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## Labour Contracting Systems and African Migrant Networks in Foggia, Apulia, Southern Italy

### Introduction

This study focuses on the working and living conditions of African migrant workers in the agricultural sector of Southern Italy, more precisely on the tomato harvesting and picking season in the province of Foggia in the Apulia region. The paper investigates the Italian gangmaster labour contracting system known as '*caporalato*' and its historical development from the end of the 1960s to today. The '*caporalato*' labour contracting system has over time incorporated different workforces—from the *pugliesi* women in the 1970s to the African and East-European migrants working the fields today. In particular, with the recent arrival of African migrants, the *caporalato* labour contracting system has evolved into a hierarchical, self-managed, informal labour contracting system, based on ethnic and kinship ties (Perrotta, 2015). The study attempts to identify the nexus between the gangmaster labour

contracting system and the African migrant networks, evident in the day-to-day activities of the migrants living in the shantytowns, and how this has evolved over time. The study is based on participant observation of Radio Ghetto: an activist, shantytown-based radio station that broadcasts locally in Borgo Mezzanone, near Foggia in the Apulia region of Southern Italy.

The paper will, first, historically contextualize the development of the *caporalato* phenomenon, followed by describing the paper's methodology of participant observation of the Radio Ghetto project in the '*pista*' shantytown near Borgo Mezzanone. Next, the theoretical framework of migrant networks will be considered in light of direct observations collected in the field. Following this, the role of migrant networks in the *pista* will be analysed vis-à-vis the *caporalato* system previously existing in the area. The analysis suggests that migrant networks function not only as enablers of 'survival strategies,' but as positive resources for the migrants, in opposition to the exploitative *caporalato* system. Migrant networks seem to play in fact a double role by both facilitating the exploitative gangmaster labour system and at the same time opposing it.

The aim and purpose of this study is to deepen understanding regarding the inherent complexities of exploitative labour contracting systems like the *caporalato* in order to create specific theoretical and analytical tools useful in countering such systems on the ground. The study suggests that worker solidarity is the most powerful tool in opposing such exploitative systems and that criminalization or victimization of migrants will only play into an already broad public opinion rhetoric that presents migrants as disempowered non-agents (Dines and Rigo, 2015).

## The Italian migration context

Until the 1970s, North Africans and Southern Europeans migrated to Northern Europe and these regions were considered 'origin' countries. Since

the 1980s, however, Southern Europe and North Africa (Libya, Morocco, Tunisia) have become both transit and destination countries for Middle Eastern and Sub-Saharan African migrants. Turkey has played a similar role; now a transit and destination country (King and Lulle, 2016). Compared to Germany, the U.K., and France, Spain and Italy are ‘new’ immigration countries, where numbers of migrants have escalated since the 1990s. In 2014, Italy had the third highest percentage/presence of non-nationals in Europe after Germany and the UK (King and Lulle, 2016, p.151). In addition, two-thirds of immigrants to Italy were from outside the EU (South America, North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia). The demand for cheap labour, in Italy and Spain especially, is rising, creating an increase in migration from Senegal, Ghana and other Sub-Saharan countries.

### The *pugliese* context: the *caporalato* and its origins

In entering Italian labour markets, recent African migrants have encountered the longstanding ‘*caporalato*’ labour contracting system, in operation in the agricultural sector in southern Italy during the past century. *Caporalato* was a system of labour exploitation based on engaging day labourers at extremely low wages with no benefits (Alò, 2010). After World War II, the Italian government implemented the ‘*imponibile di mano d'opera*’ (minimum labour tax), an obligation, by law, to hire a number of workers proportionate to the size of the farm. The objective of this law was to relieve unemployment in the agricultural sector. The law was viewed by landowners and employers as an unnecessary imposition and dialogue with the government was suspended. Between 1947 and 1972, the region of Apulia (Puglia) was characterized by peasant struggles. In the fall of 1947 in particular, over a six-day span, seven peasants died in riots in Puglia. The peasant movement was ‘radical’ and widespread since 60 per cent of the work force in Puglia was employed in the agricultural sector at the start of

this period (Alò, 2010, p.22). By the 1950s, thanks to workers' struggles and favourable legislation, the *caporalato* system was strongly weakened in its ability to recruit and exploit agricultural labourers.

The issues in the agrarian sector coincided strongly with the underdevelopment of Southern Italy. Between 1950 and 1980 the agricultural sector lost 6 million jobs. While in North and Central Italy many workers were absorbed by other sectors, in the South more than 2 million workers were forced to emigrate (Alò, 2010, pp.62-65). Connected to this, at the beginning of the 1970s, the agricultural sector in Puglia underwent a serious economic and labour restructuring process. Unskilled women, otherwise unemployed and thus willing to work away from home for very low wages, were called to enlarge the pool of labourers in what labour theorists have called a 'feminization' process (Caraway, 2005; Standing,1999).

The *caporalato* system in the agriculture sector was, between the late 1960s and early 1970s, organised around *pullmanisti* (bus drivers). *Pullmanisti* were autonomous independent bus drivers, and at times workers themselves, who utilized their personal vehicles to offer transportation services to and from the worksite. The *pullmanisti* transported young, unemployed women from the mountains and the outskirts of the cities in Puglia to the picking fields to work on a daily basis for 7 to 10 hours, depending on the 'intensity of the picking' and the type of vegetable or fruit being harvested (Alò, 2010, p.67).

Over time, the role of the *pullmanisti* gradually switched from simple 'bus drivers' to labour intermediaries and contractors. Most *pullmanisti/caporali* had complete control over which workers were being 'transported' or, more precisely, contracted and could decide whether a woman would be offered work that day or not. Although, from a juridical and legal point of view, labour intermediation and 'gangmastering' has since 2011 been deemed a criminal offence, in the 1970s it was socially accepted and

even considered a useful, righteous social service (Perrotta and Sacchetto, 2014, p.96).

Women working in the agricultural sector—for low wages (17 euros for 7 hours of work in 2000) and in very poor working conditions—would gain the right to be registered in the municipal employment lists, thus entitling them to public subsidies if they worked a certain number of days per year (Alò, 2010, p.67). Thus, although it was only fair that the seasonal working women receive public subsidies, since their wages were below minimum living standards, the government was actually involuntarily subsidizing the low wages and the *caporali* system, despite its criminalization. As such, by implementing lower income support systems, in which job positions and work conditions were directly connected to citizenship entitlements or public financial support, it gave absolute power to the *caporali* to determine access to subsidies and benefits. Once this power relation was established, the employers, or *caporali*, had the power to decide not only whether certain persons were going to work or not, but whether they were entitled to state subsidies as well.

A strong analogy can thus be constructed between the past labour conditions of the *pugliesi* women and the more recent foreign migrant workers' conditions. Both the women and the migrant workers are working for a wage, but not exclusively. The women received very low wages, but actually worked in the fields in order to access state benefits. The migrants receive low wages as well, but they are hoping to be formally employed and registered in order to be able to apply for a temporary permit and thus be granted access to legal residency in Italy. So, in the case of migrant workers today, the employer has the power to decide whether a migrant will have access or not to a temporary 'work' permit and thus qualify for legal status in Italy.

Interpretations of the phenomenon of *caporali* and labourers have been sharply polarized. The historical left (Partito Comunista-Communist Party)

has viewed the contract labouring system as a symptom of the backwardness of the agricultural sector in Southern Italy, a stumbling block to the modernization process. On the other hand, the New Left has viewed the system as an emblem of 'modern' globalization and capitalism since it is tied to the continuous call for further flexibility and lower wages (Alò, 2010, p.12). In this light, the *caporalato* should not be viewed simplistically as a reactionary and backward trait of the agricultural system in Southern Italy, but as one of the most exploitative capitalist implementations of labour flexibilization policies today.

## Fieldwork and Methodology

The truths of anthropology are grounded on the experience of the participant observer. (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, p.15)

This project involves conducting participant observation with the activists and volunteers involved with Radio Ghetto, a radio station run by and for migrants. Participant observation is an oxymoron. Tonkin (1984) describes the paradox between participating and observing at the same time whereby the more time one spends participating, the less time one has to observe and vice versa. These two activities seem to be, at first glance, in direct opposition, but actually each field research context requires a synthesis of both at different levels. Based on Scheper-Hughes's studies (2004), I conceptualize my role as ethnographer in the field by embracing Bourdieu's theory of engaged and active anthropology, in which the anthropologist has the means and the will to uncover the veil of illusion, the collective and individual self-deception. The reflexive sociologist should be an external actor to society who has no stakes in it, in fact the anthropologist must refuse society at first in order to subsequently truthfully embrace it through research. Detachment and involvement seem to be at odds but actually

Scheper-Hughes appears to solve this contrast by arguing for a ‘dual vision of anthropology as a disciplinary field, a traditional field of study, and as a force field, a site of political struggle and resistance’ (Scheper-Hughes, 2004, p.58).

Between July and September 2017, I conducted fieldwork in Borgo Mezzanone, a small town 15 kilometres from Foggia. The fieldwork was conducted as part of an ongoing Ph.D. research project that will continue over the course of the next few years as a first step in a more extensive analysis of African migrant working and living conditions in the Apulia region. The research is based on participant observation at Radio Ghetto, an activist migrant-run radio broadcast from the *pista* shantytown. The radio was founded in 2012 as a product of activists’ experiences tied to *Rete Campagne in Lotta* (Network of Lands in Struggle), a network of activist groups that originated along with the migrant workers’ uprisings in Rosarno in 2010 and in Nardò in 2011 (IoCiSto, 2012).

Radio Ghetto is a participatory radio experience that gives voice to the migrant workers themselves. The radio organizes migrant-run broadcasts directly from the shantytown and offers a space for open dialogue and discussion regarding working conditions in the fields as well as day-to-day life. The radio promotes the migrants’ own self-representation, political awareness, and the creation of a participatory communication experience for the undocumented workers in the agricultural lands in the Apulia region. The radio is based on volunteer work and benefits greatly from a mix and constant interchange of temporary short-term volunteers along with long-term permanent volunteers, who possess the skills and knowledge necessary to set up the radio on a daily basis and manage and record broadcasts.

Volunteering for Radio Ghetto during the summer of 2017 gave me the possibility to relate to the shantytown’s inhabitants on a day-to-day basis and to be part of their daily routine. The Radio Ghetto activists facilitated and enabled my access to the field and acted as ‘gatekeepers’ (Saunders, 2006)



to the shantytown. Much of the analysis in this paper is indebted to the ongoing conversations that took place at the end of the work day, when the migrants joined the radio after a long hard day of tomato picking under the sun. Individual open conversations took place in the evenings over meals in various informal restaurants in the shantytown. The observation of Radio Ghetto gives a key insight into the complex social and labour dynamics that migrants shape and face every day in the shantytown.

## Theorising Migrant Networks

Migrant networks are sets of interpersonal ties that connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in origin and destination areas through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared community origin. They increase the likelihood of international movement because they lower the costs and risks of movement and increase the expected net returns to migration. Network connections constitute a form of social capital that people can draw upon to gain access to foreign employment. (Massey et al. 1993, pp.448-449)

Migrant network connections are used by migrants to access employment in destination countries and should be considered a form of social capital. Migrant networks and social capital, in Massey's definition, are highly interconnected and reinforce each other. Social capital, a concept popularized by Robert Putnam in his 1993 book *Making Democracy Work*, is composed of 'networks, norms and trust relationships that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1993, p.167). Putnam analyses the history of the decentralized Italian structure of government, which has a high number of differentiated regional governments, and observes a correlation between government efficiency and civic engagement. Putnam observes that this positive correlation is higher in the North of Italy than in the South. Although social capital seems to be a very interesting and useful concept in explaining cooperation and efficiency patterns in society, it seems quite unlikely that such a complex issue, like the

‘questione meridionale’ (how to account for the historical disadvantage of the South of Italy) can be explained by the single independent variable of social capital.

Regardless of the well-founded criticism of the Italian application of social capital, there are some successful applications of the concept to the issue of this paper concerning informal underground economies. Lan’s (2015) case study of Chinese migrants in Prato (Tuscany, Italy) employed in the textile industry offers a strong analogy with the *caporalato* system of Sub-Saharan African migrants in the South of Italy. In both cases the exploitative labour relations among the migrants themselves are based on ethnic, kinship and township ties as well as high levels of trust and social capital. Although there are many analogies between these two studies, there are many differences as well regarding, for example, the employment system and the context of labour informality. The *caporalato* labour contracting system in Southern Italy is an extremely hierarchical system with local Italian white, male *caporali* holding the highest positions in the labour structure and Sub-Saharan African *caporali* covering the subordinate positions. In contrast, Lan’s (2015) case study reveals there are no Italians employed in the Chinese apparel industry and the exploitation system is carried out by the Chinese migrants amongst themselves.

Since the exploitative labour system in Southern Italy is carried out by local Italians for their benefit, the involvement of Sub-Saharan African *caporali* appears to be merely the result of a process of co-optation implemented by the Italian landowners to simplify and facilitate the selection and enlistment of migrants in the exploitative labour system. On the other hand, the high level of organization and coordination of migrant networks at the *pista* make possible the creation of profitable businesses that offer a variety of services to the shantytown dwellers, as well as channels for resistance, which indicates at the same time a high level of social capital. Through a participant observation of the *pista* shantytown, this paper will

explore this complicated and contradictory relationship between Sub-Saharan African migrant networks and the *caporalato* labour contracting system.

### Life in the *pista*

Radio Ghetto's broadcasts took place under the small porch in front of the radio-hut. The hut was built over the course of two weeks by the radio staff volunteers with the assistance of local African migrant builders. The permission to use the land on which the hut was constructed had been negotiated with the local neighbours and was obtained only as a result of a patient and lengthy bargaining process. The shantytown, where the radio is based, is a few minutes away by foot from the centre of Borgo Mezzanone and it is referred to as the *pista* (airstrip). Borgo Mezzanone is a small town founded in 1934, during the Fascist regime. The *pista*—so called because it was originally a Nato Air Base airstrip, now in disuse, has developed as an informal settlement of containers and shanties constructed of wood, metal and second-hand materials. Approximately 500 migrants live permanently at the *pista* throughout the year, but the numbers increase substantially during the summer picking season, reaching peak numbers as high as 1,500 or 2,000 migrants.

The *pista* is physically positioned alongside and bordering the C.A.R.A. (*Centro di Accoglienza per Richiedenti Asilo*-Reception Center for Asylum Seekers) from which it draws its supply of electricity and water. The C.A.R.A. in Borgo Mezzanone is not suitable for housing more than 700 migrants, but frequently houses up to double its capacity (1,500). The history of the C.A.R.A. of Borgo Mezzanone is extremely varied, and the structure has had multiple functions over time. In the early 1990s, it was an abandoned military aviation base that was converted in 1999 into a temporary centre for Kosovo refugees who were housed in trailers placed along the original three

kilometre long airstrip. Subsequently, in 2002, the temporary facility underwent renovations and was officially transformed into the permanent reception centre it is today.

The interplay and interconnection between the two systems: the formal reception centre (C.A.R.A.) and the informal shantytown are based on a symbiotic relationship of sorts. Refugees housed in the migration centre find solace from the prison-like C.A.R.A. structure in the shantytown, where they are able to access traditional origin food, music and bars. At the same time, the people living in the shantytown are unable to access basic materials and necessities, for example, hot water and electricity available at the C.A.R.A. Although there is a strong mutual exchange relationship between these two physically delimited realities of formality and informality, the shantytown has been growing and developing at a very fast pace and the long-term sustainability of this relationship is at risk. In fact, the dependence of an over-expanded shantytown on the centre's services may create, in the end, a strain on this interdependent relationship (Dines and Rigo, 2015, p.13).

The relationship between the C.A.R.A. and the *pista* is representative of the strong interplay that the formal and informal economy in the South of Italy and more generally in all of Italy (Urzi, 2015). The expansion of the informal shantytown demonstrates at a micro-level the ongoing macro-level trend in the economy of Southern European countries towards increasing informality and migrant labour employment (King, 2000; King and Zontini, 2000).

### African Migrant Networks, the *pista*, and the *caporalato*

Based on my direct observation, migrant networks appear to strongly support community reproduction of the shantytown. From a practical and material point of view, migrant networks in the *pista* assume the role of a 'regulatory plan' in the planning, construction and development of the

shantytown. Although there is no official 'regulatory plan' regarding the construction and positioning of new huts, most migrant newcomers in the *pista* decide to build their hut in close proximity to those with whom they share either culture, language, nationality, religion, kinship, or township ties. Furthermore, the *pista* offers migrants all kinds of services, from more elaborate restaurants to take-away sandwich shops, as well as cycle and auto repair stations, second-hand clothing stalls, and small grocery stores. The *pista* is becoming a small town with all the basic services, creating a coordinated migrant networks' services apparatus. There would seem to be a propensity amongst migrants to favour restaurants and shops managed by migrants who share the same nationality, language, or cultural background. All of the shops and restaurants represent extremely valuable resources for migrants living in the *pista* since the city is an hour away by bus and few migrants own a car. These services are a valuable product of migrant networks. Migrants in fact must pool their limited funds and earnings and create a network in order to start small businesses in the *pista*.

While migrant networks are supportive of the community's reproduction, networks will involuntarily establish the connection between the workers and the *caporali*. Most migrants will have a 'contact' or a friend in a certain picking area who they will get in touch with in order to access the area and work. The friend, who will have been living in the area for a while and who will already have a *caporale*, will introduce the newcomer to their personal *caporale* and vouch for them. The migrant network, therefore, becomes complicit in the labour exploitation process by creating the initial bridge between the workers and the *caporali*. Furthermore, consumption smoothing strategies, such as sharing living costs, partially justify the *caporale* paying lower wages, since a certain amount of money is still being saved and survival is maintained. The costs of this system are obviously all borne by the migrants, who have to lower their living standards to the bare minimum. On the other hand, what other option does the 'friend' realistically

have? Moreover, is there actually a viable option free from negative effects? To not put the newcomer in contact with the *caporale* means to exclude the new worker from the labour market and to render them free from exploitation, but at the same time, free to starve.

Based on these notions, migrant networks and the *caporalato* can be viewed as two facets of the same coin, defining and ‘structuring’ each other in a dialectic relationship. The modalities in which this structure both constrains and enables the migrants at the same time is observable in the labour recruitment process based on ethnic, kinship and township ties which enables and guarantees certain migrants access to the labour market for the day, week, or even the month. Guaranteed exploitative work both reinforces the *caporalato* structure and, at the same time, also enables migrants to access the labour market and financial resources, which in turn give migrants a chance to better their living conditions, at least in the short run, and to survive.

### Resisting the *caporalato*

Despite this dependence on the *caporalato* system, African migrants can and do resist. Small spontaneous acts of rebellion in the workplace are frequent, such as ‘small-scale sabotage (putting stones into containers of ripe tomatoes), unplanned strikes to demand outstanding pay’ (Perrotta, 2015, p.201). Moreover, coordinated insurrections and strikes took place in February 2010 in Rosarno (Calabria) following attacks on three Sub-Saharan African migrants. The migrants living in the shantytowns on the outskirts of Rosarno took to the streets and vandalized the city, breaking the windows of shops, and of cars parked in the city centre. This violent action provoked an even more violent reaction and a veritable ‘manhunt’ started throughout the streets of Rosarno. The outcome of the protest was that most of the migrants

were loaded onto buses, expelled from the city, and taken to other areas (Mangano, 2012).

Similarly, on the 3rd June 2018 Sacko Soumayla, a trade unionist and activist, was murdered in Vibo Valentia in the Calabria Region of Southern Italy sparking ongoing protests and marches throughout Italy (Messinetti, 2018). Killings like these have not been infrequent in the South of Italy and have targeted in particular immigrants with strong political leadership skills. In 1989, Jerry Essan Masslo, a South African trade unionist, was killed by local criminals because he rebelled against the requests of the *Casalesi* (the local 'bosses' of the area). His death sparked great outrage in public opinion and forced the Italian government to apply the Martelli Law, which recognized the possibility for non-E.U. citizens to apply for a refugee status (Rovelli, 2009). In Puglia, in August 2011 at the Masseria Boncuri in Nardò, migrants decided to strike and protest against the terrible working conditions. Yvan Sagnet, a trade unionist and activist originally from Cameroon, was the spokesperson for the protest that started on the 30th July and lasted until the beginning of September (Nigro et al., 2012, pp.151-152).

These instances of coordinated insurrections and strikes have become important and powerful examples of the possibilities for rebellion and resistance against the system. Moreover, the strikes and roadblocks enacted by the migrants in Nardò were successful examples of high levels of African migrant workers coordinating (Perrotta and Sacchetto, 2014). As such, not only are migrant networks crucially important in enabling the migrants' survival, they also offer the possibility of creating the necessary conditions that may lead to resistance.

The recent past has demonstrated that rebellions are generally sparked by an event that targets the migrants and is perceived by them as fundamentally discriminatory and unfair. Following a crucial event there is a possibility for a rebellion to develop, but a rebellion requires cross-network solidarity based on the migrants' own recognition of the exploitative working

and living conditions that they all share. Indeed, the migrants I spoke with rejected the justification given by fellow African migrant *caporali* that the exploitative migrant labour relationship was based on honest and sincere friendship, kinship, and ethnic ties. The African migrant farmworkers recognized that the labour relationship with the *caporali* was not based on friendship nor solidarity and the rhetoric that the *caporali* had built in order to justify their actions had been completely rejected. This rejection process was crucial for enabling the rebellions in Puglia and other regions (Perrotta and Sacchetto, 2014, p.96). The Nardò and Rosarno rebellions suggest, along with the murders of migrant trade unionists in the area, that there is a growing fear that the African migrants are beginning to create the broad alliances between different ethnic and kinship groups against the exploitative conditions they are in.

## Conclusion

The *caporalato* has been an endemic ongoing exploitative labour contracting process that has strongly defined and characterized the Italian and *pugliese* labour market for centuries now, evolving today into the exploitation of recent Sub-Saharan African migrants. To attempt to delineate a linear distinction between pure labour exploitative relations and the more positive community-oriented migrant networks that underpin this system is, however, an almost impossible task. Friendship, kinship and labour relations become inter-connected and interrelated to the point that it is hard to define migrant labour relations as purely exploitative or purely supportive. Although it is easier to simply condemn all aspects of migrant labour relations as inherently exploitative and profoundly problematic, this would mean ignoring the fact that migrants as human beings and subjects have agency and their agency is defined in relation to—and in opposition to—the exploitative structure in which they are positioned. While African migrant



networks in Puglia have often facilitated the *caporalato* system, it is in fact only through the solidarity that such networks create that migrants can hope to successfully challenge the exploitative *caporalato* labour contracting system by providing the basis of resistance.

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