Global South/Global North Comparatism: The Case of the Refugee Crisis in the Mediterranean

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The text below is the abstract of a presentation given by Hala Halim, New York University, on the Presidential Panel at the American Comparative Literature Association annual meeting in Utrecht, the Netherlands, on July 8, 2017.

An intervention in the gestating project of South-South comparatism, the presentation made the argument that such comparative work, timely though it is, cannot afford to overlook the South’s multiply overdetermined relations with the North. Granted, Third-Worldism must be recouped for a genealogy that undermines Eurocentrism, whether in the cultural sphere or in terms of international law. Scholarship on the contributions of Small States and Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL), particularly in the context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, was cited. The presentation went on to press the point that defaulting to an exclusive focus on Third World or Global South interrelations risks losing sight of the structuring effect of global capital, the existence of pockets of the South within the North and vice versa--this articulated in dialogue with essays published in The Global South journal--and adumbrating solidarities between constituencies in the South and in the North.

The presentation proposed an expanded understanding of Antonio Gramsci’s Southern Question as a generative framework and went on to demonstrate this by undertaking a comparatist reading of regards croisés on a Mediterranean “southern question.” Halim brought into dialogue two texts on the refugee crisis, a creative non-fiction book written in the South and researched in part in the North, specifically Egyptian migrants in Italy--Ezzat El Kamhawi’s 2011 al-‘Ar min al-Daffatayn (Shame on Both Shores)--and the representations in a film made in the North on Southern migrants to Italy--Gianfranco Rosi’s 2016 documentary Fire at Sea.