives at risk and treating the symptoms of suffering rather than the causes (Barnett, 2013). It also contributes to the depoliticization of migration by minimizing the critique of the overall policy established in Europe and focusing on the deadly consequences of the policy (Cuttitta, 2018; Mainwaring & DeBono, 2021).

The humanitarian efforts became visible after the events of October 2013. On October 3 and 11, 2013, two shipwrecks off the coast of Lampedusa caused the death of more than 400 migrants and triggered public outrage. In response to the perceived humanitarian crisis, Italian authorities initiated the military and humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum in late 2013. Along with activities of control and securitization of the borders, the operation aimed to rescue migrant boats. By early 2014, NGOs started operating in the Mediterranean Sea in cooperation with maritime authorities to counterbalance the lack of public resources dedicated to S&R. These activities rapidly grew from three NGOs operating in 2015 to 13 in 2016, when NGOs rescued 46,796 persons out of the 178,415 who were rescued in the Central Mediterranean (Guardia Costiera, 2016, cited by Cuttitta, 2018).

These developments marked a change in border policy in the Mediterranean, became more humanitarian on the surface. Humanitarian action, as a benevolent action led by moral sentiments to reduce human suffering (Fassin, 2011), has been increasingly involved in border policy to regulate immigration to Europe, creating what has been called the “humanitarian border” or the “border as a space of humanitarian government” (Walters, 2011, p. 138). As border crossing has increasingly become “a matter of life and death,” humanitarianism has progressively expanded into “a way of governing this novel and disturbing situation and compensating for the social violence embodied in the regime of migration control” (Walters, 2011, pp. 138-139). Humanitarian action (governmental and non-governmental) is understood here as one side of the broader European migration border regime, the side of care, compassion, and protection, which goes together with the (dominant) other

side, the one of repression, brutality, and securitization conducted simultaneously by European public authorities. This “safety/security nexus” tends to reconcile migrant safety and border security in official state discourse and policy (Williams, 2016). For instance, the continued securitization and militarization of the border rely increasingly on anti-human-trafficking and anti-human-smuggling policies, which place at their core the protection of vulnerable migrants (i.e., migrants becoming both “at risk” and “a risk”; Aradau, 2004; Aas & Gundhus, 2015).

Nevertheless, since the Mare Nostrum operation in 2014, public institutions have demonstrated limited humanitarian efforts in terms of border management. The military and humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum ended in late 2014 after having been accused by Frontex and different political actors of acting as a pull factor for irregular immigration (Frontex, 2014, as cited by Cuttitta, 2018; Jumbert, 2018; Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2020). After this short humanitarian phase, institutional responses to the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean have increasingly focused on a policy of deterrence and strategic neglect (Stierl, 2023, p. 5), and have narrowed to one frame of action and one narrative: the fight against migrant smugglers and the securitization of the border. This frame of action and narrative combines the main logic of securitization and border control with the language of humanitarian borders (Aas & Gundhus, 2015); if there are no longer irregular border crossing attempts through the Mediterranean and the Aegean Seas, there are no longer people drowning at sea. Any other suggestion that does not imply reducing the number of deaths through reducing the irregular migration flow (e.g., humanitarian S&R) is considered a pull factor for irregular migration and must be fought or avoided as much as possible. This “appropriation of the humanitarian concerns to uphold restrictive migration policies” is a strategy of frame-jacking “by which human rights discourses are turned against the emancipatory agendas that they were initially meant to support” (Cusumano & Bell, 2021, p. 4289).

The decline of humanitarianism in the border policy described above corresponds to the new “deterrence paradigm” (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Tan, 2017) observed more broadly in the European migration regime, which is increasingly characterized by its use of brutality, violence, and necropolitical abandonment at the external borders (Davies et al., 2017; Isakjee et al., 2020). Consequently, since 2016, civilian S&R activity has been progressively criminalized through legal investigations and several policy instruments. Initiated by Italian authorities and followed by many other European legal authorities (Malta, Spain, Greece, the Netherlands, and Germany), the criminalization campaign against S&R ships reached over 50 legal proceedings in 2020 (Statewatch, 2020). Criminalization aims to hinder practically and delegitimize morally civilian S&R operations. Within the landscape of S&R organizations, Dadusc and Mudu (2020) distinguish between humanitarianism and “autonomous solidarity,” the latter being a “resistance not only to the militarization of borders and the criminalization of migration but also to the

devices of government entailed with humanitarian borders” (p. 2). However, criminalization makes adopting an apolitical humanitarian stance increasingly difficult for S&R NGOs. Even though the least critical of these organizations stopped their activity, the landscape of S&R NGOs in the Mediterranean still includes a wide range of positions toward the military-humanitarian border governance, ranging from co-optation to resistance (Stierl, 2018).

Considering a border policy nexus is helpful for understanding the competing interests at play. S&R NGOs can schematically be located on the compassionate and humanitarian side of the border policy nexus, with a more or less critical positioning of their political role as humanitarian actors in the border regime. Most European supra- and national institutions tend to lie on the opposing repressive and punitive side, even though they adopt a humanitarian narrative. A broad span of political attitudes can also be observed among European authorities, from rather compassionate (e.g., Spain) to radically repressive (e.g., Greece). Both sets of actors try to bend the overall policy to their side, competing with each other over the definition of the “right” answer to the humanitarian crisis, primarily in the legal and media spheres.

The following section is dedicated to the figuration of the rescuer associated with smugglers (RAS), the cornerstone of the criminalization logic and the criminal justice model.

The Figuration of the Criminal “Rescuer Associated with Smugglers” or the Attempt to Re-secure the Borders

The rescuer associated with smugglers (RAS) figure is based on stereotyped narratives depicting humanitarian S&R as criminal and a security threat. In this context, the S&R activist is an accomplice of the criminal smuggler networks. Such an activist may pursue either a radical left and pro-migrant ideology that claims the abolition of borders (even if it means collaborating with criminal smuggler networks) or a naive human rights ideology, unconscious of how smugglers use S&R NGOs to facilitate their business. S&R activists are either depicted as smugglers themselves or as working with smugglers. The RAS figure is rooted in a pernicious “binary predator-victim perspective” (Zhang, 2019, p. 45) in which smugglers are depicted monolithically as males of color, criminal human traffickers profiting from desperate migrants.¹ In this section, I show how the figure of the RAS has been constructed in the mediascape. This construction mobilizes an imaginary of illegality and outlaws that have to be fought with the help of legal and institutional tools.

The criminalizing narrative that has been imposed onto activists is leaning on the European regulation present in the Facilitation Package. It entails

¹ This figure masks the reality of flight help, which is often embedded in private and family networks and which is sometimes part of the migration journey. For instance, most of the smugglers sentenced by European authorities are in fact migrants who were steering the boat or holding the phone to make a distress call (Sanchez & Achilli, 2019).

accusation against NGOs and their activists of assisting the irregular entry of persons into the EU and colluding with smugglers and more broadly of contributing to the alleged “migratory threat” by acting as a pull factor for the illegal smuggling of migrants.² Scholars Eugenio Cusumano and Matteo Villa (2020) refer to the accusations made in a confidential report by Frontex in 2016 and leaked by the *Financial Times* about interactions between private rescuers and smugglers, which would encourage illegal immigration to Europe (Financial Times, 2016). These accusations have been reiterated in the 2017 Frontex yearly report (Frontex, 2017, p. 32) and have been spread mainly through right-wing politicians and media throughout Europe. In early 2017, the public prosecutor of Catania (Italy) used the same narrative in a series of public statements, accusing S&R NGOs of colluding with and being financed by smugglers. These accusations led to legal procedures as Italian and Greek state prosecutors started investigations against S&R activists and organizations to look into the imagined links between smugglers and S&R NGOs, charging them with aiding illegal immigration and colluding with smugglers. The RAS figure spread even more in the public space after these legal procedures were started in 2016-2017 (see the ongoing first Italian case against the organization Jugend Rettet; Gostoli, 2018).

Following the enforcement of the so-called Salvini decree (forbidding S&R to enter Italian ports) and the series of arrests beginning in June 2018,³ the spread of the RAS figure was accelerated by liberal politicians and media. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron declared on television on June 2018 that the S&R NGO Mission Lifeline “plays into the hands of smugglers” (*fait le jeu des passeurs*) (France Info, 2018). Then in July 2018, the liberal German newspaper *Die Zeit* published a highly debated cover, “Oder soll man es lassen?” (“Or should we leave it?”) with an article in which sea rescuers were once again accused of colluding with smugglers offering free shuttle-service and being part of their “dirty business” (*schmutziges Geschäft*) (Die Zeit, 2018). Most recently, in the context of the diplomatic crisis between France and Italy about where the 234 migrants on board the S&R boat “Ocean Viking” from the NGO SOS MEDITERRANEE should disembark (Le Monde, 2022), many French media and politicians (liberal and conservative) denounced the alleged collusion between the French NGO and smuggler networks (Europe 1, 2022; Leclerc, 2022).

In their discourse analysis, scholars Cusumano and Villa (2020) argue that the spread of the RAS figure started even before the enforcement of the Salvini decree in Italy. Luigi Di Maio, leader of the five stars movement between 2017 and 2020, popularized the expression of “taxi of the sea,” depicting the S&R NGOs as encouraging irregular migration over the Mediterranean. The authors show that the Italian right-wing newspaper *Il Giornale* referred to NGOs as

² However, there has never been proof of the collusion between smugglers and S&R organizations nor of a pull-factor effect due to S&R NGOs (Cusumano & Villa, 2020; Heller & Pezzani, 2018).

³ Decreto Legge, 04/10/2018 n° 113, G.U. 03/12/2018

“taxi” 30 times between 2017 and October 2019, and that these metaphors are a tool for indirect criminalization.

Similar results have been found by a research group that published a critical discourse analysis of hegemonic discourses on migration and humanitarian S&R in German daily newspapers between June and July 2019 (Friede et al., 2022). The authors cite several conservative and liberal newspapers associating S&R activism and smugglers, arguing that the RAS figure tends to diminish the moral and ethical imperative of humanitarian borders and to normalize the deaths of migrants at sea (Friede et al., 2022, p. 121).

To summarize, the criminal figure of the RAS has spread throughout Europe, although its presence changes according to the country. It is a pronounced part of the hegemonic discourse in countries such as Greece, the UK, and Italy, where the overall political climate is saturated with anti-migrant rhetoric. The RAS figure tends to frame the public debate around the question of the alleged criminal activities of S&R NGOs and their contribution to the migration threat, and to divert attention from the humanitarian crisis and the deaths at the border zone. This criminal figure reflects and strengthens the narrative of the criminalization of migration and migrant solidarity and normalizes a discourse of dehumanitarianized borders; it contributes to bending the moral economy of European immigration policies (Fassin, 2005) towards a more punitive attitude and aims to promote governance based on a logic of fear and threat in which considerations about social justice or human rights are absent or subordinate to the question of security (see Cusumano & Bell, 2021). The narrative about the RAS figure emphasizes criminalization as the most appropriate response to solve the humanitarian crisis and fight the migration threat. The humanitarian crisis and the endangered migrants, who are mostly referred to as “illegal” migrants, tend to disappear from the discourse around the criminalized figure.

The Criminalized Hero as Counter-figure

In reaction to the construction of the RAS figure, pro-migrant groups and liberal and left-wing media elaborated a counter-narrative, which presents the activists as criminalized heroes and their actions in a frame of humanitarianism, social justice, and civilian disobedience. They refute the idea that humanitarian S&R is acting as a pull factor for illegal immigration and call for an institutional response to solve the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean Sea. In this narrative, the criminalization campaign is immoral and unjust (e.g., Deutsche Welle, 2018, July 2). This counter-narrative aims to renormalize the discourse of humanitarian borders and focuses on the moral

and legal duty of saving human lives that activists follow in their activity at sea.⁴

The most exemplary criminalized hero is Carola Rackete, who has been broadly depicted as a “modern hero,” a “saint,” or, as it could be seen on the front page of the German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, as “the captain Europe” (for her moral and humanitarian values) (*Der Spiegel*, Nr. 28/2019). The German S&R activist was arrested in June 2019 for illegally entering the Italian port of Lampedusa and aiding illegal immigration, as Matteo Salvini, the Minister of the Interior, has decided on a closed-ports policy. This case has been widely debated in the media and civil society around the person of Carola Rackete (Penchaszadeh & Sferco, 2020; Friede et al., 2022). Compared to the RAS figure, the counter-figure of the criminalized hero focuses on existing persons who are hyper-individualized. Other examples of these criminalized heroes have been produced in, and by the public sphere, such as the captain of the boat “Lifeline” (from the German organization Mission Lifeline), Claus-Peter Reisch, arrested by Maltese authorities in June 2018, or the captain Pia Klemp from the boat “Iuventa” (from the German organization Jugend Rettet) arrested by Italian authorities in August 2017. These criminalized heroes can also be found more broadly in the field of the criminalization of migrant solidarity. The French Cédric Herrou, repeatedly arrested for helping migrants at the French-Italian border, has also embodied this figure in the French public sphere (see *Observatoire du journalisme*, 2017). The unjustly prosecuted hero seems to transcend the political and reach a more symbolic and emotional arena through their construction by and in the media as a figure people identify with.

In the case of S&R, criminalized heroes such as Carola Rackete are depicted as brave and moral citizens, fighting for justice and helping the people in need, even if it means breaking (unjust) rules or laws. Their actions are described as selfless and altruistic but also idealistic. In their analysis of the hegemonic discourse about Carola Rackete in German newspapers, Friede et al. (2022) note that Rackete is seen as embodying the human and Christian values of the EU (i.e., the ones that European politicians cynically disregard in application of the border policy in the Mediterranean). She is a role model with whom one can identify and who represents the good and the moral in society.

The figure of the criminalized hero can be illustrated using Boltanski’s analysis of how spectators emotionally and morally respond to the distant suffering as presented through the media (e.g., TV reports on wars and humanitarian crisis). Following his analysis, one possible response offered to the spectators of distant suffering is to be sympathetic to a benefactor to whom the suffering person is grateful. Through this emotional response the criminalized hero is seen as a benefactor to whom the spectator is sympathetic

⁴ The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) of 1974 and the international convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR) of 1979 express the legal duty of rescuing endangered people at sea.

for his or her act of benevolence toward the drowning migrants (Boltanski, 1999, pp. 77-95).

Furthermore, the meaning of the criminalized hero figure can be contextualized by examining its relations to other actors or figures and how it is embedded in a particular field of action (Moser & Schlechtriemen, 2018, p. 10). For instance, the dominant media have often presented Carola Rackete as the victim of Matteo Salvini and fulfilling the duty of humanitarian rescue in place of the EU. The EU, on the contrary, is often presented as failing to address this issue. This narrative adopts the topic of denunciation, as described by Boltanski, which focuses on a persecutor (here embodied by Matteo Salvini) and enables the distant spectator to feel outraged (Boltanski, 1999, pp. 57-76). The criminalized hero is constructed as an active subject, as they are treated as an individual with a biography and a title (e.g., captain).

The counter-figure of the criminalized hero and its narrative introduce and spread a substantial critique of the criminalization of humanitarian S&R by affirming the moral and ethical duty of assisting endangered migrants in the Mediterranean, which is presented as superior to the political interests related to migration policy. The criminalized hero, bravely embodying moral and human values in a hostile field of action, fundamentally questions the deaths at the border and deconstructs the narrative supporting criminalization as being on the “wrong side” of justice and morals. As analyzed by Moser and Schlechtriemen (2018), figures emerge “within fields of practice in which a structural transformation is close at hand or already underway” and “point out possible new reactions and behaviors that can be discussed through them” (pp. 11-12). In this sense, the construction of the counter-figure tends to channel the discourse in the frame of social justice, presented as morally just, and in opposition to criminal justice, presented as a political tool used in this case in a morally wrong way. Nevertheless, this effect remains limited as media advocating against criminalization unintentionally increase the visibility of the discourse they seek to debunk through associational links (Cusumano & Villa, 2020).

The counter-figure also transforms how the political message is framed through its effects. For Friede et al. (2022, p.191), the focus on the rescue turns the macabre dying at the border into a heroic and positive action realized by civilians. It raises interrogation about how the engagement of civil society and media in the question of border policy is staged. Their solidarity seems to be triggered through identification figures that they can relate to (and who are not migrants). According to the authors, the identification figure eases spectators’ consciences and transfers their responsibility of bettering and humanizing the situation to a person who is constructed as a hero. That way, the discourse and the political action are highly emotionalized and romanticized. For Penchaszadeh and Sferco (2020), the construction of heroic figures, such as Carola Rackete, puts the idea of sacrifice at its center and resembles the religious figures of the martyrs. These processes of sacralization and hyper-individualization tend to blend the political and ethical backgrounds: migrants

become an anonymous mass, and other S&R activists disappear from the picture as if Carola Rackete would fight alone and detached from the collective action of which she is a part. Friede et al. (2022) have similar findings concerning the position of migrants in this narrative. Migrants are placed in the background and almost always described as an anonymous and passive mass, as objects deprived of subjectivity (they are never addressed as individuals but always as a group). By contrast, the hyper-individualization of the criminalized hero reinforces this phenomenon. According to the authors, this way of representing the migrants supports a racist view of this group. At the same time, the authors acknowledge that the suffering of the migrants is a central piece of the construction of this figure. However, the suffering seems to primarily point to the persecutors (e.g., Salvini, the EU) and to the benefactors (e.g., the rescuers) who are the main actors of the narrative; migrants are situated at the bottom in the hierarchical order of the discourse.

Thus, one can say that the figuration of the criminalized hero refocuses the debate on the humanitarianization of the borders as a moral and social justice duty. The criminalized heroes are identification figures through which criticism towards criminalization and unhuman border policy is addressed. At the same time, the hyper-individualization and sacralization of the counter-figure tend to emotionalize and depoliticize the discourse. The counter-narrative and counter-figure encompass a narrow humanitarian social justice frame within the frame of criminalization. In this way, both humanitarianize the discourse on border policy and tend to contain it to a depoliticized question of human rights.

Wide mediatization of the (counter-)figures and their (counter-)narratives have had unintended implications on the criminalized landscape of S&R. These implications are scrutinized in the next section.

The Transformation of the Civilian Search and Rescue Landscape

Yes, we have become really famous with Carola Rackete... In the beginning, we were overwhelmed by all the requests from the media. That was a crazy time for all of us. We had to organize our PR work because that was clear to us that we couldn't address all the requests. (Sea-Watch employee, June 2021)⁵

In the interviews I conducted with German S&R activists, it appears that the media's attention brought by the construction of the figure of the criminalized hero has profoundly transformed the landscape of humanitarian S&R and its practices in this particular country.

For example, in 2019, the Carola Rackete case was a game changer for the organization Sea-Watch, for whom she worked as a captain as she was arrested. As underlined in the quote by a Sea-Watch employee, this case went viral and

⁵ All interview quotes are translated from the German by the author.

brought so much attention from the media that the NGO had to grow its media team (from zero employees in 2015 to eight in 2021). Since its creation at the end of 2015, the organization has grown fast and went from no employees to more than 100 in 2021. This rapid growth accelerated in 2019 with the Carola Rackete case and shortly after the Italian and Maltese criminalization campaign started. The moralization of the debate around these new criminalized figures seems to have reached a broader audience. Responding to the topic of denunciation, more and more spectators found the arrest of Carola Rackete unjust, showing their solidarity by donating money to her cause and expressing support on social media. For instance, as the ship captain was arrested, a fundraising campaign started by two German TV journalists, Jan Böhmermann and Klaas Heufer-Umlauf, raised over one million euros within only two days. The participation of the public through donations, spearheaded by famous TV journalists, is similar to what Boltanski described in his analysis of the topics of denunciation and sentiment (1999). The emotionalization of the distant suffering delivered by journalists to spectators is constructed through empathy and sympathy toward the benefactor, who is the activist-victim unjustly criminalized (the topic of sentiment), and through antipathy toward the persecutor (i.e., Matteo Salvini, the topic of denunciation). In this context, spectators are not passive and distant witnesses of injustice; they wish to act and become political actors by participating in the reproduction of the discourse of pity or indignation and donating money.

Yes, many donations. For instance, with the money, we created a foundation with other organizations. Because Jan Böhmermann has raised one or two million Euros, and we decided to create this foundation to serve the cause of civilian S&R and, more generally, to support people on the move. (Sea-Watch employee, June 2021)

With this new influx of money, Sea-Watch and other organizations decided to create the “Safe Passage Foundation,” which raises money to fund S&R projects (as mentioned in the interview quoted above). The creation of this foundation illustrates the growing interest in S&R within the German civilian, religious, and humanitarian landscape. Representatives from the German protestant church, a powerful lobby group in Germany, expressed their solidarity with S&R NGOs in response to the arrests of several activists by the Italian government and decided to join and financially participate in the new foundation. Nevertheless, the growing public attention toward these S&R NGOs produced not only new alliances, donations, and solidarities but also new enemies and attacks (mainly online hateful comments) (Cusumano & Bell, 2021).

This shift in the humanitarian S&R landscape has affected the smaller S&R organizations that depend on donations. As some NGOs’ fame and donation money have grown exponentially, those of smaller NGOs have dropped proportionally. The shift changed the balance of power structurally within the S&R scene: the more significant the NGO becomes, the more space it gets in the public area, the more donation money it attracts, and the more influence it

gets in the S&R landscape. Leaders of S&R organizations are well aware of how an NGO's economy is bound to its visibility in the public space. Through the appropriation and instrumental use of the counter-figure, they adopt new practices to navigate through the context of criminalization, as the following quote from the head of a small German S&R organization shows:

It's the way media works; they need a protagonist, and Carola Rackete was a good fit because she isn't dumb and she's a woman, and [this situation] has many advantages. Especially for ARD (the biggest federal organization for German media), it was a godsend. They produced documentation they exploited on their online media center for a long time. And, of course, it is perfect for raising money. ... It's really advantageous for us if we can control that because then you have a protagonist [in the media discourse], and I would be one myself..." (Head of a small S&R NGO, April 2021)

Seeing what happened with Carola Rackete, this NGO tried to adopt the strategy of producing a criminalized hero. The head of this NGO decided to become a "protagonist" himself (this is his wording), a criminalized hero, in the moral economy of the criminalized landscape of S&R in order to attract more media attention and the donation money that comes with it. The head of the NGO also stated during the interview that he plans to get his teeth refurbished to embody this often-televised moral figure better.

This seemingly unimportant anecdote illustrates the degree to which the moral counter-figure of the criminalized hero can be used instrumentally and strategically to improve the place of an organization in a hierarchical and competitive humanitarian S&R landscape. Navigating and adapting within a constantly moving criminalized environment (Vigh, 2009) means, in the S&R case, handling the dominant media narrative to gain room for maneuvering and staying an active player in the construction of this particular field. The growing attention toward and the rapid growth of some S&R organizations point to the fact that the counter-figure is a powerful instrument that reinforces the humanitarian side of the border policy, not only on a discursive and symbolic scale but also on a material and financial one.

Adapting its practices to the dominant narrative for instrumental reasons may also lead to adapting its social justice model toward something apolitical that corresponds to the expectations of the "humanitarian industrial complex" (Dadusc & Mudu, 2020) as a place where donation money for NGOs is generated. This sentiment is exemplified in the following quote by the same NGO head:

Of course, if you are apolitical, you can raise more money... It's a bit complicated, but the question is... you have two extremes, and you navigate between the two. So, on the one side, you can have extreme political claims, and on the other side, you can have a serious conservative claim, 'it's all about human lives.' (Head of a small S&R NGO, April 2021)

The White Savior Industrial Complex and the Attempt at an Ethical Social Justice Discourse

A lot more attention. When we speak about activists (and not about migrants)... I think the media attention, it's always the white-savior theme; somehow, there is a hunger from the media for it. When there is a white person, who somehow helps another person, it's... I don't know, glorified, romanticized. The white suffering is then highly stylized. 'A white person is in prison, oh!', and then the media go crazy. It's a racist pattern... (Legal advisor of an S&R organization, March 2022).

The construction and diffusion of the criminal figure and counter-figure have framed the debate about the humanitarian S&R around the imaginary of the white savior. The figure of the white savior, which is not specific to humanitarian S&R, critically describes how white individuals embody the figure of the hero by saving or rescuing non-white people in a pattern that denies agency to the non-white people who are the passive recipients of white benevolence. Nowadays, this figuration is mainly identified in humanitarianism and international development assistance. In the case of S&R, this figure overlaps with those of the criminalized hero and the RAS.

The "White Savior Industrial Complex," as described by the writer Teju Cole (2012), refers to the damaging effect of white saviorism, which is not about justice but rather an emotional experience that validates white privileges through isolated charity actions that do not aim to change the structural roots of the issue (Aronson, 2017). This dynamic is at the heart of the deterrent migration policy, which both reduces the possible narratives around S&R to the question of the legitimacy of white activists (typically centered around one individual) to fight for human rights and positions the drowning migrants in the background of this moral debate.⁶

In the interviews conducted, activists claiming a critical political stance often concluded that the mediatization of the situation and its focus on white activists tend to screen a more complex problem and depoliticize and moralize the discourse at the same time (for instance, in the quote above by the legal advisor of the S&R organization). While the heroization of S&R activists seems to serve the humanitarian S&R cause by bringing public attention and money, it also appears to harm the pro-migrant cause by framing the debate around the activists themselves and not the cause they are fighting for.

But, we have (ethical guidelines) about how we represent ourselves to the outside. Our media team developed ethical guidelines over the years. For example, we do not do pictures with babies, that kind of stuff. Stuff that I find really disturbing, white-savior bullshit, we don't do that ... Or pictures that show refugees in terrible

⁶ Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the mediascape is not monolithic, and voices that are critical of the white savior figure emerged (even if in a minority). For instance, Sarah Mardini, a Syrian refugee and rescuer, has been constructed as a criminalized hero in many dominant media. For example, the Netflix movie *The Swimmers* (Sally El-Hosaini, 2022) has been dedicated to her story.

shape, in the water, and in need of help. And then comes the white guy and rescues him. Against that kind of stuff, we have ethical guidelines. If a tweet with that kind of picture comes out, I can assure you that we will discuss it. We will take care of that. (employee of an S&R organization, June 2021)

To recenter the social justice frame to a pro-migrant and anti-racist direction (and avoid the pitfall of white-saviorism), some organizations (including those claiming autonomous solidarity; see Dadusc & Mudu, 2020) have formulated internal ethical guidelines for their PR Team. They set limits on the white-savior figure by refusing, for example, to take pictures of white activists carrying a black baby, and address the problem of the migration policy in public interventions. These critical S&R organizations and activists do not act alone, as they are part of a broader landscape of pro-migrant and anti-racist organizations (e.g., AlarmPhone, Borderline Europe) in which the critical discourse of white saviorism circulates.

We use the attention on us to then say in the second step in interviews and in social media: Hey, we are criminalized, but this is a symptom of a racist system under which less privileged people suffer much more, namely, for example, people who drive the boats on the Mediterranean and then sit in prison for absurdly many years, in Greek prisons. (Employee of an S&R NGO, February 2022)

Another way of fighting the harmful effects of the white savior industrial complex is to use the figure of the white savior to highlight the more significant structural issue, and by doing so recenter the social justice model toward the fight against the criminalization of migration (and not only the criminalization of white activists). As mentioned in the above quotation, the focus on white activists makes invisible the much broader criminalization of migrants of color, who are charged with the same accusations as the white rescuers. The white savior industrial complex tends to impose a bicameral view of people: while white activists are worthy of public attention, and their criminalization is worth outrage, migrants of color and the criminalization they experience seem to deserve much less attention. In highlighting the criminalization of boat drivers, who are accused of human trafficking and encounter particularly severe sentences, critical activists and groups also contribute to deconstructing the figure of the smuggler as a monolithic group of criminals profiting from vulnerable migrants. Another example of this process can be found in the campaign “Free the Samos Two,” which fights for the liberation of two boat drivers of color accused of smuggling and helping illegal entry for migrants. The campaign uses the face of Carola Rackete on its website and tries to stress the role of the border regime and the double standards of justice and public opinion that are at play in the criminalization of migration, whether the criminalization is about white activists or migrants of color (Free the Samos Two, 2022). In the same vein, the campaign “Day of Smuggling – Festive Tribute of Europe’s Smugglers” led by Borderline Europe subverts the white

savior narrative by celebrating testimonies of migrants accused of smuggling (Borderline Europe, 2023).

Conclusion

Through the lens of figuration of crime and social justice, this article contributes to the growing research field on border studies, critical studies on humanitarianism, and the criminalization of migrant solidarity. More specifically, it brings a new understanding of the de- and repoliticization processes (Cuttitta, 2018) that occur in the field of humanitarian help and migration. It also provides new empirical material for studying how different criminal and social justice models compete to become the dominant ones.

Tensions between humanitarianization and securitization of the discourse around the deaths at the border, and between the development of humanitarian S&R practices and their criminalization, characterize the current European southern border regime. The construction of the negative figure of the RAS was first introduced in the public space by right-wing media and politicians and then became a central piece in the discourse of liberal and conservative media and politicians when addressing the S&R topic. This construction adopts a humanitarian-like narrative in which deaths at the border can be avoided through the fight against human smuggling (with which humanitarian S&R is associated). EU governments support this narrative by combatting and criminalizing human smuggler networks and those associated with them (i.e., humanitarian S&R). The RAS figure tends to strengthen a criminal justice model based on the de-humanitarianization and the re-securitization of the borders. It continues the process of criminalization of migration and strengthens a securitized moral order in which migrants and their allies are depicted as illegitimate, criminal, and a threat to Europe.

The counter-figure of the criminalized hero is constructed in opposition to the figure of the RAS and presents S&R activists as unjustly criminalized and their rescue activity as morally good and humane, thus bolstering a social justice model based on defending fundamental human rights and human life. This counter-figure has a significant media impact and broadens the visibility of humanitarian S&R in society and their sources of income. However, its diffusion focuses on the denunciation of the criminalization of white European activists, rendering the structural causes of the deadly border policy (i.e., the closing of borders and migration routes) less visible. In addition, the figure of the white savior is overlaid onto the figure of the criminalized hero. In order to reorient the border policy towards an anti-racist and decolonial direction, activists adapt their practices and attempt to recenter the discourse on the broader issue of the criminalization of migration.

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