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Caporalato capitalism, Labour brokerage and agrarian change in a Mediterranean society

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses a contemporary form of illegal labour mediation, known in Italian as *caporalato*, which persists in industrialized agricultural production in southern Italy despite a decade of unrelenting legal and policy reforms. Focusing on the regions of Puglia and Basilicata during the so-called Mediterranean 'refugee crisis' (2011-2018), this article addresses the question of how practices of *caporalato* remain a central infrastructure of globalized agri-food production, while segregating migrant workers in rural society. Adopting an infrastructural lens, we propose two main arguments. First, we highlight the need to shift analytical concerns from 'criminal' labour gangmasters and their protection business to a broader analysis of their role in the reproduction of precarious migrant labour. Second, we highlight how *caporalato* infrastructures contribute to adversely incorporating migrant 'seasonal' workers into local agricultural labour markets in a context of increasingly globalized retail agriculture and changing state policies.

KEYWORDS: Labour migration agriculture processing tomatoes broker capitalism Southern Italy ethnography geography

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes

1 We understand labour reproduction as the forces that facilitate the reproduction of labour force, including health care, social service delivery as well as the unwaged work that is used to maintain labour power, and as such becomes a subsidy for capital. We understand labour reproduction as value-producing, not only because of the fundamental role of such unwaged work for the production of compliant labouring subjects, but also because it generates value that is internalized by the labouring pool and their social and economic networks (Mezzadri 2019: 38). Particularly useful comparative studies in this domain are Tania Li's (2017) work on Indonesian palm oil plantations, Lindquist (2017) and Biao's (2012) work on Indonesian and Chinese labour migration broker networks, and Peano (2017) on Southern Italy.

2 Borgo San Nicola is a pseudonym for a small agricultural town. We prefer not to name places and interviewees for security reasons and - to paraphrase one author who we cite as a main source of inspiration for this article - because we aim at highlighting dynamics and mechanisms rather than the idiosyncratic details of capitalist brokers in the given context (Blok 1974). The bracketing of 'seasonal' workers highlights their temporary but recurrent employment by the same agricultural firms, as we show in section 4.

3 Gambetta's analysis has also been widely criticized on historical grounds: e.g. Lupo 2009.

4 The total figure for Italian farms amounted to 3,1 million in 1982 and to 1,4 in 2013 (ISTAT). More specifically, the number of farms decreased by 9,1% in the 1980s, by 15,9% in the 1990s and by 32,4% in the 2000s. The highest rate of decrease concerns the small farms and the farms in the interior and mountain areas. In the 2000s, the average farm size grew from 5 to 8,4, while the number of farms with more than 50 hectares (in the Italian setting they are considered large farms) grew by 22%.

5 The term 'ghetto' is widely used in Italy to designate the informal settlements of migrant farm labourers in the countryside, especially in the South; nonetheless, it is also an 'emic' term: on the basis of a multi-sited ethnography, the anthropologist Benoit Hazard (2007) noted that migrants from Burkina Faso used the term 'ghetto' to designate not only the settlements in Southern Italy, but all those spaces of passage and transit along their mobility circuits, in both Africa (Mauritania, Algeria, Libya) and Europe since the mid-1980s. The first important 'ghetto' of migrant farm labourers in Southern Italy was commonly known by both migrants and natives as the 'ghetto of Villa Literno', in Campania, in the early 1990s (Schmidt di Friedberg 1995). In our field research, the main ghettos have been Borgo Mezzanone, Rignano Garganico, and Tre Titoli (Puglia), Boreano, Mulinu Matinelle and Felandina (Basilicata).

6 Previously, the public recruitment of migrant employees in Italy occurred predominantly through the so-called *Decreti flussi* (decrees for the determination of migrant flows), which assign specific quota to each economic sector each year. In addition, the Bossi-Fini Law (2002) assigns the responsibility for migrant recruitment directly to the Italian employer. Concretely, this means that migrant workers may only physically come to Italy after such invitation has been endorsed, and they lose the right to territorial residence in the absence of a formal employment contract.

7 UNHCR statistics estimate the number of yearly arrivals by sea across the Central Mediterranean route in 2011-2017 to be between 120 and 180.000 - dropping sharply to just over 23.000 in 2018. On the political and discursive construction of this Mediterranean 'migration crisis' see Heller and Pezzani 2013, Cuttitta 2014.

8 The North Africa Emergency plan stipulated that migrants who were fleeing from Northern Africa between January and April 2011 acquired an automatic right to a temporary permit of stay for humanitarian reasons (a so-called *permesso umanitario*).

9 Upon their arrival on the Italian territory, migrants were assigned to a reception centre for new arrivals. There they received a first level of assistance, which varied according to the reception centres. Migrants who applied for asylum were obliged to submit their application to the territorial commission in the region of stay. In case of a successful outcome, this resulted in the prefect assigning a place of residence where the applicant could stay. The residential permit had to be renewed every three months until a territorial commission decided if and what kind of protection the applicant would receive from the Italian state. In case of a positive decision, the commission then granted subsidiary, humanitarian, or refugee protection, after which the applicant was 'free' to lead an independent life in Italy or any other European country.

10 Figures obtained from the organization.

11 By way of example, according to official figures, the first level reception centres, those designated for new arrivals, were already working at 24% over their capacity in 2014 (ANCI et al. 2014).

12 Minister of Interior, various reports, see www.interno.gov.it/it/stampa-e-comunicazione/dati-e-statistiche/sbarchi-e-accoglienza-dei-migranti-tutti-i-dati.

13 Since 2001, the Dublin regulations stipulate that so-called first countries of arrival need to take responsibility over the migrants' asylum claims. In 2013, the Dublin III negotiations reconfirmed this principle and further securitized and digitalized border controls.

14 From the interviews with concerned workers, it emerges that local citizens categorically refused to rent them apartments in that period; this attitude only changed slightly as a result of the constant interventions by Caritas, the local bishop and migrant associations.

15 For example a recorded conversation circulated in the media at the time, recording several entrepreneurs organizing piecework mediated by the same white *caporale* from Borgo San Nicola.

16 It is important to underscore that the Law 199/2016 - the anti-caporalato Law - mentions housing for migrant labour as a purely logistical operation ('sistemazione logistica').

Additional information

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