

CAGE ISLANDS

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The reception crisis presently being experienced in the Canary Islands cannot be explained without taking into account resistance to referring the newcomers to the mainland. This policy of containment is based on the assumption that immigrants who are not eligible for the processes of international protection will be returned immediately. This is the great fallacy of European migration and border policies which, moreover, tend to create black holes in basic rights and are a breeding ground for the far right. In sum, many of the crises that are presently afflicting Europe are intersecting in these spaces.



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DECEMBER
2020

* This article has
previously been
published
in *El País*.

The Arguineguín dock on the island of Gran Canaria is now a symbol of the latest reception crisis on the outer borders of the European Union. It is partly explained by numbers. So far this year, the Canary Islands have recorded the arrivals of some 17,000 irregular immigrants, more than half of them in the last two months. Other factors are a failure of foresight of the administrations, poor coordination, and lack of any clear agreement within the Spanish government, especially between the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration.

Yet there is an even more basic —if that is possible— reason which explains this reception crisis, namely resistance to referring the newcomers to the mainland. It is estimated that only 10% of those who have reached the Canary Islands this year have been transferred, despite the fact that many of the peninsula's reception resources are unused. This is an essential difference with the open boat crisis of 2006 when transfers (with more or less delay) were the norm. Another difference is that we are now all aware of the refugee camps on the Greek islands. Alluding to this, the member of parliament, Ana Oramas of the Canarian Coalition, reminded the house that “the islands are not a cage”.

Nevertheless, the fact is that the Minister of the Interior, Fernando Grande-Marlaska, is insisting that the immigrants must be held on the islands. Although the reasons for emigrating lie more in origin than in destination, he argues that transfers to the mainland could have a knock-on effect for those who have not yet left. He also repeatedly states that this denial of referrals is not only his decision but part of European policy. Although there have been no official statements on the matter, it is true that Europe's recently presented “New Pact on Migration and Asylum” has the same idea: create closed spaces at the border for quick decisions about who might be eligible for processes of international protection and who, if this is not the case, will be repatriated immediately.

Apart from detaining immigrants in these “cage islands” many of the crises presently affecting Europe come together there: the demographic crisis; the economic crisis; the political crisis of citizens who feel neglected by the politicians who are supposed to represent them; and, finally, the migrant crisis which, though it is the least serious, is also the most visible.

Here, then, is the great fallacy behind these containment policies. Even if the European Commission and the member states have long emphasised return as a key part of migrant policy, the data show that this does not work. As the European Commission itself recalled, only a third of those who receive an expulsion order are finally returned. This low percentage is partly due to the fact that the countries of origin and transit do not always work together (even when there is a formal agreement). And now there are two additional reasons for not cooperating. First, are the restrictions on mobility imposed by the pandemic and, second, as we have seen in Senegal, an increasingly indignant population is starting to blame the authorities for their silence and responsibility in this situation.

Moreover, these containment policies tend to create black holes of basic rights. Legal assistance is often absent and the right to protection of refugees and minors is not respected. The reception conditions are also inadequate: suffice to recall the unhygienic conditions of overcrowding and insecurity in some of the border “reception” centres. When deportations are streamlined, the indispensable intervention of legal protection services tends to be lacking. This is not about proclivities but a matter of scrupulous compliance with the law because the alternative, in a democratic state, is unacceptable.

Finally, the containment policies affect not only immigrants but also the population in general. The wretchedness of (bare) life inside the camps ends up affecting the lives of those outside as well. Feeling that the government and the EU has abandoned them, the latter tend to blame the immigrants for all their ills. This is a war among the poor and the forsaken. It is a conflict with no end in sight as the solution is not in the hands of one party or another. This may be happening on the geographic fringes but there are no containment policies worthy of the name here because their effects (in the form of votes for the far right) come to the centre sooner or later.

What Lesbos, Samos, Ceuta and Melilla, and now the Canary Islands, have in common is that they are spaces of confinement on the outlying borders of the European Union. Apart from detaining immigrants in these “cage islands” many of the crises presently affecting Europe come together there: the demographic crisis of an empty or emptied Europe which expels its young people; the economic crisis of zones affected by deindustrialisation and processes of globalisation and frequently overdependent on the monoculture of tourism; the political crisis of citizens who feel neglected by the politicians who are supposed to represent them; and, finally, the migrant crisis which, though it is the least serious, is also the most visible, which means that the migrant tends to become the scapegoat for everything else. Without a doubt, there are too many crises for too little space.