

An interview with Hind Meddeb, director of *Paris Stalingrad*: “It’s not a film about refugees, it’s a film about human beings”

David Walsh
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I spoke this week to Hind Meddeb, the director of *Paris Stalingrad*.

David Walsh: *Paris Stalingrad* is a very strong and moving film. It depicts a cruel, deliberate policy of the French national and Paris city governments toward refugees and immigrants. How would you describe that policy?

Hind Meddeb: The population of Paris is democratic-minded, left-wing, very open-minded. This is not a racist city. As you can see in the film, ordinary citizens show solidarity, they try to help. It was really a shock. How come a government in a city that is “left,” that is not fascist or right-wing populist, or racist, is doing that?

To be honest, when I started doing the film, I thought as soon as we alerted people, as soon as we highlighted the conditions, things were going to change. But that didn’t happen.

Slowly, I understood what you just said, that it’s a deliberate policy. There is a social crisis right now in Europe. There are fewer jobs, people are not well-paid. The cost of everything is increasing, only the salaries are not increasing. It’s very difficult for ordinary people, the working class, to survive. It’s a question of the distribution of wealth.

The politicians don’t have the power or the willingness to change things, they won’t pressure the big companies and the international economic system, but they have to be re-elected. They base their entire campaigns now on these themes: immigration, closing borders, foreign people, etc. They direct this message to the population: you have citizenship, you are white, you will always be better treated than the foreigners. It’s a way to create a hierarchy, and divisions, among the people.

The only power the politicians exercise is to close the borders and repress people. The various right-wing parties are growing: the National Front in France, Salvini in Italy, the same in Hungary, all across Europe, so the other parties, including the “left” parties, decide: we have to work with this same agenda. Instead of posing an alternative, they are running after the arguments of the right wing. In the end, there is no difference between the “left” and right parties. You think: my God, who am I going to vote for?

The whole refugee crisis is a fiction. It’s intended to create

this imaginary situation. It’s a kind of story-telling. My film is dangerous in a way, because this film is showing what the state wants to show, what it wants to boast about, repression and the fact that these people are not treated like French people. When you create imagery, you always have to think about who is directing or manipulating the whole situation.

The day they put all the refugees on buses in Paris, all the television cameras and the media were there. They wanted to create the image of France being invaded. There is no invasion. The borders are already closed. It’s almost impossible now to reach Europe. There are only a few people who arrive in France, and lots of them have already nearly died many times. They are shipwreck survivors.

It’s similar, not the same, but similar to what happened with the Jews in the 1930s in Europe. The Jews were not even foreigners. Imagine the politicians who created the difference between Jews and Europeans, when the Jews were totally European—they made Europe! Intellectuals, artists, scientists. Einstein, Freud. History repeats itself.

The politicians are not courageous. In Paris, there are 200,000 empty homes. Why doesn’t the mayor of Paris say it’s illegal to have an empty home? If you keep it empty, the state is going to take it and we are going to create social housing. They won’t do it.

The center of Paris, where I live and where I grew up, is totally changed. It’s like San Francisco or New York or London. There is gentrification, and you have all these empty buildings because of speculation. The poor people have to go farther and farther away from the center. You have no social mix, then you have very boring cities.

One of the reasons I made my film was to capture in images the situation at that time. Because everything is different now. Everything you see in the film has disappeared. The refugees are in the suburbs, in places where you can’t see them. They are behind the ring road, under the ring road. They are in terrible conditions. To be honest, my film underestimates their conditions. Dozens of refugees have committed suicide.

I admired very much the recent occupation of the Panthéon by African immigrants. France would not be so rich, so

powerful, if she had not colonized Africa. I come from a colonized country too. My father was Tunisian, my mother was half-Moroccan, half-Algerian. My parents came because of their ideas and their belief they could have rights and freedoms they didn't have in their own countries. My father was a writer. My mother wanted women's rights. They came to France as a country of human rights. They respected the culture. I grew up with that.

I did the film because I was so shocked to see what was happening in my city. I went to Germany and I studied the rise of fascism, between 1929 and 1933. I was always very aware of these issues: the state of emergency, exceptional measures and so forth. How could fascism arise in such a cultured country?

DW: I think you're correct to point to the social and economic crisis, and the fact that supposedly left- and right-wing politicians are carrying out the same policies. In the US, the Obama administration, with Hillary Clinton at the center of it, launched the war in Libya. They killed thousands with drone strikes, they deported massive numbers of people.

HM: Nobody liked to talk about it at the time, but Obama deported many people. Now it's Trump, they shout about it.

DW: The great powers make the wars that produce the refugees, in Afghanistan, Syria, Libya. The US, Germany, Britain, France make the wars, the people flee and they're blamed for the crisis.

HM: They need the wars to make money. There is always a money issue. France is selling weapons to Saudi Arabia to fight the war in Yemen. It's a big scandal.

DW: There are heart-breaking scenes in your film. When the 14-year-olds and 15-year-olds introduce themselves, it's devastating. What horrors they have seen!

HM: These are kids from countries where French was the colonial language. They think: we speak French, we want to go to school, we want to learn, we want to have a chance. And then they are treated like this.

DW: How do the refugees describe the situation in Libya?

HM: They describe conditions of slavery. This is what Souleymane is talking about. There is no rule of law. It's the jungle. Souleymane almost died many times. He worked in a gold mine on the border of Chad and Libya. They were not paid. They worked in incredibly dangerous conditions, down deep mine shafts.

One day, there was a big party and everybody got drunk. The guards fell asleep. Souleymane and two of his friends said, let's go. They took a chance. They could have died in the desert. They walked for miles. They reached a road and a car stopped for them, took them to the next city. Then they worked, not as slaves, but in a factory and they saved money for a boat across the Mediterranean.

DW: How much do they have to pay?

HM: It depends. The quality of the boat improves the more you pay. The poorer you are, the worse the boat. They pay between \$500 and \$1,000.

Souleymane arrived in Italy and he managed to avoid them taking his fingerprints. If you are a refugee, you cannot choose the country you want to go to. Once you give your fingerprints, you are not allowed to apply for asylum in another country. So everybody has to apply in Italy, Spain, Greece and Bulgaria. It makes no sense. It's like Kafka.

Souleymane was hiding in Italy, in the woods. It took him a long time to reach France. First, he went to Calais. He wanted to get to England, and when he saw it was impossible, he went back to Paris and decided to apply for asylum there. When I met him, he didn't have anything. He had a tee-shirt, it was very cold, and he didn't have a jacket. He had slippers, not proper shoes. He was exhausted.

You have to apply in French. So you have to pay a translator to put down your story in French. And many of the people who offer themselves as translators can't really speak the language. They just take the money. Nothing is done so that people can apply in their own language. Souleymane had been traveling for five years, since his village was burned in Sudan.

I did this film because I live in Paris, I have to show what's happening, to create a record, I have to show to the world what's going on. We create this solidarity. It's not a film about refugees, it's a film about human beings. It's a film that shows it could be you, it could be me. There is no difference between us and these people. We share the same humanity. You have to fight the ideology that is supported by the money and power.

You have always had this, people who are ready to destroy, to make more money and be more powerful. You also have the beauty of the solidarity that I saw, for example, in Palermo in Sicily, where I also made a film. The poorest people are the most generous, welcoming. Palermo is a crazy city. You have very poor fishermen living with very poor immigrants.

This is what happened with the *gilets jaunes* [yellow vests], when people who had never spoken to each other started to speak together. Of course, the police wanted to destroy it, because it's dangerous. It's questioning the system. In Sudan, people went into the streets by the millions. That's the way forward, I think. In Hong Kong too there are mass protests.

I think life is stronger than death. People want peace, they don't want war. You cannot have permanent war. It's a never-ending fight, but it's possible.

We did the film to give these people a voice. So the people seeing the film could meet them.



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