



Carola Rackete. Looking for a “safe harbour” against hate

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It is on June 12, 2019, when Carola Rackete¹ rescues at sea 52 migrants from Libya with the ship that commands, the Sea-Watch 3, flying the Dutch flag and owned by the German NGO Sea Watch. Despite the Libyan Coast Guard has formally taken over the coordination of the rescue, the Sea Watch has arrived first at the site of the event and therefore immediately started operations of recovery of shipwrecked people.

They are located on an inflatable boat in precarious conditions, without sufficient fuel to reach the mainland, and on board nobody wears a life jacket. Recovery operations concluded, the commander requests the assignment of a "place of safety" to different maritime authorities, receiving a response from Libyans who have indicated that they can head to the port of Tripoli. Carola replies that Libya cannot be qualified as a “safe harbour”, and she requires another one. In the meantime, she heads north, repeating the request for mooring. Carola then asks for permission to enter an Italian port, but on the 15th of June the Minister of the Interior (at the time of the events, Matteo Salvini) orders the first entry ban against the Sea Watch 3, in implementation of the so-called “security decree two”, as soon as it enters into force, in accordance with the provisions of Article 1².

In the following days, while the ship is stationed in front of Italian territorial waters, repeating the request for the allocation of a harbour where to dock, the authorities will evacuate some migrants in need of urgent medical care. On 26th of June, the Sea Watch

¹ German, 31 years old, a bachelor's degree in nautical sciences, a master's degree in environmental conservation, 5 languages spoken (German, English, Spanish, French, Russian), she drove an icebreaker ship to the North Pole, she spent eight months in the Kamchatka Natural Park (Eastern Russia) as tour guide and equipment maintainer, she was second officer on the Arctic Sunrise of Greenpeace, she has conducted research for the British Antarctic Survey.

² Decree-Law no. 53, 14th June 2019, containing "Urgent provisions on order and public security. (19G00063) (G.U. General Series no. 138 of 14-06-2019)", entered into force on 15th June 2019, available here: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2019/06/14/19G00063/> sg. The Decree Law will be converted into Law no. 77 of 8 August 2019 (in G.U. 9/08/2019, no. 186).



enters the Italian waters and heads towards Lampedusa, disregarding the stop of the Guardia di Finanza patrol boats and invoking the “state of necessity”. It stops, therefore, near the port, waiting for instructions.

On the night of 29th of June (after 17 days) -found that a political solution is late in coming, and the appeals filed with the Administrative Court of Lazio³ and the European Court of Human Rights⁴ failed- the Commander starts the engines and heads towards the quay of the port of Lampedusa, where, finally, it docks, accidentally bumping into a Guardia di Finanza patrol boat during the manoeuvre. Carola Rackete is arrested in flagrante delicto and placed in Lampedusa, accused of violation of article 1100 of the Navigation Code (resistance or violence against warships) and attempted shipwreck (provided for by articles 110 and 428 of the Penal Code). The ship of the German NGO is placed under administrative precautionary confiscation⁵. The prosecutor of Agrigento, Luigi Patronaggio, who also entered into a collision course with Minister Salvini in the previous months, on this occasion he uses very harsh words towards the “captain's” behaviour. “Humanitarian reasons - he commented - cannot justify acts of inadmissible violence against those in uniform who work at sea for the safety of everyone”.

³ Against the entry ban, the Sea Watch 3 appealed to the Regional Administrative Court of Lazio, asking the President to suspend as a precautionary measure the effectiveness of the ministerial order prohibiting the ship from entering Italian territorial waters. On 19 June 2019, the Lazio Regional Administrative Court, without pronouncing on the legitimacy of the measure, simply rejected the request for temporary suspension of the effects of the measure itself, considering that there were “no exceptionally serious and urgent reasons such as to justify the suspension”, since the vulnerable people had already been landed on the 15th of June, and that the Sea Watch 3 did not indicate any other vulnerable individuals on the ship.

⁴ On 25 June 2019, the European Court of Human Rights rejects the request made by Sea Watch 3 for the adoption of “interim measures” allowing the landing on land of the 42 migrants on board the ship for 13 days. The ECHR has decided that there were insufficient grounds to ask the Italian Government to apply a measure provisional disembarkation. Such a measure is, in fact, granted, the Court states, “in exceptional cases where applicants would be exposed - in the absence of such measures - to a real risk of irreparable damage”. In essence, as there is no immediate danger of death (even because the most fragile people have already been transhipped), there is not even an order for a landing immediate. See “Rackete and Others v. Italy - request for interim measure refused in the case of Sea Watch 3”, available here: <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press?i=003-6443361-8477507>.

⁵ On September 25, 2019, the evidential release is notified, but the ship remains under seizure administrative. On 19th of December, then, the Court of Palermo upheld the appeal filed by the German NGO and ordered the release of the vessel. The boat was stranded for over five months in the port of Licata.



So far the mere chronicle of what happened. From this moment on, there will be a long series of violent racist and sexist attacks against Captain Rackete. It's an exemplary story that passes very quickly from everyday life to social networks to courtrooms. Carola's entire path is marked by a series of legal measures which, once issued, become a pretext to justify even public denigration.

The Sea Watch 3 story first, and the one linked to the fate of its captain then, succeed in showing the worst of the hate speech and fake news of the in recent years, intertwining hate and content in an "impeccable" way⁶. And this happens both with statements, declarations and postings by politicians (also in government), and by ordinary people, the same people who then habitually frequent social networks, where, passing from real life to virtual life, they end up transforming ancient frustrations into violent messages, hidden by a screen and a not-so-anonymous keyboard. Obviously, it did not come to this from one day to the next, but there has been a broad preparatory scenario of growing media coverage. From the "boast" of the Minister of the Interior⁷, to the insistence with which the right-wing newspapers (and not only them) have stressed that Carola would be nothing more than a "daddy's girl" or "a pirate"⁸. To reach Valentina Mazzacurati, 29 years old from Rwanda, a sympathizer of the Northern League, who writes on Instagram a post against the "aesthetic features" by Carola⁹. And at the microphones of the show *La Zanzara*, she also reiterates that Carola "does not look like a woman", because "she has dreadlocks, she dresses in a certain way, so she is not decent"¹⁰.

⁶ A similar and even more recent case is the return to Italy of the young Silvia Romano. See L. Melandri, "Power, Sexism and Racism", 22 May 2020, <https://comune-info.net/power-sexism-and-racism/>.

⁷ Here the video of Salvini's statements: <https://video.huffingtonpost.it/35ae0b04-5194-4c78-aa14-973a3ee21a0b>. The reaction of Giorgia Meloni from Fratelli d'Italia is also tough: "And, according to international law, this means that the Sea Watch is a ship that must be seized, that the crew must be arrested, that the immigrants on board must be disembarked and repatriated immediately and that the ship must be sunk in the same way as ships that do not comply with international law".

⁸ For example, "masterful" synthesis in: "Carola Rackete, left-wing heroine pirate who plays at making the captain thanks to daddy", *Il Messaggero*, 27 June, available here: https://www.ilmessaggero.it/italy/capitana_carola_rackete_sea_watch_last_news-4582766.html.

⁹ She would have written: "Can we do something to make her look like a woman? If I looked like that, maybe I'd be a smuggler, too".

¹⁰ Here the audio of the interview: <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/06/29/carola-rackete-lafilo-leghista-banger-criminal-borderline-skating-brawler-streaking-skinny-fa-schifo/5290668/>.



One of the worst scenes the whole world has witnessed was undoubtedly Carola's descent from the ship. In addition to the Guardia di Finanza and the Police, there is also a group of men who shout terrible insults, filmed in a live broadcast (now removed) on the Lampedusa Northern League's Facebook page. These insults are also documented in a video published¹¹ by the Senator of the Democratic Party, Davide Faraone. "I hope these niggers will rape you. Gipsy. Sold. Toxic. Criminal. Arrest her", and other unrepeatable phrases. And then, to the DP deputies present: "They have to rape your wives, these illegal immigrants".

Carola Rackete is insulted with epithets that are generally "reserved" for "certain" women, as Laura Boldrini, Samantha Cristoforetti and Michela Murgia well know, just to mention a few of them. Even the singer Emma Marrone, "guilty" of having shown solidarity with Carola (and previously also with the campaign for "open harbours"), is subjected to a similar media pillory of racism mixed with sexism, together with Paola Turci and Fiorella Mannoia who have supported her. Finally, Alessandra Vella, the judge who did not consider validating Carola's arrest¹², for having made a decision concerning her work, is forced to abandon her social network profiles due to heavy insults and death threats. The fact that Carola has been threatened with "rape"¹³ (a horrible term that even though it continues to be used in the common language) is neither a random fact nor an exceptional event¹⁴. Added to this is the recurring obsession with sexual intercourse of a white woman with one or more black men, which condenses sexist insults with a good dose of racism.

¹¹ The video is available here: <https://www.facebook.com/a8ebb307-5012-4507-af10-cb87143b8988>.

¹² After several days of house arrest, on 2nd of July, Carola's arrest is not validated because "she was doing her duty by saving lives at sea" and no precautionary measures are taken.

¹³ What Carola suffered is a sort of virtual "rape" or perhaps a new form of "social stoning", the result of the infliction of a punishment typical of male chauvinist ideology, and a sign of a perseverance of a real "culture of rape". It is the one that then legitimizes and normalizes abuse in our society. "Rape" should not only be understood as an aggression of a man against a woman, but it is also in words, gestures, threats, daily relationships.

¹⁴ Suffice it to say that, only a few months earlier, a Roma woman had been intimidated in the same way by a CasaPound militant during the clashes over the allocation of social housing in Casal Bruciato, Rome. See: ""Bitch, I'll rape you". Fascists against the Roma in Casal Bruciato", il manifesto, 8 May 2019, available here: <https://ilmanifesto.it/troia-ti-stupro-fascisti-contro-irom-a-casal-burned/>. See also Elisa Pini's sheet on the subject.



But if there had been a man driving Sea-Watch 3, would he have suffered the same lynching and insults? Most likely not: a male captain does not would have received the same unacceptable indecent treatment. In addition to the insults, Carola's public and private life is being probed up to the minimum detail. A fake news factory is good for guiding public opinion and to fuel aggressive speech. Together with her, anyone who has tried to support her is muddy. Numerous posts (up to real viral meme) that show by immortalizing, at the moment of arrest, "an unshaved armpit"¹⁵ of the woman. This is enough to unleash a real wave of insults (from the generalisations on hygiene and the class of German women, up to the suggestion to use an anti-flea product).

Then there are the Libero¹⁶ journalists who "discover" that Carola Rackete is not wearing a brassiere under her black t-shirt during the press conference following the deposition in the public prosecutor's office in Agrigento. Or the post of Venetian deputy of the Northern League, Alex Bazzaro, who publishes on his Facebook profile¹⁷ a retouched photo, so that in the centre of the raft you can see a sumptuously laid table, depicting the parliamentarians of the centre-left during the transfer from the port of Lampedusa to the Sea Watch. Then it's also the turn of the missionary father Alex Zanotelli, who supported Carola's nomination for a Nobel Prize¹⁸, who claimed that all the news stories about Lampedusa had been altered by the press, including the spur. Obviously, a fake news too. While Carola is still under house arrest, many fake news about her private life circulate, then easily "debunked". Like the news according to which Carola's dad would be an arms dealer¹⁹, and that the whole family would gain economic benefit from the destabilisation of the international context. And more. The other news according to which the captain would be deprived of the titles

¹⁵ See: <https://www.giornalettismo.com/carola-rackete-igiene-personale/>.

¹⁶ See here: <https://www.liberoquotidiano.it/gallery/personaggi/13485460/sea-watchcarola-racketeers-without-breast-patronage-g.html>. At a distance of a few days, the "Free Nipple Day" initiative starts in Turin, literally "nipple day "free", scheduled for July 27th.

¹⁷ See: https://corrieredelveneto.corriere.it/venezia-mestre/politica/19_luglio_02/legghistaritocca-foto-gommone-pdma-era-scherzo-4144964a-9c8f-11e9-a0ee-05ea37d418a0.shtml.

¹⁸ See: <https://www.bufale.net/invenzioni-su-padre-alex-zanotelli-sea-watch-3-e-carolarackete-tg-falsi-nonha-speronato/>.

¹⁹ Si veda: <https://www.bufale.net/la-grande-disinformazione-su-ekkehart-rackete-il-padre-dicarola-spacciato-per-mercante-darmi/>.



to be able to lead a ship²⁰. Or the “fake” interview of 30th of June in the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera* (both on paper and online), while Carola is under house arrest²¹. The situation is, then, partially clarified by the *Corriere* itself, which in the article specifies that *“the 31-year-old captain is under house arrest and cannot make statements, but through her lawyers she clarifies the doubts raised by several parties about her behaviour”*. Therefore, the newspaper published a conversation that never happened. And then, the diffusion of Carola's photo-signage, bounced on sites and social networks, taken at the Lampedusa hotspot at the time of validation of the arrest²², with the intention of showing Carola Rackete as a criminal, convicted before any trial.

Carola, in spite of many, returns free, and even “free”, she is the object of mockery, hatred and insults. Among the many haters, the Minister of the Interior, Matteo Salvini, who, from the beginning of the affair, seems to have engaged in a sort of personal “duel” against the woman²³: “For the Italian judiciary to ignore the laws and to spur a patrol boat of the Guardia di Finanza are not sufficient reasons to go to jail. No problem: a measure is ready for the criminal commander Carola Rackete to send her back to his country, because she is dangerous for national security”²⁴.

Numerous reactions, including that of the National Association of Magistrates pointing his finger right at Salvini's declarations: “One again, he has made contemptuous comments towards a judicial decision, detached from any reference to its technical-juridical contents,

²⁰ See: <https://www.bufale.net/carola-rackete-non-ha-la-patente-nautica/>.

²¹ See: V. Piccolillo, “Sea Watch, Carola Rackete speaks: “I had to get into port, I was afraid that some migrants could commit suicide””, 30 June 2019, available here: https://www.corriere.it/Politics/19_June_30/ I had to go in- port-migrant-power-to-suicide-2a0a6448-9aad-11e9-8fdd-d4f7eb4bd62c.shtml.

²² Here a tweet with the incriminated photo: <https://twitter.com/annalisacamilli/status/1145601180258787329?s=12&fbclid=IwAR3F-9G1W76sdRc43HEt-C5hj9TVj1YVIDnrX9vLDjOJdzrIk-TWEZFzgW4w>.

²³ To the point that many newspaper titles have long played on this. For example, see: “The Captain against the Captain: arm wrestling Rackete-Salvini”, 26 June, ilgiornale.it; “Captain and captain in comparison: who has offended the Italians or circumvented the laws?”, 1 July, lavocedineyork.com; “Sea Watch, the Captain beats the Captain, the judge does not validate the arrest, Carola free”, 3 July, qds.it.

²⁴ See his tweet: <https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1146127748194340864>.



which risk to feed a climate of hatred and aversion”, we read in a press note²⁵. “When a measure is unwelcomed to the Minister of the Interior,” continues the NAM, “the magistrate is immediately accused of being in politics”.

Always a few days after Carola's liberation, on a Facebook group called "Il Finanziere"²⁶, 16 thousand users managed by a brigadier of the Guardia di Finanza on leave since 1996, numerous racist and sexist insults have been posted. A crescendo of violent phrases and thoughts, accompanied by unrepeatable insults against the German commander, which ends with the hope of a “nice military coup to restore order and discipline”. Some people invoke “hanging” and others, referring to migrants, say: “throw them overboard with a block around their neck”, “sink the ship”, “put a bomb”.

On 12th of July²⁷, Carola decided to sue, in fourteen pages, the Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini for aggravated defamation and incitement to crime. In the complaint²⁸, Carola refers to the statements made in recent weeks by the Minister, which she finds offensive, as well as the posts published on social networks and the comments made by users to them. Carola asks, therefore, the magistrates to seize the minister's Facebook and Twitter accounts to investigate them. “In the words of Matteo Salvini are conveyed visceral feelings of hatred, denigration, delegitimization and even real de-humanisation”, we read in the text of the lawsuit, full of links to the “sources” (online videos on Facebook made by Salvini, tweets, articles online, live tv). It is also worth noting that the reported outrageous statements do not take place within the functions performed by Matteo Salvini in his “quality” as a minister, but he makes himself strong with “this quality” in order to strengthen his hostile

²⁵ See: https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/politica/2019/07/03/anm-salvini-rischia-alimentare-climate-hate_xQ6zLX9tJotx9ihB5ogiCL.html.

²⁶ The complaint was based on an article published on The Vision website, available here: <https://www.thevision.com/current-events/group-Facebook-financiers/>.

²⁷ “Matteo Salvini – we can read the document reported by Repubblica on 11 July (<https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2019/07/11/news/carola-230955102/>) - has publicly and repeatedly called me boastful, outlaw, accomplice of traffickers, potential murderer, delinquent, criminal, pirate, one who tried to kill financiers and kill five Italian soldiers, who made an attempt on the lives of soldiers on duty, who deliberately risked killing five young men and who takes his time to break Italian laws and makes politics on the skin of the wretched: the seriousness of the injury to my honour is evident in itself”.

²⁸ The full text of the complaint is available here: https://www.meteoweek.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Querela-Carola-Rackete_definitiva.pdf.



messages to the highest degree possible: “an ordinary crime, therefore, for which they should not nor can the parameters against which ministerial offences are measured, nor the resulting procedural specialties be applied”, the lawsuit continues. A picture that, we read in the lawsuit, “measures, in terms of greater gravity, the hate speech of a subject who plays a top executive role in the Italian Government”. Interventions that are, “a pure propaganda and an inciting instrument of a 'hate speech', which overwhelms every recall to the institutional function”. Claims that have also put Carola's own safety at serious risk, “ending up inciting the audience of her readers to commit further offences” against her²⁹. But Carola's story does not end here. Every time she re-appears in public, the initial acrimony resurfaces with force. Like when, few months later, in November 2019, she is hosted in the RAI tv programme “Che tempo che fa”³⁰.

On January 16th, 2020, the third Criminal Section of the Supreme Court³¹ rejected the appeal by the Agrigento Public Prosecutor's Office, filed on 16 July 2019, against the order by which the judge for preliminary investigations, at the same Court, had decided not to validate Carola's arrest. The Supreme Court confirms the setting of Agrigento's judge: because the commander had acted in the fulfilment of a duty, that is to save human lives, establishing the primacy of law over that of force. And also, an important decision of high jurisprudence, which frees Carola once again, becomes a reason for spreading hate messages. As in the case of Silvia Bocci, deputy inspector of the State Police of the Grosseto Police Headquarters, who, after learning the reasons for the Supreme Court's ruling, defines Carola Rackete as a “dirty left-wing mint” on Facebook. “She's just a terrorist who's going to end up like it deserves”, while those who defend it are “a plethora of decontextualised mummies from real life so adept at splitting hairs into 4 that you forget what you are talking about”. Bocci

²⁹ In February 2020, the Milan Public Prosecutor's Office closed the investigation.

³⁰ See here for example: <https://it.blastingnews.com/politica/2019/11/carola-rackete-dafazio-reactions-social-heavy-critical-from-melons-and-calendar-003022942.html>.

³¹ Criminal Court of Cassation, Section III, Judgment no. 6626 of 20 February 2020 (hearing 16 January 2020), available here: <https://www.giurisprudenzapenale.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Cass-6626-2020.pdf>.



uses very offensive words also for the migrants landed in Lampedusa³². A post removed with clumsy excuses almost immediately. Carola's judicial affair seems to have ended and also the insults towards her.

A thank you to Carola is due. Because despite the heavy insults received, she has been able to face it all with enormous dignity. After all, those who attacked and continue to attack Carola Rackete, hates and loathes her not only for her choices, political or otherwise, but also because of her choice not to be homologated and influenceable. And, above all, for her being “free”.

³² See here: <https://www.nextquotidiano.it/la-fantastica-retromarcia-della-poliziotta-che-dadella-terrorist-a-carola-rackete/>.