

## **Stuck and Exploited**

Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Italy Between Exclusion,  
Discrimination and Struggles

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# **Ghettos, Work and Health Immigration Policies and New Coronavirus in the Gioia Tauro Plain**

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**Abstract** In Italy, the new Coronavirus pandemic has dramatically highlighted the contradictions evident in the relations between the agri-food sector and the political-economic treatment of a work force whose productive contribution is nowadays perceived as highly necessary. In a short time, in fact, slowdowns encountered by the agricultural sector during pandemic endangered the subsistence's conditions of thousands of rural workers. In this contribution, I'll try to examine, in the background of the current medical emergency, the relation between reception policies, differential inclusion of migrant work force in the labour market and the production of urban and political marginality in Southern Italy, more specifically in the Gioia Tauro Plain.

**Keywords** Ghettos. Tent city. Pandemic. Immigration policies. Gioia Tauro Plain.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Situating, Researching, Acting. – 3 Humanitarian Exploitation. – 4 Health Emergency. – 5 Mobilisation. – 6 Conclusions.

## **1 Introduction**

In this contribution, I will discuss the emergence of the new coronavirus experienced by migrants who live in the informal camps and centre in the Gioia Tauro Plain.

The ethnographic description and the consideration entrusted in the following pages intend to examine precisely whether and how the pandemic situation has influenced the political treatment faced



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by the foreign population of the Plain. In other words, the governance of migration and migrants. At the same time, it is proposed to turn our sights to the counter-politics of groups and organisations, which during the months of the lockdown, took action to make political claims and of a social and economic nature, starting from the improvement in the living conditions of migrants (especially labourers) using the prevention of contagion from COVID-19.

The theoretical framework that forms the background of the contribution draws on the definition of *humanitarian reason* as a pre-eminent moral economy in contemporary politics and which directs actions, investigates the care of suffering, rather than to the political meaning of the subjects.<sup>1</sup> Revealing itself as a governmental device used to guide and regulate conduct, at the same time enlists care and control functions, alternating a compassionate ethos and disciplinary if not security orientations (Agier 2005).

This political and moral orientation is not divorced from the functioning of the accumulative machine of global capital, which establishes – even in the social and economic spaces of capitalist countries – heterogeneous productive and legal regimes through the differential and hierarchical incorporation of subjects and territories (Lo Cascio, Piro 2018). The segmentation of the labour market is one of the most obvious consequences of this dynamic that, articulated with a differential assessment of cultural, economic and social diversity, generates a process called racialisation (Piro 2020; Mellino 2012; Curcio, Mellino 2012).

Compassion, control and racialisation: although these concepts, and the provisions, representations and practices that underlie it can be considered different and contrasting, I believe that they co-exist in territories such as the Gioia Tauro Plain, which are crossed by a very heterogeneous range of agencies. From a methodological point of view, it means conceiving the research setting as an arena in which forces institutions and actors that refer to both local and transnational processes confront each other. The humanitarian moral economy that presides over the confinement of the foreign population, making itself evident in sites such as camps and tent cities, alternates emphasis on the suffering and care of migrants (provisions which are not exempt from more conflicting activists and organisations) to others in which control devices are prominent. Finally, this stratified moral economy takes shape within a socio-economic configuration of the labour market that associates specific tasks and salaries according to the ethno-national origins of workers. The care of the basic needs for the physical survival of migrants is not incompatible, I believe, with a differential evaluation of political and economic rights that are not recognised as significant. The *refugeeisa-*

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**1** Fassin 2011; 2006; 2005; Fassin, Pandolfi 2010; Agier 2010; 2005.

tion of the workforce (Dines, Rigo 2015), which I will refer to in the second paragraph, fits into this context.

This contribution provides for an initial framing of the Plain of Gioia Tauro and, in particular, San Ferdinando in a wider economic-productive context. Later, I will focus on the visible confinement to which the migrant population is subjected and then move on to an ethnographic description of the first months of the health emergency due to the pandemic. The last part is dedicated to the political action with which groups and actors (both Italian and migrants) have resorted to. The emergency of the pandemic situation has led to claims for better living conditions and political significance for the foreign population of the area, in the expectation, largely misplaced, generated by the amnesty promoted during the lockdown by Teresa Bellanova, the Italian minister for agricultural policies (Caruso, Lo Cascio 2020).

## 2 Situating, Researching, Acting.

Lastly, a clarification is needed on the scientific and ethnographic positioning that is a prelude to this paper. For two years I have been participating in the activities of the ‘Soumaila Sacko’<sup>2</sup> legal desk, jointly created by the USB union and the Nuvola Rossa association. The legal desk mainly supports the foreign population of the Plain from a legal, bureaucratic and documentary point of view. However, as time as gone on, the help desk has also taken on a more political function, becoming a platform for claims which does not hesitate to give life to moments of political mobilisation as well as close discussions with the institutional actors of the territory.

The research I expose in these pages is the result of a political commitment that nourishes, being in turn shaped by it, an extremely precious anchor in the field for collecting data and information. Therefore, it’s a kind of engaged anthropology which, if made explicit in the conditions in which it is carried out, does not detract from the scientificity of the facts described, if the reflective season within anthropology has allowed to crack the myth of neutrality or objectivity of work in the field (Pavanello 2009; Geertz 1988; Bourdieu 2003) and considering the transition to observant participation (Tedlock 1991). Active and voluntary participation in the activities of the help desk represented an important resource for scientific research; but in turn, thinking

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<sup>2</sup> Soumaila Sacko was a labourer and trade unionist of the *Unione Sindacale di Base* shot and killed in the Vibonese area, not far from the old San Ferdinando ghetto, in 2018. When he was shot in the head, he was recovering with two of his companions some pieces of sheet with which to make the shacks of the settlement less precarious.

scientifically about the political processes in which I was involved, allowed me to critically reflect on the social transformation action in which, together with other subjects and organisations, I was engaged. The relationship between observer and observed produces unavoidable effects in the subjectivities of the participants in the research setting as well as in the results of the latter, making vain (as well as misleading) the observer's claim to be an impartial spectator of reality and practices in which he expects to be immersed (Bourdieu 2003).

The pandemic health emergency can be defined as a "total social fact", not only because of its global extension and because of the consequences it is producing in the most varied areas of social life. The pandemic is a total social fact because it is susceptible to multiple codification, producing meaning in various contexts and implying in its understanding the total set of relationships that make up the society in question (Clifford 2010).

This is why it can aspire to represent the prism from which to start an overall vision of the relationship between reception policies, the differential inclusion of migrant labour in the labour market and the production of urban and political marginalisation in the Plain district and beyond.

The mobility limitations that everyone has experienced during the pandemic has made it impossible to acquire first-hand data and ethnographic documentation, except for some personal visits to the institutional tent city of the municipality of San Ferdinando and the Contrada Russo ghetto, located in the neighbouring countryside of the municipality of Taurianova, which I will explain in the following pages.

Although I have been conducting political and ethnographic activity in those sites for years (focusing in particular on the bureaucratic production of marginalisation and social suffering), the reflections presented in this chapter will mainly feed on the experience of the members of non-profit humanitarian organisations and local trade union activists on whose testimonies I will draw to describe how the health emergency constituted the litmus test of the contradictions that characterise the Italian agri-food chain and its political management in relation to the needs of the global articulation of capital. In addition to acting to prevent and limit the economic and health discomforts caused by the epidemic, the associations and organisations active on the Plain have coordinated themselves with pressure on local and national institutions by exploiting and reorienting the same emergency rhetoric with which political decision-makers usually deal with the presence of labourers and foreign subjects in order to produce concrete results for long-term problems.<sup>3</sup>

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**3** I distinguish between 'labourers' and 'migrants' in order not to homogenise a composite and heterogeneous presence of foreign subjects who in recent years, as will be

In short, these organisations have grasped the potential in the COVID-19 emergency to alter policies and generate a social transformation that has so far struggled to manifest itself. It is interesting to note that this platform, whose rhetorical-claiming core is located in the health emergency and the unhealthy living conditions of migrants in the fields and ghettos of the Plain, repoliticises biopolitics by developing a critical etiological perspective and contrasting the discriminatory effects that power relations produce on suffering bodies and beings (Comaroff 2006).

In this sense, while moving from within the biopower, the counter-politics that originated during the pandemic and focused, at least initially, on the prevention of contagion and on the 'care' of the lives of labourers and other foreign subjects, overturns its meaning and restores value to lives that abandonment had made bare (Comaroff 2006).

First, however, it is necessary to describe the context under consideration by placing ourselves as close as possible to the experience of the migrants who live in the Plain of Gioia Tauro.

### 3 Humanitarian Exploitation

Located along the coast that connects the Tyrrhenian Sea with the Plain of Gioia Tauro, San Ferdinando is at the heart of an agricultural economy focused on monoculture and seasonal citrus harvesting, mostly entrusted to foreign labour.<sup>4</sup>

Care must be taken when considering San Ferdinando, Rosarno, Taurianova and the other small municipalities of the Plain that are marginal centres of the productive economy (as poles with no links to the routes of global development). In fact, on the Plain the workforce comes from Eastern Europe and West Africa, the orange juice comes from Brazil to the port of Gioia Tauro, the contributions to crops come from Brussels and finally the oranges are exported to Russia, Germany, Poland, United Arab Emirates and the United States (MEDU 2018).

It is the exploitation chain through the decisive role played by large organised distribution: migrant labour, juice multinationals, large merchants and supermarkets are all players in the game (MEDU 2018).

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specified below, have reached the Plain of Gioia Tauro not only as workers in the agri-food sector but as expelled legally and politically by the institutional system of reception. In this sense, the Italian legislative production appears substantially uniform (Dal Lago 2004), although the Law Decree 113 of 2018 represents an undoubted and nefarious leap in quality.

<sup>4</sup> MEDU 2020; Perrotta 2020; Manisera 2019; Iocco, Siegmann 2017; Garrapa 2016.

The entire Plain district represents a network of 'global' cities as indicated by Saskia Sassen (2001). I.e., part of economic-financial networks extended on a planetary scale in which different proportions of shares of global capital, transnational professionals, marginalised pockets of resident or trans-migrant population are concentrated (Corrado, De Castro, Perrotta 2016; Gertel, Sippel 2014).

In recent years, the fields and *ghettos* of the Plain have seen their nature change, following the recent Italian legislation. The 2020 MEDU (Doctors for Human Rights) report certifies that the vast majority (90%) of residents in the former San Ferdinando slum are legally resident.

The changes that have affected the Plain in recent years have also affected the socio-economic composition of the area. An originally seasonal workforce has gradually been joined by a now permanent population, mostly made up of asylum seekers and beneficiaries of forms of protection coming mainly from sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>5</sup>

This statistical survey is fully part of that *refugeeisation* of migrant labour in the agro-industry sector pictured by various studies (Perrotta, Sacchetto 2012; Castronovo 2015; Dines, Rigo 2015), a process linked in turn to the hegemonic affirmation of humanitarian reason in the representations of common sense and in the governance of migratory flows. The humanitarian reason corresponds to the affirmation of a naturally 'apolitical' moral economy that bases the recognition of the Other on the primacy of suffering and the violation of human rights rather than on political and social injustice (Fassin 2006) that crosses migratory itineraries from the country of origin to the one of arrival, passing through those of transit. The ethos of compassion at the basis of this moral economy then finds expression in governmental and national institutional practices (Dines 2018) as well as in international migration management, not without relation to the differential inclusion of migrants in the labour market (Melino 2012). In this framework, moral sentiments, clearly translated into the suffering of the body or the violation of 'universal' human rights, are the reward criterion for the attribution of forms of protection that sanction access to and permanence on European territory. On the level of migrant work in agriculture, this political-moral device implies that the recognition of the agricultural workforce takes place within the same moral and legal categories of humanitarian reason: workers are increasingly asylum seekers when they are not refugees or holders of various forms of protection – especially those of former humanitarian and its derivatives: special protec-

<sup>5</sup> Of the 213 people whose legal status MEDU has investigated, two thirds are asylum seekers or holders of international protection or other forms of protection. Only 7% have a residence permit for work reasons.

tion and protection for special cases. This trend is linked to the failure (or renunciation) of European migration policies when creating migration corridors for skilled labour (the flow of workers from third countries are increasingly limited and with tighter controls) and is accompanied by an emergency management of the social contexts crossed by the migrant workforce (the same applied to natural disasters or 'exceptional' situations experienced by populations or social groups) rather than by the implementation of labour or economic policies specifically addressed to the workforce of the countryside. More briefly, drawing on the aforementioned work by Nick Dines and Enrica Rigo (2015, 3), the *refugeeisation* includes

the preeminence given to human rights violations over labor relations in the representations of migrant workers' conditions; the growing phenomenon of asylum seekers and international protection holders employed as a low-skilled labor force; and the use of measures originally deployed for displaced persons in order to confront "emergency" situations that occur during peaks in arrivals of seasonal workers, often managed by the Civil Protection Department.

Humanitarian reason, therefore, can paradoxically reproduce the conditions of vulnerability and marginality experienced by the 'damned of the earth' in the protean juridically, politically, economically differentiated spaces of contemporary global capital (Mellino 2012). Despite a superficial reference to the conditions of suffers, it is not a prelude to the recognition of a 'political subject' and nothing changes in the framework of the relations of power and economics. On the contrary, the systematic and total aphonia of the large agro-industry conglomerates, almost never reached the technical tables convened by prefectures and other agencies.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as we will see with regard to the San Ferdinando tent city, it participates in the processes of securing neo-liberal societies.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, I believe that humanitarian reason applied to the contexts of migrant labour reiterates the liberal idea of migration as an autonomous individual choice of subjects eager to fit into the mesh of the free market, without any reference to the constraints and determinants objective - historical, economic, social, political - that give shape to diasporas and transnational itineraries (Taliani, Vacchiano

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<sup>6</sup> However, this does not at all mean that workers/migrants cannot apply resistance practices even within the same disciplinary mechanisms, negotiating social statuses and legal conditions useful for the continuation of the migration path (Perrotta 2015).

<sup>7</sup> I define 'neoliberal societies' - as a cast of English neoliberalist - those societies in which neoliberalism constitutes the dominant rational technique of government in the articulation of sovereign rules and regimes of citizenship (Ong 2006).

2006). Furthermore, it feeds the alteration and culturalisation of labour and labour relations, given that the differential inclusion of migrants in the labour market feeds on the use of every difference (cultural, ethno-national) as a function of capitalist enhancement (Mellino 2012; Düvell 2004).

Returning to the Plain of Gioia Tauro and the profiles of rural workers. In the last year and a half the picture seems to have partially changed. The concentration of invisible people living in conditions of administrative irregularity and adhering to non-contractual work relationships has significantly increased, waiting for legal-legislative openings, often then moving to the North. Therefore, it is no longer just or above all labourers entitled to protection, but a larger population of 'denied' and irregular workers produced by Italian migration policies. However, this does not radically decentralise the discourse initiated in the previous pages regarding the refugee or migrant labour. Despite the absence of protection, the vast majority of foreign workers encountered during the ethnographic work benefited from some forms of protection later losing it for various reasons, such as possession, albeit in negligible quantities, of drugs; failed to obtain it at the end of the long asylum application process; has not renewed the document (due to the stringent rules that link residence to the permit, for example [Ronchetti 2012]) or has not appealed a rejection or denial. In short, it is always part of the humanitarian reason that governs the entry of foreigners into host societies and the labour market. In this context, the contrast between *ghetto* and city stands out even more than in the past – between spaces of care, cure and control (Agier 2005), in which humanitarianism and security show their most perverse ties, and spaces of citizenship – within a border method (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) first applied to the world of work (in the distinction between professional tasks and unfair wages) and now elected to govern the society partially independent of income.

Despite the recent evacuation of the ghetto of San Ferdinando – come to light after the famous 'facts' of Rosarno in 2010 and one of the largest *ghettos* in Italy – which has had the effect of multiplying informal settlements, the management of the local foreign population in the Gioia Tauro Plain continues to feed on the logic of the concertation camp from the point of view of housing and differential from the point of view of legal, economic and political treatment.

An example is the case of the State tent city of San Ferdinando, which is added to the informal settlements that became known after the events of Rosarno in 2010 (Contrada Russo, Taurianova; Testa dell'Acqua, in Rosarno, to name the major ones), access to which is self-managed. The tent city, regulated by the local administration and the Ministry of Interior, was initially conceived to select entrances according to the legal position of the migrants, thus reproducing the social and cultural taxonomies of exclusion politically.

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Despite the expectations of the municipal administration of San Ferdinando, the pressure on the tent city, due to the expansion of the lines of illegal immigrants that I mentioned in the previous pages, has made this space a military camp. Police patrols and carabinieri surround the camp to prevent anyone from climbing over the fence and entering without having the right to. Nevertheless, someone who emerges from the dense surrounding scrub to find refuge there at least at night always comes out.

To prevent it from becoming too full, the town's administration has decided that those who leave the tent city for a few days, for work or other reasons, should be revoked from the camp. It is therefore evident that the camp does not only constitute a physical boundary of territorial delimitation but the invisible boundary that establishes the distinction between desirable and unwanted.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4 Health Emergency

The health emergency caused by the new Coronavirus has amplified and exacerbated existing premises and established social relationships. Let us see what happened as soon as the health emergency touched Southern Italy and the settlements mentioned in the previous pages. Organisations that have long been conducting medical assistance work on those sites (such as MEDU) and trade union protection or various others (USB, Nuvola Rossa, Mediterranean Hope) immediately saw serious dangers to public health. In a period in which gathering seems to have a horrific powers and a source of disaster for the community, the fields and *ghettos* of the Plain are places of overcrowding without remedy. The marginalisation of foreign population following the so-called 'security' decrees launched by the Lega-Movimento 5 Stelle government in 2019, produced unmanageable pressure in the institutional tent city, to which more and more people have had access from side passages and in a completely informal way. The social panic generated by the pandemic has also increased the demand for control but paralysed the interactions between law enforcement, workers of the cooperative that took over the management of the camp and guests of the latter. Thus, many people continue to sleep in the tents, not even being able to track the people entering and leaving the tent city. In addition, the stop to intra- and extra-regional mobility due to the measures taken in March 2020

<sup>8</sup> From a purely residential point of view, the presence of slums and tent cities in Calabria, and in the province of Reggio Calabria in particular, contrasts with the huge amount of new or unused housing stock. In the province of Reggio, the ISTAT estimate certifies the proportion of empty housing as second only to the province of Milan (Ziparo 2017).

to stem the epidemic has meant that dozens and dozens of migrants have remained stranded in Calabria. These mainly young adults have come to the Plain from other regions to stay there for the time necessary to renew their documents at the competent police headquarters.

The hygienic-sanitary issue is a useful looking glass for the purpose of evaluating the aporia of institutional rhetoric. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas ([1966] 2014) wrote that the beliefs in contamination exercise a precise function in ratifying positions and social relations, since they express a general point of view on the social order. The reports during the lockdown, which actually emerged after its conclusion, refer to migrants hosted in reception projects who died of unknown causes, not rescued by health personnel for fear that they were sick with COVID-19, and whose corpses remained for days to lie on the bed in a room shared with other people until the providential intervention of a priest, an activist, or sympathetic citizen.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the body, animated by vitality or removed from the vigour of death, always bears upon itself the signs of the unequal social order that assigns a differential evaluation to human beings (Fassin 2019).

While the Italian Government issued communication at all hours regarding personal care and hygiene, setting up a significant biopolitical legal and moral system, on the Plain, especially in the informal ghettos such as Contrada Russo in Taurianova, the water was also cut off, with the motivation that the relative connection was abusive. Human waste is therefore emitted outdoors; waste piled up and burned without anyone intervening; humans and animals (chickens, dogs, cats and mice) live in conditions of risky proximity. This also happens, albeit to a lesser extent, at the institutional camp, whose overcrowding generated electrical overloads, collapsing sewers, no available water, insufficient chemical toilets (presently in the ratio of one per hundred people) long before the pandemic explosion. The pandemic therefore reveals the contradictions of the institutional rhetoric on health matters. Alternatively, if we want, it dramatically grasps its differential nature in terms of class and 'race'. Just as the lockdown is not the same for those who have a large sunny and well-ventilated home and those who live in a damp and smelly basement, in the same way the attribution of the qualification of 'essentiality' to goods whose possession is considered obvious, indeed, an indication of little attention to higher values and stakes, reflects inequalities and structural violence. Such as when some institutional exponents of the local authorities of the Plain reproached the migrants who are guests of the tent city for expressing requests regarding food and drinking water, elementary needs, crude, subhuman, im-

<sup>9</sup> A tragic example is represented by the story of 20-year-old Ali Saibu, a Ghanaian resident in the province of Agrigento, reported by *L'Espresso* of 5 July 2020.

PLICITLY asserting their inability to abstract from 'traditional' meaning references and therefore to modernise. Without starting a reflection on the theorisation of the cultures of poverty (Lewis 1959), it may be sufficient, after all, to recall that the culturally and socially mediated nature of needs (Sahlins 2004) emerges in all its crudeness in the areas of experialism. A concept coined by David Foster Wallace, this neologism was recently taken up by Francesco Faeta (2017) who defines it as a tendency - on the part of the State - to cede sovereignty over territorial areas considered more problematic, delegating to other States or subsidiary bodies their management. De facto, the State expels them from the national and imperial border, leaving them in their marginality. The policies of experialism delegate to other groups or elites the management of territories such as the Plain (including patronage and crime networks, which have specific local functions in the articulation of capital).

Thus, disinfectant gel and soap have been procured, in recent months, by the associations present on the Plain, which have installed bins containing instructions for the use of the cleaning material. The strategy of the associations is to play attack: take advantage of the emergency to get out of the emergency. They denounce the unhealthy conditions of camps and ghettos to relaunch the issue of widespread housing on the Plain. But in this way there is a risk of giving side to those xenophobic interpretations that elect the Other and the sites in which he lives as a privileged source of contagion and danger. Some local media, in fact, did not hesitate to denounce the overcrowding of the tent city, from a more scandalous perspective than concern for the living conditions of the camp guests. Feeding the fear of spaces and people who already bear a considerable stigma in normal times can represent a boomerang.

In fact, the moral economy of suspicion that usually permeates the relationships between old and new inhabitants of the Plain as well as the relationship between State institutions and migrants is charged with new meanings and new ways of social stigmatisation. This is the case of those foreign workers without a contract or with a contract but with an expired residence permit who are blocked by the police while on their way to the workplace and forced to return 'home'.

Furthermore, in a phase in which health facilities are collapsing throughout Italy (especially at the beginning of the pandemic), drawing attention to segregation spaces can represent an extremely minority voice, destined to be unheard. Yet the centre-right government of the Region picked up the cry for help. In particular, the vice-president of the Region, Spirli, a member of the Lega, the Italian xenophobic party, said he was available for a dialogue aimed at overcoming the ghettos. Pity that this dialogue will leap in a short time, after the attempt by the local Caritas to set up a canteen service in the tent city saw the violent opposition by a small group of the guests of the

structure, to the point that Spirli discarded the mediator's clothes for thundering in the press that his commitment will henceforth be directed primarily at the Italian population.

The dialogue between the Prefecture and the officials of the Ministry of Interior was proved to be more fruitful. The meetings, requests, appeals and phone calls between associations and institutional representatives constituted a small piece of the proposal for the regularisation of migrants which, however, resulted in a measure well below initial expectations and limited to a few categories of foreign workers.

To worsen the general picture of the situation, the partial slowdown of the agri-food supply chain between March and April 2020 resulted in a pulverisation of the already poor wages of the labourers. But even those who were not employed in the agri-food sector have suffered from the contraction of incomes and the desertification of all employment opportunities.

The possibility of dying from the new coronavirus has therefore been added to the possibility of dying of hunger. Even in institutional sites such as the tent city, the inhabitants began to complain about the shortage of basic food (rice, tomatoes, meat). The associations active on the Plain have thus provided food aid together with masks, gloves and hand disinfectant gel, also creating a popular solidarity fund inspired by the values of mutualism and active solidarity. The popular fund was the subject of donations from all over Italy, reaching thousands of euros in a few weeks.

## 5 Mobilisation

In this climate, news of an imminent regularisation undertaken by the government to support the agri-food supply chain, at risk during the pandemic paralysis, raised the expectations among those who have become 'irregular' in recent years.

Abubakar Soumahoro, a union leader of the USB during the lockdown,<sup>10</sup> visited the camps and *ghettos* of Southern Italy when the restrictive measures had not yet loosened their grip. He gathered evidence of social suffering, cries of anguish and a desire to overturn social injustice. During the second half of April, Soumahoro visited the container camp of Taurianova (Contrada Russo) and the tent city of San Ferdinando. He brought with him huge quantities of necessities that he had collected thanks to a national campaign that was widespread on social media. The food delivery was preceded by meet-

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**10** Soumahoro left the USB at the end of July to cultivate a still shapeless political project as I write.

ings during which Aboubakar specified to the labourers that his visit was not just a distribution of food, but aimed at the political-trade union organisation of migrant labour. It must be said that Aboubakar enjoyed high popularity among labourers, who followed the videos he shot in the fields of Italy and knew the catchphrases he relaunched.

In Taurianova, where the majority of migrants came from Mali or West Africa, he first met dozens of labourers in an assembly that lasted about one hour. This took place mainly in Bambara and in French, and on the occasion he invited the workers to collaborate with local union militants and encouraged some young residents of the settlements to engage in union activity. Then he wandered around the field, met people, took pictures and promised that contacts would be close from then on. In addition, he started the paperwork with which the labourers, with the sufficient number of working days registered by their employer, would be able to access the State subsidies issued for the COVID-19 emergency. This obviously left out a significant number of workers whose contributions were lower than the amount of work actually paid.

At the beginning of the pandemic, a theory circulated in the camps that the new coronavirus affected only whites. Later things changed not just because the spread of the virus had also started to affect sub-Saharan Africa. Now, what is frightening is another consequence of the infection, which is the loss of hope it causes in the countryside, as a side consequence of the loss of work and of hunger.

In national public opinion, the insistent voice of an amnesty involved politicians, journalists and intellectuals. Behind the humanitarian tones of many interventions, however, lies the decisive instrumental reason for the fruit and vegetables left uncultivated in the fields, with the related economic damage to agro-business. This was a pretext, which prompted the government to insert in the 'Relaunch Italy' decree a regularisation provision for foreign citizens. Only those workers working in the sectors of agriculture, breeding and animal husbandry, fishing and aquaculture, personal assistance and domestic work (porterage, construction, catering) with a work contract in 2019 and a residence permit not expired before 31 October, 2019 will be able to access. A quick calculation of the migrant profile of the Plain allows activists to estimate that less than 5% of foreigners could access regularisation. In addition, the duration of the residence permits achieved thanks to the amnesty was only six months, an element that would seem to confirm that the measure aimed almost exclusively at repairing the holes and production delays that the agri-food sector suffered during the pandemic emergency.

These are, moreover, predictable and consubstantial risks to the order of the discourse that political-union activists and militants have themselves assumed during this political phase: resorting to the emergency register to re-signify it in terms of more equitable re-

distribution of social justice. Many activists and organisations close to migrants have in fact relaunched the issue of rotten vegetables in the fields, inviting institutions to act appropriately while protecting workers and the production chain. It is clear that the former have been subjected to treatment in accordance with the ordinary structure of political and working power relations dominant in the Country. The disappointment among the migrants was burning, after they understood the sanatoria's aftermaths. Many had a permit that expired even shortly before 31 October 2019 and asked activists without illusions if they could return to the amnesty.

USB (Unione Sindacale di Base) called for a strike by agricultural workers on 21 May 2020: it was one of the first political mobilisations of the COVID-19 era, during which the participation of local producers (crushed by large-scale distribution) and consumers was sought. A few days before the strike, some activists went to the camps to agree with the migrants what to do. They learned that dozens if not hundreds of these had left for Puglia, trying to repeat the customary geography of production even during the pandemic. In the following days, assemblies were convened inside the camps directly by the labourers, without the input of the union leaders. The migrants were determined, not just because of the disappointment about the amnesty but also because the marginalisation that the decrees wanted by the former Minister of Interior Matteo Salvini constituted apical measures, since they determined the return to the status of asylum seeker. In fact, this has resulted in a spiral of appeals, hearings in courts and territorial commissions, uncertain requests for residence permits for many people suitably integrated under the socio-economic and linguistic profile.

A demonstration was organised in front of the Prefecture of Reggio Calabria, where a dozen migrants (not all labourers) converged on the square in front of the institutional building depositing crates of fruit and vegetables, to denounce how the institutions were concerned more about goods than about people. Among other things, protesters took care not to create a crowd, given the anti-contagion provisions and risk disciplinary sanctions. In technical terms, we cannot say it was a strike, because on a national scale the demonstrators were mainly migrants in an irregular juridical-legal condition and therefore without formal employment relationships. It was more than anything, a mobilisation called to shed light on women and men discarded by all political and economic citizenship, which re-emerged under the spotlight during the COVID-19 pandemic. On May 21, on the national strike day, hundreds of migrants cross their arms. In the Foggia area, a large procession led by Abubakar Soumahoro went through *ghettos* and farmhouses. In the Plain of Gioia Tauro, participation in the strike was very low, but that morning, characterised by intense bad weather, many labourers took photos

in which they were portrayed in the act of holding banners, union flags and signs on which it was written that their rights should be extended to the invisible, without further hesitation. Some of them converged in Reggio Calabria, in which foreign citizens not employed in agriculture and residing for years in the province of Reggio participated. Some of them, equipped with masks and observing the requirements of social distancing, took the floor in a square manned by a strong presence of law enforcement and delivered speeches in which, although the autobiographical element predominated, political criticism was not lacking. In one of the most popular speeches, Abdurrahmane, a 28-year-old employed in catering and now in serious economic conditions, asked himself:

What will we tell our children one day when we tell them about our life here in Italy? We have worked and we work for you, on your premises, in your fields; we collect your fruit; we want rights not only for immigrants, we want equal rights for us and for Italians!

Thanks to the mobilisation gained in different areas of Italian political and civil society, the government changed the initial regularisation plan, extending its links also to the foreign worker - in addition to establishing a formal employment in the economic sectors mentioned above (whose limited range therefore remains) - able to show any document (health, relating to urban transport, etc.) as proof of its presence in Italy before the pandemic.<sup>11</sup>

## 6 Conclusions

Within a reflection on the cultural construction of representations and the political status of migrant subjectivity, Ascari and Sanò (2019) warn about the risks and aporia inherent in investing the migrant subject with that political consciousness, necessarily leading to political rebellion, deriving from living an existence in which the contradictions of the political-economic system manifest themselves at their highest level. Migrant labourers are arms that serve the economy of states; they constitute an 'industrial' reserve army that can easily be blackmailed and exploited because their workforce is extorted through highly unfair state legal-political affiliation grids. Their subaltern integration (Ceschi 2014) into the system occurs at a double level, economic and political. Creatures necessary and at

<sup>11</sup> Despite some limited corrective measures, the system of the measure - binding the possession of a residence permit, sanction of regular presence in the territory, to a work contract - remains almost unchanged.

the same time dangerously ambiguous – since with their altered surplus they crack the fragile taxonomic scaffolding that states feed on to shape national affiliations, as Sayad (2002) taught us – migrants would be entitled by virtue of this political-social placement, subversively polysemic, the task of redeeming humanity.

To embody the emergency: this task seems to fall to the majority of citizens of non-Italian origins residing in this Country. The pandemic reproduces this leitmotiv. Who suffers more than others the hygienic-behavioural prescriptions, the socio-economic repercussions, the political inequalities and access to health if not migrants? This is undeniable if on the other hand every pandemic is at the same time a total social fact, that is, subject in the Maussian sense to multiple codifications; or even better, perhaps, a ‘hybrid’ object (Palumbo 2020) that cannot occur solely in the medicalisation of a pathological condition. Thus, the new Coronavirus fuelled a process of social transformation full of an unprecedented political dynamism. Associations, trade unions and migrants have seized the opportunity of the situation to put the media and institutional spotlight on spaces and people who generally hold social invisibility, linking health policies and labour policies against the background of the wider debate on Italian migration policies.

However, the success of this operation is still far away. In mid-July, during yet another technical table convened by the Prefecture of Reggio Calabria, local officials and administrators evoked, without giving more details, the possibility of overcoming the tent city, to be implemented not through a muscular evacuation but with a less conspicuous removal of guests who are currently elsewhere in the productive geography acted by the migrant workforce (mainly in Puglia or Sicily, as every summer).

“Can anyone who left expect to find their place once they return?” the Prefect official who presides over the meeting commented caustically. Take advantage of the partial summer emptying of the tent city to sanction its shrinkage, the transformation into a limited space that is easier to manage: this was the goal. Two weeks later, the municipality of San Ferdinando circulated an information leaflet in the tent city in which it warned migrants that the space was about to be closed: “Guests are invited to identify a new and different housing solution”, the final gloss. The notice is part of a polemical strategy adopted by the mayor of the small town of the Plain, who was disappointed by the lack of commitment that institutions and political class, including his Democratic Party, which led the region for five years. The response from trade unions and associations was immediate: “Will those who fail to find an alternative housing solution independently live on the street? Moreover, even if some of the inhabitants of the tent city will be hosted in first or second reception centres, is it legitimate to treat them as migrants who have just landed in Ita-



ly?”. The response of the municipal administration of San Ferdinando was not long in coming: “We are for the overcoming of the tent city”, almost wanting to reverse political roles and visions, suggesting that the institutions really want to go beyond the concentration camps, unlike these of the social partners. Contradictions and overlaps of the humanitarian.

In October 2020, during the Coronavirus second wave, which has been impacting hardly Calabria, COVID-19 spread in the informal settlements as well as in the San Ferdinando tent city. Due to the high incidence of infections, those sites have been declared ‘red zones’. This decision provoked discontent and tensions among migrants, prevented from getting to work and without subsidies by the State. Many of the migrants tested for COVID-19 didn’t receive a certificate which in case of negativity may allow them to work. Furthermore, the impossibility for health institutions to provide COVID-19 tests for all the dwellers of tent city and ghettos made it impossible for them to require health insurance certifications, so to compensate for the lack of payday during quarantine. The opacity of the emergency management caused frustration in the tent city, where several clashes between migrants and police occurred.

Against the backdrop of despair and anger, during the winter several road accidents occurred, due to the absolute lack of street lighting around the ghettos. Many migrants were hit by cars whilst riding their bikes. In December 2020, the day after the death of Gassama Gora, a young Senegalese man run over by a car while coming back from work, hundreds of migrants rose up in a spontaneous protest, recording a very high abstention rate from work. Not even union activists, rushed to the place informed by the migrants themselves, could imagine the massive participation. The strike, initially against the will of Police officers, given the ban on non-static demonstration, consisted of a march from San Ferdinando to Gioia Tauro, where migrants paralysed traffic until they obtained the promise of the involvement of the Minister of Labour and regional institutions. Everyone, including solidarity and civil society associations, was surprised by such a strong manifestation of an unexpected political subjectivity which demanded urgent recognition.

The experience of recent months, oriented towards the search for mutualism, solidarity and popular welfare practices towards the social groups most affected by the economic-health crisis has helped to rewrite the political grammar of the organisations active on the Plain. Activists are reflecting on the possibility of creating Popular Purchase Groups - on the model of the already existing GAS - Solidarity Purchase Groups (Iocco, Lo Cascio, Perrotta 2019; Mostaccio 2016) - that put at the centre of their action the dramatic theme of the absence of income for those who have found themselves or will find themselves unemployed due to the post-pandemic economic contrac-

tion, providing them with self-organised support outside the institutional framework, hoping that this process can generate a surplus of class aggregation and critical consumption. This partial transformation, to which the history of some of the subjectivities present in the movement contributes, could shift organisations' centre of gravity away from political denunciation and from being a movement of opinion able to move freely between different issues and categories (the housing question; civil rights); awareness raising activities in schools against racism; support for a certain vision of a multicultural society; legal-bureaucratic practices; etc. to the almost exclusive adoption of mutualism and trade union self-organisation 'from below'. Furthermore, these GAPS will aim to weave political-relational plots regardless of the nationality of the people who use them. In other words, if neoliberal 'extractivist' capitalism operates by racialisation – that is, redefining the relationship between capital and labour on a racial basis (Nugent 2006), the militant response could resort to a de-categorisation of the subaltern political subjectivity.

However, the outcome of this process is still uncertain.

It is certain that a new season of political struggle is looming on the horizon, in the Plain of Gioia Tauro as elsewhere.

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