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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

1. Introduction

On August 4 and 6, 2018, 16 agricultural labourers of Sub-Saharan African origin died in two terrible car accidents near Foggia, in the Capitanata plain of Puglia, southern Italy. After a day of labour manually harvesting tomatoes, they were returning to their precarious shacks in a local 'ghetto' being driven inside beat up and overcrowded vans, most likely by illegal labour brokers known as *caporali* (literally, corporals). In the first accident, the van collided with a truck that was transporting about 30 tonnes of harvested tomatoes to a canning factory. The pictures of the accident, which showed the crushed tomatoes next to the totalled vehicles, circulated widely in the press. On August 7 in an official press conference at Foggia's *Prefettura* (the Government Office, Prefecture), the Minister of the Interior at the time, Matteo Salvini, declared that the local mafia clans, who still control what he described as a 'small section' of agriculture in this area, were responsible for the accidents. In his view, most farmers and landowners act in a fair and legal way (ANSA press agency, 8 August 2018). The Minister's declaration is consistent with a widely held view, which depicts the role of *caporali* as a disturbing factor in an agrarian

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economy striving for competitiveness and recognition. Contrary to this paradigm, this article seeks to lay open the 'black box' of *caporalato* brokerage in order to better grasp the fundamental role it plays in both agrarian production and labour reproduction. Starting from a historical analysis of *caporalato* labour mediation in the southern Italian regions of Puglia and Basilicata, this paper offers an alternative analytical framework that highlights *caporalato*'s systemic role within the context of rapid agrarian change.

Our argument is twofold. First, and in reference to the recent literature on 'migration infrastructures' (see e.g. Lindquist et al. 2012, Gammeltoft-Hansen and Nyberg Sørensen 2013, Lin et al. 2017, for an overview see Krifors 2020), we argue that over the last 30 years, *caporalato* has constituted a central infrastructure in labour mediation, which simultaneously complements neoliberal state policies while embedding the cost of labour reproduction into migrant networks. Specifically in the context of export-driven plantation economies – the Italian tomato production being a prime example in our view – migrant labour infrastructures like *caporalato* represent the hidden undercurrents of extractive capitalist frontiers. Agricultural firms rely increasingly on such broker networks to guarantee their need for a flexible and disposable labour force while outsourcing the cost of labour reproduction to communities and their social networks, which are deliberately placed outside the realm of 'formal' capitalist development.¹▲

In this context, the terminology of migrant labour infrastructures serves to unpack the systematically interlinked institutions, actors, and technologies, that facilitate and condition labour mobility. As socio-technical platforms for labour mobility that are at the same time immanent and relational (Larkin 2013), they may become at the same time self-perpetuating and self-serving, while also providing an alternative for withering state control over formal labour markets. Besides being conduits for human mobility, these infrastructures are also political, in the sense that they reflect the contested integration of labourers into their local living environments, from which they remain formally excluded in terms of labour and citizenship rights. Concretely speaking, they perform the role of incorporating informal workers into global supply chains under adverse conditions, or, in the words of Phillips, they serve to literally suck vital energy from mobile workers, while segregating their human presence from the societies that benefit from their labour (Phillips 2011, Tyner 2019).

In sum, we regard the *caporalato* infrastructure not just as an illegal residue of formal labour markets that can be dismantled exclusively through judiciary means. Rather, we argue, the *caporalato* brokerage infrastructure continues to be an essential component of contemporary agri-food production and reproduction in the sense that it allows for concentrating the means for capital accumulation in formal industrial firms while externalizing the cost of labour reproduction to informal workers who are increasingly caught in the web of illegality.

¹We 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.

Secondly, and inspired by the rich anthropological and historical scholarship on brokerage in Southern Italy in a context of large-scale land properties (e.g. Boissevain 1974; Blok 1974; Schneider and Schneider 1976; for an overview see Watts 2016), we argue that an analysis of labour brokerage in the contemporary, globalized agri-food production settings must necessarily include the systemic relationships between the figure of the broker (*caporale*), the agrarian economy, politics and society and a labour force whose reproduction is contained through combined formal and informal governance. This is what we call '*caporalato* capitalism': a mode of production and exploitation that thrives on the historical relation between labour, capital and public authority in the domain of industrialized agriculture, and which continues to reproduce migrant labour as an adversely incorporated force that produces wealth.

The argument we present here is based on longitudinal ethnographic research in the regions of Puglia and Basilicata on the transformation of agrarian labour mediation practices during the so-called Mediterranean migration emergency of 2011-2017. More specifically, our ethnographic research concentrates on 'seasonal' agricultural workers of Burkinabè origin in the area of Borgo San Nicola, a town situated on the border between Basilicata and Puglia.² Over the last 40 years, this area has emerged as a key agricultural district for canned tomatoes (for a historical discussion see Perrotta 2016). Our research focuses on a period of intense human mobility, starting with the NATO intervention in the Libyan war in North Africa (2011), and culminating in a radical reorganization of the border regime by the subsequent Italian Ministers of Interior, Marco Minniti (2017) and later Matteo Salvini (2018-19). Over a period of two years (2016-17) – but building on a much longer engagement with the topic – the two authors gathered over eighty interviews including with migrant workers, farmers, owners and managers of canning factories, civil society organizations, labour unions and local administrators. We have corroborated our ethnographic data with the anonymized database of Caritas's Presidium project as well as a comparison between Employment Office and National Social Security Institute (INPS) data on migrant agricultural labour. During the harvest seasons, we also conducted direct observations of informal migrant settlements where the majority of seasonal labourers find a precarious habitat in this area and we participated in 'grassroots' projects in support of (and together with) workers. Some of the projects were focused on the legal and social support of migrants, but there was also an Italian language school, as well as participatory agriculture projects aiming at the emancipation of labourers from the *caporalato* system. Because our research has been connected to such social movements, it can be considered a form of 'scholar-activism' (Borras 2016). This approach was particularly important in a field characterized by strongly unbalanced power relationships among workers, employers, *caporali* and public institutions. These activities were useful in a two-fold way: they allowed us to collect empirical study materials and discuss our ideas in a relationship of reciprocal trust with some migrant farmworkers; and they enabled us to contribute to the construction of the projects themselves through the ideas emerging from our research.

²Borgo 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.

Our paper is structured as follows: after a brief reconstruction of the history of *caporalato* in Italian agriculture (section 2), and a theoretical reflection on the relationships between brokerage, agricultural labour, and the capitalist economy (section 3), we describe the transformations of southern Italian agriculture over the last 40 years, in particular changes in the processing tomato sector in the regions of Puglia and Basilicata and the role of the local *caporalato* in these changes (section 4). In sections 5 and 6, we address more specifically the impact of the rise in rural immigration during the 2010s: focusing on the so-called migrant crisis since 2011, we analyse the effects of human mobility on the transformation of the existing labour regime. Our analysis of *caporalato* as an infrastructure of farm labour recruitment, and as a structural component of southern Italian economy and society (section 7) finally shows how this system has been able to mutate and survive, even while becoming the target of legislative measures and enquiries.

2. The long history of *caporalato* in Italian agriculture

The system of farm labour mediation known as *caporalato* and its contestation date back at least to the second half of the nineteenth century (Perrotta 2014). During their long history of struggle, Italian farmworkers' unions repeatedly tried to compete with the *caporali* in the domain of labour intermediation, with the aim of controlling the labour market and defending workers' interests and wages against the large-scale landowners. It was in this context that the figure of the *caporale* was declared illegal for the first time by royal decree in 1919. At different times in this history, national governments intervened in the conflict between gangmasters and farmworkers' unions, claiming public control over farm labour markets. In the 1970s, farm labour recruitment was entrusted to local public employment offices, in collaboration with the unions. Such offices, however, were accused by the employers of being ineffective and, in the context of neo-liberal reforms in the 1990s, they were dismantled, while private labour mediation was again legally permitted, only via temporary employment agencies under the authorization of the Ministry of Labour (Law 30/2003).

Historically, *caporali* recruit workers and organize their mobile employment in agreement with the local landowners, especially in those agricultural operations requiring a large force of seasonal wage labour. The *caporali's* mediation is usually remunerated with a fixed cut withheld from the workers' wage. In addition, *caporali* offer a number of paid services to the groups of predominantly male workers who work in the domain of plantation agriculture. These services include, amongst others, the provision of housing, transport, food and water, the facilitation of credit – similar to the Californian farm labour contractors described by Krissman (2005) and Holmes (2013).

Since the 1980s and '90s, during a time when Italian farmworkers were gradually flanked and partially replaced by a foreign labour force, the *caporalato* has gradually become a synonym for the dramatic working and living conditions of migrant farmworkers in Southern Italy (Howard and Forin 2019). Academic studies, reports in Italian and European mass media as well as NGOs and trade unions' complaints have contributed to depicting the *caporali* as *mafiosi* and slavedrivers, similar to human traffickers and sex work exploiters (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2018; Fanizza and Omizzolo 2019). Following a long strike in Nardò (Puglia) by African labourers in August 2011, a national law

declared this form of mediation a criminal offense, punishable with a prison sentence (Perrotta and Sacchetto 2014). In 2016, a new law (199/2016) extended this criminal offence to agricultural and other enterprises that consciously use the *caporali's* services. But even though this new legislation has been the basis for several judiciary investigations from 2016 on (Santoro and Stoppioni 2019), it has not achieved much success in addressing the widespread labour exploitation to which migrant workers continue to be subjected.

The placement of the so-called employment centres (*centro per l'impiego*: CPI) in the rural districts is a crucial element that explains the persistence of *caporalato* brokerage despite the fact that it has been made illegal. These centres replaced the public employment offices that were previously in place and have become the central nodes of formal state-capital mediation in the rural districts. Agricultural firms report the value of labour to the state administration to these centres through formal (mostly digital) statements, while in turn the State reserves the right to verify this value through occasional inspections and bureaucratic oversight. In this context, the anti-*caporalato* legislation has addressed informal and illegal mediation from a punitive perspective, notably through criminal law measures and judicial court cases. As Rigo and Caprioglio (2021) write, this approach may have pushed labour mediation to partially emerge out of the illegal sphere, but it also contributed to what experts now call a rise in 'grey labour': the underreporting of actual labour time in order to cream off or preclude the payment of social welfare contributions, such as unemployment and pension benefits.

Rather than improving migrant labourers' working and living conditions, legislative reforms have essentially reformulated the question of agricultural labour around border security and humanitarian migration management, with the effect of increasing the latter's continued social and political segregation in Italian society – as we will show further (section 4). While some attention has been devoted to the social aspects of legislative reforms (e.g. Rigo 2015; Lo Cascio and Piro 2018; Rigo and Caprioglio 2021), a specific focus on migrant labour mediation in the context of Europe's liberalizing agri-food industry today has not yet received much attention in Italy (see Avallone 2016; Salvia 2020). Hence the need to define more specifically the role of illegal(ized) labour mediation in supply chain capitalism and its significance in the Italian historical context, which will be the subject of our next section.

3. Capitalist brokers

Going back to the opening example of this article, we find that Interior Minister Salvini's comment actually reflects a widespread narrative in Italy and Europe, described by Howard and Forin (2019) as 'new abolitionism', i.e. the association of severe labour exploitation with humanitarian emergency, and promoting the idea that the problem lies in a few shameful enterprises whose criminal actions can be addressed through penal sanctions. In the Italian context, this narrative draws on a dominant paradigm which principally associates such criminality with the failure of the State. This paradigm holds in a setting where state sanctions to guarantee compliance with economic contracts are weak or absent, thus enabling the rise of power brokers who engage in the 'business of protection' (Gambetta 1993; see also Varese 2001; Volkov 2002; on migrant labour Martin 2017). Though such criminal activities may appear to be a violent resistance

against state rule, Diego Gambetta (1993: 2) writes, they do provide a ‘genuine commodity’ that acts as a ‘lubricant’ of economic exchange under such conditions of state absence. In the context of contemporary agri-food production, there is indeed a widespread assumption that *caporali* assume exactly this role: to guarantee fluid cooperation
 230 between economic agents who would otherwise have trouble connecting in a context where they feel unprotected or unrepresented by legal state frameworks. Under such conditions, therefore, it is easy to imagine the *caporali* as a form of organized crime. Quite like *mafiosi* – labour unions and other leading policy makers in this arena argue – *caporali* are both a sign of state weakness in marginalized economic arenas as well as an evil that
 235 needs to be eradicated and opposed (Ossevatorio Placido Rizzotto 2018; Fanizza and Omizzolo 2019).

Yet while public policies tend to focus mainly on this ‘criminal’ aspect of *caporalato* as labour mediation, the role of capitalist brokers has a much longer history in the rural societies of southern Italy.³ In their work on the origins of the Sicilian mafia, for instance,
 240 Schneider and Schneider (1976) define ‘broker capitalism’ as the political economy of global commodity markets, absentee landlords, and local rural society in the rise of western Sicilian agri-business in the mid nineteenth century. At the time, it was less a space of self-sufficiency than a breadbasket for an integrated world economy in which the extra-economic rents of such capitalist brokers could flourish. Anton Blok (1974)
 245 insists that the rise of the Sicilian mafia depended on a specific set of economic and political arrangements, such as the consolidation of large-scale land ownership in the hands of an emerging merchant bourgeoisie, the ‘democratization’ of private violence within the context of the state’s deliberate non-intervention, and, as a result of these, the emergence of nested sovereignties that contest and challenge central state control in the arena of
 250 economic production. As Charles Tilly writes in his foreword to Anton Blok’s ethnography, we should analyse the specific set of economic and political arrangements in which such capitalist brokers arise: ‘The problem, therefore, is not to discover who these *mafiosi* were, nor to evaluate their characteristics. It is to locate the connections between the prevalence of private violence and the structure of economic and political life.’ (Tilly 1974,
 255 xiii; see also Dickie 2004 and Watts 2016). We think it is useful to apply and translate this analysis to the contemporary context of globalized agri-food production and its arguable impact on the relation between agricultural labour, capitalist entrepreneurship and contested sovereignty in the Mediterranean.

Specifically, brokers act as nodes between networks or social groupings that are perceived to be incommensurable. Boissevain (1974: 148) conceptualizes brokers as agents who place ‘people in touch with each other either directly or indirectly for profit’. So, the aim of brokers is to simultaneously bridge gaps, while also gaining a benefit from the boundaries between so-called ‘weak’ social ties (see also Granovetter 1973, 1985).
 260 This role creates both connection and frictions. One important observation from this literature is that to remain relevant socially, brokers cannot settle conflicts between social groups: they can only act as buffers and gatekeepers, while simultaneously maintaining the tension that drives their social actions (Wolf 1966, Migdal 1974). Hence it is crucial to see the locus of such brokers through this social and cultural perspective: through the brokers’ contact, economic agents may find alternative service providers, so
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³Gambetta’s analysis has also been widely criticized on historical grounds: e.g. Lupo 2009.

brokers have to remain sensitive to maintaining these incentives and disincentives along a wide network of social relations.

More generally, it is important to acknowledge the tension between fixity and mobility in terms of the opportunities for capital accumulation: various types of brokers may indeed emerge as 'nodes of systematicity' (Tsing 2005: 101) in the wider social and cultural reconfigurations that global capitalist supply chains entail across geographic space. Not only do such brokers ensure a connection between the supply and demand of flexible agricultural labourers; but they also become key assets in the externalization of the cost of labour reproduction, primarily through maintaining social distance between segmented workers, and through outsourcing services that would otherwise be taken on by the state or by employers – such as health, accommodation and social welfare (see e.g. Lindquist *et al.* 2012, Biao 2012). Along with the important political role they play in processes of agrarian change, these more subtle aspects of labour brokers' operations will be the object of our study.

Building on the historical studies of Italian broker capitalism we partly cited earlier, we ask ourselves in what ways the modes of rural capitalist accumulation have themselves been transformed as a result of a persistent collusion and contiguity between rural capitalist brokers and public institutions. This not – as is often argued – a result of state 'failure', but a function of the systemic linkages between rural agri-food production and the (multi-sited, pluralistic) regulation of agricultural labour. So rather than considering the 'illegal' (or, better, criminalized) labour brokers as a kind of methodological fetish, we argue for a more systemic approach that enables us to understand their fundamental role in a context of rapid rural change. Our contribution about the persistence of *caporale* labour mediation in South Italy needs to be situated in this perspective. Analogously to the wheat, lemon and olive plantations of nineteenth century Sicily and the contemporary Asian plantations discussed by Lindquist and colleagues, the current conjuncture of contemporary agri-food production in Puglia and Basilicata with increasingly repressive state policies in the field of global migration provide the conditions for the emergence of a kind of organized labour brokerage within a situation where relations between capital, labour and the state are actively upset and renegotiated. Specifically, in the context of contemporary market liberalization, we observe the emergence of a new kind of neoliberal, though illegalized, labour broker who is able to guarantee the reproduction of a flexible labour force while at the same time filling the gaps left by a deliberately retreating state administration in the domain of state-capital mediation and migrant labour reproduction. In the next two sections, we will analyse these two aspects (global retail markets and the local rural political economy) one by one.

4. Southern Italian agriculture between retailization and flexploitation

Since the 1980s, the system of food production and distribution in Italy has undergone a profound transformation. Like other Mediterranean intense agri-food production areas, for instance in southern Turkey (Adana Province), Greece (Kalamata), and Spain (Andalucía), southern Italy has become a main supplier of fresh and canned food for global supermarkets chains – with radical consequences for the social relations of production and reproduction in food-producing areas (see Flores 2008, Rye 2018, Pelek 2020; for an overview: Rye and Scott 2018). As a result of global restructuring, agricultural production has

not only been progressively integrated into vertical supply chains in a context of increasingly liberalized international food markets: through their buyer power, few big retail corporations determine the features (meaning the production costs and standards, the distribution, and the consumption patterns) of these agri-food supply chains, crystallizing in what McMichael and Friedmann (2007) call a 'retail revolution'. But these global changes are also producing variegated effects on rural societies, depending on their organizational (e.g. availability of agricultural land, type of agricultural firms, degree of mechanization) and social (e.g. migration networks, organization of the host societies and labour markets) features. With Rye and Scott (2018: 932), therefore, we share the urge to look into the 'specific historic roots and present-day particularities' of these dynamics.

In Italy, the retail revolution is generally believed to have given rise to two combined effects (Corrado et al. 2018). On the one hand, it has fostered the gradual decrease in the number of farms as well as a parallel gradual increase in the average dimension of farms.⁴ As in other contexts (Burch and Lawrence 2007), only relatively big farms have been able to satisfy retail chains' demands in terms of production, logistics and standard certifications. On the other hand, the retail revolution has contributed to increasing the flexploitation of the agricultural labour force (Peck 2016), which likens the hyper-mobility of workers to their increasing precarity in legal and economic terms. While family members of small and medium-size enterprises remain protected through official employment, since the late 1980s, this formal employment has been coupled with a consistent increase in the foreign wage labour-force, which generally remains unprotected, not covered by unemployment benefits, and subject to major labour exploitation. The growing vertical integration of Italian farms in global food chains in fact goes hand in hand with a decisively more localized phenomenon of unskilled labourers who are now becoming a permanent feature of globalized retail agriculture (see also Scott 2013). In 2017, farm foreign born labourers registered with the Italian social security institute (INPS) were about 364,000, representing one third of the total agricultural labour force (Crea 2019). Migrant labour remains mostly concentrated in precarious (i.e. temporary, demanding, and unprotected) jobs like seasonal harvesting. The main nationalities composing the migrant labour force are Romanian, Indian, Moroccan, Tunisian (Crea 2019), and – for what can be considered the reserve army of seasonal harvesters in the South – Sub-Saharan Africans. Besides receiving notably lower salaries than those provided by the legal collective bargaining and agreements, most migrants work without (or only partially through) formal contracts and on a piece-work basis. In addition, they suffer a detrimental exclusion from social entitlements and segregation from Italian society in general.

The reasons for migrant workers' weakness in the labour market are multifaceted. They include their precarious legal status, competition in the labour market between migrants of different nationalities and with differing legal status; their segregation and ghettoization during the harvest season; as well as the sheer impossibility to find an employment without the mediation of the *caporali*. These aspects will be examined singularly through

⁴The 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 2000, 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%.

the case of Borgo San Nicola, a small agricultural town situated on the border between the regions of Puglia and Basilicata. Due to its progressive integration in global food markets, the area around Borgo San Nicola has required a consistent workforce for the harvest of tomatoes in late Summer. The term 'seasonal' in fact does not fully reflect the fact that these workers are sometimes permanently employed and travel between regions to harvest citrus fruits, grapes and olives (Autumn), vegetables like fennel and broccoli (Winter), and strawberries (Spring), all year round.

With some exceptions, these workers live in so-called *ghettos*⁵: makeshift rural settlements concentrated in the agricultural production areas, which completely lack state-subsidized infrastructures (public transport water, sanitation and electricity). Following Loïc

Q6 Wacquant's definition of the urban ghetto as a 'spatially-based concatenation of mechan-

isms of ethnoracial closure and control' (Wacquant, 1997: 342; 2008), we expand this term

to discuss the socio-spatial segregation of mobile rural populations who, in the absence of

state support, try to fend for themselves (see also Pelek 2020). We think that the gradual

spread of such migrant *ghettos* needs to be viewed, on the one hand, in the light of an

expansion of ethnic segmentation of the workforce by the *caporali*, who use their respect-

ive social networks to recruit and discipline mobile workers, and, on the other, as the

direct result of the persistent segregation migrant workers face in the Italian rural

towns and villages, where they continue to suffer institutionalized racism and discrimi-

nation. Finally, we differentiate the rural *ghetto* from other public infrastructures that

aim to channel labour mobility logistically: while showing some similarities with these

formal labour camps (Brovia and Piro 2021), in our view the consolidation of the

migrant worker *ghetto* as a central node in today's retail-driven food agriculture in Italy

shows the growing interconnection between globalized commodity chains and illegali-

zed labour mediation. This allows for the vertical integration of farms in retailer-driven

agri-food supply chains but also generates a ground for permanent migrant spatial seg-

Q7regation in this rural environment (see also Flores and Le Doaré 2008, Pelek 2020).

In the migrant *ghetto*, workers are completely dependent on the services of the *capor-*

ali, including the supply of food and water, as well as transport to the workplace and to

urban centres where state services such as hospitals and social welfare remain concen-

trated. The role of these informal brokers is crucial for the reproduction of this specific

type of workforce, because *caporali* mobilize thousands of flexible labourers while provid-

ing for their accommodation, access to transport and other services, and guaranteeing

their discipline in the workplace. At the same time, such rural *ghettos* are also important

nodes in migrant networks that provide workers with the opportunity to connect with

each other, earn a living and generate opportunities on the way. Next to their important

role in socio-spatial segregation, we also find it important to emphasize their function as a

site of social renewal and regeneration. Indeed, in the *caporalato* labour intermediation

that reproduces these spaces as an impermanent form of labour settlements we

⁵The 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, Mulini Matinelle and Felandina (Basilicata).

recognize a central infrastructure in the externalization of labour reproduction that characterizes contemporary monocropping regimes like the ones we cited before.

In Europe, since the late 2000s, privatized forms of recruitment have persistently started to occupy a grey zone between formal and informal labour regimes (Mésini 2014; Garrapa 2016). In France, for example, the recruitment of seasonal migrant farm labourers through so-called *OMI contrats* traditionally guaranteed by the state has been progressively replaced by private forms of labour mediation (Décosse 2016); since the early 2000s, Spain launched the *contratacion en origen*, which delegates the recruitment of farm workers to the organizations of farmers in collaboration with the regional employment offices in the countries of origin of migrants (Hellio 2014). As we shall explain below, what is specific to the Italian case concerns the structural link between state policies that worsen rather than ease migrant workers' precarious political and socio-economic status and the agricultural capitalists' response to growing legal scrutiny in a context of globalized supply chain capitalism. Globalized retail agriculture and state policies on migrant labour shall be examined separately in the two upcoming sections.

5. The canned tomato industry and the 'migration crisis': the routes and roots of mobile labour

The transformations described above are quite evident in canned tomato production. Canned tomatoes, which to some extent can be regarded as an emblem of made-in-Italy agri-food production, in fact represent a quintessentially globalized commodity (Pritchard and Burch 2003). Since the early 1900s, the production of canned tomatoes has been predominantly based in the Campania region, where the traditional variety of *San Marzano* tomatoes used to grow in small plots in the hills and small plains of the province of Salerno. For a number of reasons, including the subsidies of the Common Agricultural Policy to canning factories since 1979, its production has increasingly become industrialized. In the same period, the bulk of agricultural production was delocalized to the much vaster Capitanata plain in Puglia as well as to the neighbouring province of Potenza, in Basilicata, located at approximately 200 km from Salerno, where most canning factories are still based today. In Puglia, according to the sixth general Census of Agriculture, realized by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2010, approximately 2,300 farms occupied about 20,500 hectares of tomato cultivations; in Basilicata about 350 farms occupied around 2,400 hectares. Through this delocalization, the processing industry of the Campania region sought to increase and to 'modernize' agricultural production, hoping that growers in Puglia and Basilicata would soon follow suit and start mechanizing the operations of seeding and harvesting. However, while in the same period the provinces of Parma, Piacenza and Ferrara in Emilia-Romagna invested in a complete mechanization of the harvest, in the South this process was prevented – or at least delayed – by the growing presence of migrant workers. The availability of such highly flexible teams of labourers discourages enterprises from investing in large machinery, while, at the same time, the labourers' meagre wages compete with the costs of mechanized labour (Perrotta 2016).

Hosting a mobile population of 1000–1500 workers every year from mid-August to late October, since the early 1990s, the area of Borgo San Nicola has gradually become one of the central nodes in the circular seasonal movements of Sub-Saharan African labourers in

Basilicata. Despite being illegal, wages based on piecework in the tomato harvest enable the strongest and fastest among the labourers to compete for better wages. Each 300-kg box (named '*cassone*') is paid between 3 and 4 euros (depending on various elements, such as the conditions of the field and the tomatoes, and the 'bargaining' process between the *caporale* and the farmer). The fastest workers are able to harvest up to 30 boxes a day, thus earning 80–100 euros (the *caporale*'s fee and the cost of the transport is deducted from the amount). On the other hand, the weakest and slowest among the workers manage to harvest no more than 5 or 10 boxes a day, thus earning no more than 20–25 euros. This pecuniary coercion has the double function of disciplining and cutting the costs of an already precarious labour force.

As noted before, in this context of rapid delocalization and globalization of local production, *caporalato* as a mode of organizing the labour force retains its fundamental importance because the harvest needs large teams of workers who can be mobilized and coerced on short notice, in sometimes quite distant and remote fields. In contrast to the CPI, which practically can just stamp the employment papers presented by the official employers (see above: section 2), the *caporali* can ensure a slew of other services. In the area of Borgo San Nicola, over the past twenty years, different kinds of vertical and horizontal brokerage systems have coexisted. The five to six Burkinabe mediators active in this area mainly rely on their extended social networks, through which they recruit relatives, friends and co-nationals who join each other every year. Some of these workers come from the cities of Northern Italy, where they have been living for many years, supporting themselves as either factory workers or 'second generation' children of immigrant parents. These labourers look for a seasonal employment during the summer holidays. Other members of the labour crews come from the neighbouring regions of Southern Italy and move seasonally from one harvest to another, from one *ghetto* to another. These Burkinabè *caporali* – or *capi neri*, as they are called by the workers of their crews – control two or three labour teams each, and they collaborate with each other. At the same time, a more structured, hierarchical organization comes together around a Sudanese and an Italian *caporali* who operate across communal and territorial boundaries. This second form of organization is less dependent on communitarian ties. In both cases, the *ghetto* operates as a sort of employment office: people who look for temporary employment during the harvest are compelled to stay in the *ghetto* where they wait for the call of the *caporale*; indeed, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find employment outside the *caporalato* infrastructure. As one agricultural entrepreneur we interviewed recalls:

You have to know that we are basically on our own here: everyone here works for himself, with his planter, his harvesting teams, etc. ... When we start planting [tomatoes] in May, one or two workers are enough. But when in September the tomatoes ripen, everything comes together and it's a mess [*è un macello*: literally, a slaughterhouse]. When we have a rapid ripening of the fruits, we need to act immediately. When it rains, it gets even worse, because you have to find the workforce right away. But often the trucks do not come on time ... Since [the transporters] operate in a kind of monopoly, you cannot do very much but accept the company's offer ... Finally, [the processing plants] even have the right to discard up to 10–20 percent of the delivered produce based on their quality assessment. In sum, we are dealing here with a very perishable product here. (Interview, 23 August 2016)

The farmer's statement is interesting in that it highlights the logic behind cutting labour costs in this predominantly retail-driven agriculture. Because of their close relation to the agricultural entrepreneurs, *caporali* can bargain with the farmer for the quantity of piece-work, the salary and the period of employment. On their part, for different reasons, workers rarely challenge the role of the *caporale*. In some cases, existing communal ties between the workers and the *caporale* contribute to prevent conflict and to enhance reciprocity. In other cases, such ties entail a mechanism of social extortion, whereby workers refrain from contrasting the *caporale's* power out of fear of losing their jobs. A quarrel with the *caporale* is often the cause of unemployment, because the broker controls the extra-economic and economic means and has the power to exclude undisciplined workers from his team. See for example this excerpt of an informal interview with a 26-year-old labourer from Burkina Faso collected by the first author on 3 March 2017:

I am not allowed to work in this ghetto anymore. The *caporali* don't let me to go to work, they put me on their blacklist. I threatened to burn the car of a *caporale* that didn't want to pay me. It was the first year I came here, in 2013, I didn't know anything about how it works here. At the end of the season, the *caporale* paid me only 150 euros instead of 300. He had paid the whole amount to the other guys in the team. Then he threatened me, but I was not afraid, I just wanted my money. I got angry, close to us a guy was cooking some meat, I took a hot coal and got close to the *caporale's* car. All the *caporali* of the ghetto were there; he gave me my money, but after that nobody wanted me to work here and the following Summer, I went to another ghetto to find a job.

As our example shows, this simultaneous bridging and gatekeeping role of the *caporale* represents an essential element in the transformation of Southern Italian agriculture and its increasing reliance on disciplined and cheap migrant labourers who remain simultaneously excluded from local society. In the next section, we highlight how this role has persisted despite the growing legal scrutiny of these last five years.

Before that, however, we need to describe the two major events that, from 2011 onwards – in Borgo San Nicola and South Italy in general – radically altered the usual, cyclical labour migration pattern⁶: the joint EU-NATO intervention in Libya and the Italian reaction to the so-called 'migrant crisis' in the Mediterranean. Whereas the EU-NATO military intervention in the Mediterranean pushed literally thousands of young African workers across the Mediterranean in search for asylum and safety from armed conflict⁷, the Italian government reacted to this emergency in two distinct ways: first, it added a series of new asylum procedures that would permit those fleeing from North Africa access to state protection⁸; and secondly, it sub-contracted the temporary accommodation of asylum seekers and refugees to private and non-governmental organizations.⁹ ▲

⁶Previously, 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.

⁷UNHCR 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.

⁸The 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*).

⁹Upon 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

During the humanitarian operation Mare Nostrum (2011-2013), but even more visibly so during the subsequent *Triton* border security operation directed by the European border management agency FRONTEX (2014-2018), these political and legal changes would give rise to two noticeable effects in the Southern Italian plantation economy.

545 **Q8** First, they contributed to what Dines and Rigo (2015) call the growing *refugeeization* of
 550 Southern Italy's agricultural workforce. By this they not only mean a numeric shift towards refugees and asylum seekers in the composition of the agricultural workforce, but also the manner in which this changing composition of the workforce was grafted onto already existing labour market disparities. By way of example, among the 1,356 migrant workers Caritas assisted through its Presidium programme in the migrant *ghettos* in Piedmont, Puglia and Basilicata between 2014 and 2017, 64.3 percent were shown to hold some form of refugee status.¹⁰ Given the lack of assistance these newly arriving migrants received in the largely outsourced system of migrant reception¹¹, and given the increasing denial rate of asylum residence renewal (which grew from 60 to 80 percent in 2015-2019)¹², significant numbers of refugees and asylum seekers began showing up in South Italy's agricultural fields in search for means of subsistence. In fact, many of these migrant workers were torn between renewing their application for political asylum or becoming *de facto* economic migrants at the time of expiration of their humanitarian permits: being often disinformed and disoriented, they ended up working as precarious workers for the agri-food industry. One can safely conclude, therefore, that this deliberate indeterminacy of Italy's asylum system – which has progressively placed incoming migrants into a critical legal and political limbo (Fontanari and Pinelli 2017) – pushed an increasing number of migrants into a situation of economic precarity. With nowhere to go outside Italy¹³ and no means to live besides the rudimentary humanitarian assistance at the reception centres, asylum seekers and refugees became increasingly dependent on an extractive economy that continued to wrangle profit from their presence during this period.

560 A second consequence of this growing securitization of migration across the Mediterranean was practically the reversal of the logic behind the categories of political and economic migration: even if they have legitimate grounds to demand asylum, nowadays migrants are trapped into a logic of survival that may end up reproducing their presumably 'economic' status. In fact, the growing *refugeeization* of farm labour these last few years shows quite palpably that the persistence of *caporalato* in Southern Italy is not connected to a lack of state protection, quite on the contrary: we witness a deliberate withdrawal of the state from its mediating role in rural labour markets; while at the same time,

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.

¹⁰Figures obtained from the organization.

¹¹By 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).

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

¹³Since 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.

it has engaged in increasingly restrictive migration policies that have consolidated migrant workers' vulnerable condition and reliance upon exploitative labour markets. The next section will offer a more detailed description of the systematic migrant segregation and expulsions that have been taking place since 2009 in Borgo San Nicola in order to explain this tightening link between migrant reception and labour exploitation in the context of South Italy's rapidly transforming agrarian economy.

6. The case of Borgo San Nicola: the spoils of impermanence

The short history of migration management in Borgo San Nicola over the last 20 years serves as a good example of how, in a context where Europe's migration control is framed increasingly by a security paradigm, migrant labour precarity gradually has become a cornerstone of contemporary capitalist reproduction (see De Genova 2013). Between 1999 and 2009, a warehouse that had been confiscated from organized crime in the periphery of Borgo San Nicola was put to use as a seasonal camp to accommodate migrant labourers. The camp was managed by the town council in collaboration with several governmental and non-governmental organizations. Notwithstanding a certain degree of assistance by local associations and the municipal administration, the place experienced a serious deterioration over the years, culminating in a violent clash between Sudanese and Burkinabe workers in 2009. Partly as a reaction to this clash, local authorities abruptly decided not to open the camp in the Summer 2010, officially to prevent illegal settling of migrants within the camp structure (the mayor's ordinance speaks of 'reasons of public security'). But having nowhere else to go¹⁴, different groups of workers started to build their own *ghettos* in the surrounding countryside. While this decision had the immediate effect of dispersing the few remaining foreign labourers, the wider implications of this securitization measure were hard to predict at that point. In the Spring 2011, during the North African Emergency, the former seasonal reception camp in Borgo San Nicola became a centre for the repatriation of Tunisian asylum seekers. As the narration of their presence was increasingly framed as a security risk, local administrators felt reluctant to provide any accommodations to seasonal farm workers. As a result, migrant day labourers in the area of Borgo San Nicola did not receive any form of official State assistance between 2010 and 2014. This lack of formal intervention motivated migrant workers and their *caporali* to create various informal *ghettos* by occupying abandoned farmhouses, building provisional tent encampments and shantytowns along the main rural areas devoted to the planting of tomatoes every year.

During this period, the progressive securitization of the Mediterranean migration regime produced its first impacts on human mobility in the tomato districts of Puglia and Basilicata. In 2014, the administrations at the regional level for both areas inaugurated similar forms of intervention: the Puglia regional administration tried to tear down the largest African *ghetto* of Southern Italy located between Foggia, San Severo and Rignano Garganico, under the project 'Ghetto Free-Capo Off', which garnered

¹⁴From 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.

considerable media attention at the time. Just a few weeks later, the Basilicata regional administration set up a Migration Task Force, which collaborated with the Red Cross, the labour union CGIL and Caritas. While officially responsible for all matters related to regional migration, the main aim of the Task Force was to close the migrant *ghettos* that had become a thorn on the side of the regional administration. In his multiple inter-
 635 views with the second author of this article, the regional Task Force coordinator repeated that if the region succeeded in tearing down the *ghettos*, it would result in the defeat of the structure of the *caporalato*. 'We are dealing with a lawless zone (*zona franca*) that needs to be reclaimed and sanitized (*bonificato*)', the administrator told the second
 640 author during an interview in August 2016. Whenever resistance did arise against the region's official reception system, authorities emphasized the destructive attitude of 'black and native actors of the *caporalato* industry' who resisted the Red Cross reception infrastructure (AGR Basilicata 2016).

But migrant workers had every right to be disappointed. Once the Task Force had
 645 finally decided to assign a former industrial plant to the Red Cross as 'temporary' accommodation for migrant workers during the summer months, the new camp infrastructure opened its doors too late in the harvest season to be able to offer its services in 2014. This would become the rule in the following years as well, despite the many complaints by local associations and the migrants themselves. As a result, most migrant workers were
 650 forced to live in the rural *ghettos* for the following years. The regional administration also decided to open a temporary labour camp in a neighbouring town in the same tomato district in 2014, 2015 and 2016. The last year, in addition, coincided with the eviction of the largest migrant *ghetto* in the area, which hosted up to 500 workers during the
 655 harvesting period and had in the meantime become a steady settlement of mostly Burkinabè day labourers employed in the agricultural sector. While voluntary associations continued to criticize the Red Cross for its 'militaristic management' of the camp in Borgo San Nicola (we expand on this point later in section 7), few migrant workers decided to live in these 'reception' centres during the harvesting season, though most were convinced that they would neither find work nor the assistance that was promised to them through
 660 official channels. During a conversation with NGO representatives who were working under the Task Force umbrella in August 2016, one worker told the second author of this paper that he would never go live in the camp because it was situated far away from the fields. This would make them even more dependent on the *caporali* for their transport as the Task Force provided no means of transport. In addition, the worker
 665 also observed the inadequate conditions of the official labour camp, which did not even have enough stoves to enable people to cook (Interview, Burkinabè worker and NGO representatives, 22 August 2016). The *caporali* of course performed their part of making the labour camps unattractive by refusing to pick up workers in front of the gates of these temporary labour camps and stimulating the construction of various
 670 *ghettos* divided by ethnicity.

7. The *ghetto* and the *caporale*: migrant labour logistics

In hindsight, one could argue that the politics of the Migration Task Force in Borgo San
 675 Nicola's tomato district has actually contributed to a segregated labour market for seasonal agricultural labourers to the advantage of the local *caporalato* hierarchy. Roughly

speaking, the growing strength of the *caporalato* infrastructure during the period 2014–2020 can be attributed to two central factors: active migrant dispersal, and militarized mobility control.

680 After a long period of institutional non-intervention in 2010–2014 (see above, section 6), the institution of the Migration Task Force in 2014 inaugurated active dispersal of migrant workers through the deliberate denial of their rural accommodations. On the one hand, the Task Force pressurized local town councils (*comuni*) to evict them from abandoned farmhouses (*casolari*) and former agricultural hamlets (*borghi*) where migrant workers found their temporary housing, both during and outside the harvesting season. The main instruments of the Task Force in this context were sanitation (demanding local health services to constantly control the hygienic conditions of rural housing accommodations) and taxation. As far as taxation goes, the regional administration made use of an administrative reform approved during the Matteo Renzi government in 2014 (the so-called *Piano Casa*), which denied people without a fixed address the renewal of their residence papers. This much debated reform transformed squatters across Italy into ‘illegal occupants’, unless they registered with an official institution, like a migrant reception centre (an alternative solution, provided by a minority of *comuni*, was the so-called ‘virtual residence’ registered with the demographic services of the town council). In order to fight such ‘illegal occupations’, furthermore, the Renzi government enacted a supplementary tax on vacant buildings. Needless to say, this real estate tax constituted an efficient instrument to evict migrants from their rural settle-
685 ments: all across the Puglia-Basilicata boundary, owners of abandoned *casolari* systematically started to tear down or close off the vacant buildings on their land properties.

700 On the other hand, some (though not all) *comuni* in the district gave the regional administration a helping hand by actively destroying the *ghettos* that had emerged on their territories, as we indicated above. Ironically, this active demolition strengthened rather than weakened the local *caporalato* hierarchy in Basilicata: whereas previously, the district accommodated a decentralized network of ethnic enclaves, with Ghanaian, Malian, Sudanese and Burkinabe workers returning to their habitual *ghettos* situated along the Basilicata-Puglia boundary; the annihilation of these settlements left only few of them intact and, there, the *caporalato* hierarchy gradually succeeded in consolidating itself around a single group of gangmasters. From a confidential interview with two smaller *capi neri*, the authors were able to establish that in this period, practically all workers were forced to declare allegiance to this organization. As one *capo nero* from Borgo San Nicola told the second author of this article: ‘I work directly for [the white caporale], he is like God ...’ While admitting the existence of several smaller territorial black *caporale* sovereignties in the area for the organization of services in the *ghettos* – as the *capo nero* asserted, ‘(the Sudanese *capo nero* should not show his face in our *ghetto* ... Noooo way’), both men confirmed the conflation of the *caporale* hierarchy into this single figure of the white *capo* with regards to the organization of labour mediation (interview, 2.7.2017). From these testimonies as well as other evidence gathered in this period¹⁵, it is clear that labour mediation in the area now became conglomerated around a strictly organized, Italian dominated network, which, moreover, operated
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¹⁵For 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.

in close complicity with local employers. Within this context, therefore, the two official labour camps established in Borgo San Nicola and a neighbouring *comune* performed the unique task of legitimizing the securitization of migrant flows through purely logistical means.¹⁶ While the official labour camp did nothing to stop the concentration of power into this unique *caporalato* infrastructure, different voluntary and humanitarian organizations continued to denounce the Red Cross for managing the camp in a 'militaristic' manner, which did not facilitate migrant workers' transfer to this official infrastructure. During a visit to the official labour camp in August 2017, the second author noticed how poor the conditions of this official camp infrastructure were (see also MEDU 2017). A grid of metal construction sheeting covered with white canvas separated the warehouse into different compartments. Each compartment hosted two field beds, reaching a total capacity of 300. Adding tents on the outside, the director said, the camp could accommodate up to 400 people. Next to the sleeping compartments, the warehouse also contained a praying area (basically, a carpet on the floor facing a concrete wall), two containers with 5 toilets each, two additional containers with 5 showers each, a public fountain and a cooking area consisting of two plastic tables, some chairs and two small cooking fires. The total number of workers present in the camp at the time did not exceed a dozen.

With only a minority of seasonal workers living in in the temporary labour camps, the main contribution of the Task Force policy was to push labourers into the web of the *caporali* who controlled the access to work and services in the area's main *ghetto*.

In 2019, at the end of the harvest season, a longstanding judicial investigation into the *caporalato* hierarchy of Borgo San Nicola ultimately resulted in the temporary house arrest of one of the main members of the *caporalato* structure. While this arrest left Basilicata's main *ghetto* practically void of the *caporale's* services for the harvest season in 2020, it meant that a growing number of workers practically had no option left but to camp out in front of the main gates of the temporary reception centre, which, as usual, delayed its scheduled opening in the middle of the harvesting season, in August that year.

8. Conclusion

This article started from the assumption that, in order to understand contemporary 'illegal' labour mediation practices in Southern Italy's agricultural economy, we need to root such practices in a longer historical process characterized by persistent informal labour brokerage practices and active state abandonment in the domain of migrant labour mediation. Inspired by the historical anthropologies of the Mediterranean, which have repeatedly insisted on the systemic relation between local politics, agricultural entrepreneurship and capitalist brokerage institutions, we proposed an infrastructural approach that is both ethnographically and geographically embedded. While taking seriously the organizational aspects of labour migration in this context, our focus provides the basis for an analysis of the ever-emergent and shifting character of the infrastructure of mobile labour mediation practices as well as their adaptability to rapid social, political and economic changes. With a focus on a place in the Puglia-

¹⁶It 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').

Basilicata border area during a period of fast economic globalization, our ethnography of *caporalato* broker capitalism analyses the contingent aspect of infrastructures that connect labour, capital and local politics within a context of globalized agriculture. Instead of assuming an isomorphic relationship between bourgeois capitalists and state bureaucracies, we explain the deeply informal negotiation of authority that has historically underpinned the agrarian economy in this environment (Arrighi and Piselli 1987). Rather than explaining away labour as a commodity that can be mobilized and expelled according to capital's needs, we explain the deep relational and social embeddedness of labour brokerage networks that have come to replace the state's mediating role between agricultural workers and entrepreneurs. From this perspective, we propose two main conclusions.

First, we observe the double function of informal migrant labour infrastructures to simultaneously route and root agricultural labourers in the local social and political context while excluding them from wider social benefits. We argue that the *caporalato* mediation infrastructures has generated a mobile territory that leaves its distinct traces in the form of networks and relational ties built in the context of increasingly restrictive migration policies at both national and local level. As a concrete example, we detailed the active push back policies that bureaucratic institutions continue to forcefully implement in this region and which, in our view, have directly stimulated the consolidation of informal labour settlements as neuralgic centres for the local *caporalato* hierarchy. Despite the overt rhetoric against 'illegal' brokering practices, we contend that the politics of migrant displacement, coupled with the active banning of migrant workers from local society, created the foundations for the persistence of *caporalato* capitalism in this region. Neither national legislative measures, nor the deliberate eviction of migrant environments in the district have had the effect of destroying the *caporali* hierarchy. On the contrary: both policies have actively strengthened the closely knit network of associations between local agricultural employers and labour intermediaries who continue to exploit a fragmented migrant workforce in their 'permanent temporary' condition of displacement. In an apparently paradoxical situation, whereby their activity has been defined as criminal by national law, *caporali* nonetheless continue to be favoured by the normative context because of the crucial contribution they make to disciplining the agricultural workforce. *Caporali* remain a central kingpin in Italy's agricultural economy where public administrations have remained apparently incapable, but practically unwilling, to fundamentally transform the way in which labour is being recruited, housed and reproduced. The result of this policy is that the cost of reproducing labour power is actively outsourced to agencies that operate in the shadow of state regulation and benefit from this marginality in a pecuniary manner.

A second conclusion of this article concerns the impact of *caporali* brokerage practices on agrarian societies more generally. Following Rye (2018: 189), we observe how contemporary forms of rural mobilities may in fact generate novel socio-spatial divides that transgress the local scale (see also Woods 2012, Hedberg and Lo Carmo 2012). Similar to neighbouring agricultural districts in Calabria, Puglia, and Sicily, which have experienced a comparable history of *latifundismo* and rapid agrarian transformation, Borgo San Nicola's plantation economy has been characterized by a persistent form of 'broker capitalism' (Schneider and Schneider 1976, Blok 1974) underpinned by an oligopolistic, export-oriented network of agricultural production firms. Today though, the combination of

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retail-driven commodity chains, neoliberal labour reforms and securitizing migration management in the sector of industrial agricultural production is significantly deepening the rift between migrant workers, agricultural producers and their families in the rural towns and villages, and the oligopolist retailers who both finance, process and distribute cash crops to global markets. For this reason, we need to look beyond the fetishized figure of the broker as a kind of thuggish intermediary involved in a criminal business of protection, as argued by Gambetta (1993) and others. Instead, we emphasize the interconnected infrastructures that continue to produce migrant worker segregation in a local context. While the migrant *ghetto* fulfils a central role in this socio-spatial seclusion, we argued, this role is a direct consequence of the ongoing externalization of labour reproduction through state policies that address seasonal labour merely in 'logistical' terms (through establishment of temporary labour camps) while deliberately abdicating their mediating role between labour and capital. Instead, the proceeding illegalization of labour mediation in the rural context has generated a dangerous liaison between local administrators and agricultural entrepreneurs who both benefit from flexible labour coercion. At the same time, migrant worker segregation also precludes migrants from developing the most important asset that could potentially lead to their emancipation: the ability to organize collectively and independently from those actors who are able to provide a bridge between capitalists, labourers and local public authority. That is why, despite official programmes and discourses about its dreadful role, *caporalato* capitalism continues to persist in the shadow of globalized agriculture since over one-and-a-half century.

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