A European answer? Of continents, containers and un/domesticated movements

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1. OUT OF PLACE

‘This is not Italy,’ African farm labourers often say when complaining about the living and working conditions they experience in the many shantytowns, informal settlements and labour camps that dot rural spaces of intensive agro-industrial production. Abandoned, derelict buildings or favela-style dwellings without running water and no connection to the electric grid, haunted, in some fortunate instances, by the sound of generators and usually cut off from urbanity by muddy, pot-hole-littered roads. But also container- and tent-camps skirting the outer layers of cities and towns from the north to the south of what, on maps, is marked as Italian territory. One kind of settlement morphs into the other: this is where the institutional meets (and tags onto) the informal, and vice-versa; where rural meets urban; and where political geographies blur.
The largest among those hybrid in-between places, the so-called Grand Ghetto, lies in the Capitanata Plain of northern Apulia, some fifteen kilometres from the city of Foggia. During the tomato harvest season the Ghetto hosts more than 1000 people, mostly from sub-Saharan Africa. Here, newcomers who recently crossed the Mediterranean meet longer-term dwellers and people with a history of reverse social mobility - from up- to downwards, from the country to the city and back again after losing their decades-long jobs as a consequence of the economic crisis. They co-exist with seasoned gang-masters, sex workers and petty traders for whom farm workers represent the main source of income. Workers live in shacks built with cardboard, scrap wood, corrugated iron, asbestos and plastic sheets, or in overcrowded, abandoned farmhouses with no facilities, hoping that gangmasters or farmers will recruit them for as many days of grossly underpaid and (more or less) irregular piecework as possible. The 40-odd women who share their living conditions sell sexual and other kinds of services - food, drinks and more, in the many eateries located at the front of the shacks. Roma gypsies and gagé locals come daily to trade in clothes, shoes, chicken, new and second-hand goods of all kinds. Stolen and illegal commodities, of course, ‘rightly’ belong here too. Locals also come by night, especially during the weekend, to purchase the services of the African ladies at highly discounted prices compared to the already cheap street fares. Journalists, film directors, politicians, trade unionists, researchers, activists, priests, scouts, other concerned civil-society members, safari-lovers, voyeurs and ‘experts’ from all corners of the country, of Europe, and sometimes beyond, complete the picture.

Expressing their surprise at the situation they encountered when arriving in such places for the first time, migrants would often confess: ‘I never thought a place like this could exist in Italy’. Such shock is of course a common feature in many migrants’ narratives, conveying their disappointment when they first realise
that their expectations about Europe do not match with a reality in which people beg, sleep rough, and have trouble making ends meet. And yet, places like the Ghetto, or the tent-camp-turned-shantytown located in the Gioia Tauro Plain, Calabria, carry a surplus of peculiarity.

On their part, some Italian citizens also (mis)recognise the exceptional, seemingly out-of-place nature of these dwellings: ‘If you want to see what Africa looks like, you should come here’ - such is the mantra one hears over and again from the scores of visitors eager to uncover ‘the dark side of the Italian tomato’, as one rendition would have it,1 or the ‘blood stains’ on the oranges and clementines sold across the continent and the globe, raw or processed. However, countering such representations, many ghetto/camp dwellers are keen to point out that ‘no such places exist in Africa, I have met these places in Italy for the first time’. Others, perhaps in light of their different biographical experience, seem less confident. In his book, Cameroonian citizen, short-lived media star and trade unionist, Yvan Sagnet (hailed as one of the leaders of the ‘Nardò strike’ that in the summer of 2011 saw several hundred African tomato and watermelon pickers in southern Apulia demand fairer wages and work contracts) describes his impressions of the camp where the wildcat strike would erupt: ‘[W] as Boncuri, we asked ourselves, Africa or Italy?’ (93).2

Out of place, indeed.

So what are these zones of exception, what exactly makes them such, and where are they? Laboratories for the spectacularised, just-in-time exploitation, pacing and containment of a segregated, soaring and racialised underclass, they are also spaces where new formations of subjectivity and of struggle emerge. The strike in Nardò and the revolts that erupted in Rosarno in 2008 and 2010 (when the tent camp was not yet a reality, and migrants lived in
large informal settlements across different abandoned industrial and residential sites) poignantly demonstrated how the constant play of control against subversion drives change.

Yet, before asking the resistance question, let us start from the initial puzzle posed by those who encounter ‘ghettos’ for the first time: where exactly are these places and the people they host?

2. CONTAINED: FROM THE Ghetto TO THE CONTINENT AND BACK AGAIN

Discussing the work of artist Ursula Biemann, titled ‘Contained Mobility’ (2004), Brian Holmes gives us some hints on how we might begin to address these questions. Biemann herself, speaking of the subject of her video installation (a displaced long-term asylum seeker filmed in his container-house, side by side with images of cargo ships), describes her subject thus: Anatol Zimmermann has ‘come ashore in an offshore place, in a container world that only tolerates the translocal state of not being of this place – nor of any other, really – but of existing in a condition of permanent non-belonging, of juridical non-existence’. Such condition might well be compared to that of migrant farm workers living in one or another container-form, in more or less metaphorical terms.

Containers may indeed be the forever-temporary homes for some African fruit pickers, for example in Saluzzo (Piedmont), or in Rosarno. In the same locations, alongside metal boxes, tent camps expressly built for seasonal(ised) labourers signal the latter’s even more temporary and yet often chronic condition, creating hierarchies of precarity and entitlement where time is frozen in an eternal and uncertain present. The labour-camp model is progressively spreading to other agro-industrial contexts that register the presence of sub-Saharan African workers, such as the Capitanata Plain (Foggia), the Bradano-Vulture region of Basilicata or the Trapani province (Sicily).
For Holmes, the container in turn embodies the social form of just-in-time production, where consumer desires are monitored and modelled by supply chains in which retail holds the lion’s share, and where mobility and its control are everything (from workers to commodities, through managers and consumers). Indeed, agricultural production in Italy as across much of the globe is no exception to this pattern, with large supermarket chains or wholesale retailers controlling ever more directly the entire process of production and distribution. And relying on a large and internally fragmented reserve army of utterly precarious migrant labour, segregated through racialised zoning processes that increasingly rely on the same humanitarian dispositif which regulates their survival, and extracts value from their very existence – from the sea to the camp.

Thus, aside from living spaces other forms of containerisation, of permanent displacement, are simultaneously in place. Some workers are undocumented, and hence non-existent in juridical terms (or, rather, existing in their exclusion from the right to have rights), suspended in that space of non-belonging that Biemann describes. Yet, many more do have some form of (often temporary) juridical recognition, ever more frequently granted on humanitarian grounds. But their condition seems nonetheless one of containment in places out of place.

After having displaced millions, the military-humanitarian complex - perfected in the aftermath of NATO’s Libyan war and carried forward by the (part EU-funded) Italian rescue operation tellingly named ‘Mare Nostrum’, then morphed into Frontex-led ‘Operation Triton’ - awards some of those arriving by sea (not in containers but in overcrowded boats) with an always precarious and revocable right to stay on the arbitrary grounds of exceptional circumstances, once again institutionalising precarity. And, incidentally, who is the subject of that pronoun, ‘our’, qualifying the Mediterranean sea, a borderzone? Can we reclaim a different ‘us’
for it? Is this a ‘European question’ as Nicholas De Genova posed it? We shall return to this.

Humanitarianism, like war, is (also) business. The recent bursting of the ‘Mafia Capitale’ scandal, involving public officials, fascist-leaning mafia cartels and third-sector organisations (where one cannot be clearly distinguished from the other), summed it all up impeccably: one of the main defendants, his phone tapped, plainly explained how ‘migrants are more lucrative than drugs’.

Not only can the lives saved at sea be put to work in Italy’s ‘green factory’ at ever-decreasing rates - in fact, many agro-industrial areas also host long-term asylum-seeker reception centres (which, in turn, often outgrow into shantytowns) -, thus making the previous regime of migration regulation obsolete. As Dines and Rigo point out, it is no coincidence that since the ‘North African Emergency’ that followed the Libyan war no annual quotas for labour migrants have been issued by the Italian government. What is more, the entire lives of these ‘containerised subjects’ are increasingly monetised - by means, for example, of private contracts, sponsored by local authorities as in the case of the Grand Ghetto, for the provision of portable toilets and drinking water, or of entire camps where they are to be lodged. Once established, emergency, as we know, reproduces itself (and profit alongside with it). It becomes a permanent device of government.

Furthermore, humanitarian emergencies made ordinary also eclipse the reality of labour. The type of work migrants end up performing, as one of the few opportunities available, partakes of that non-belonging too, which is embodied by the containerised asylum seeker turned excess workforce. Or, rather, we may more accurately speak of differential belonging (to paraphrase Mezzadra and Neilson’s reconceptualisation of the inclusion/exclusion dyad as a continuum), whereby persons are increasingly categorised, labelled, contained and ghetto-ised according to an ever multiplying set of parameters and dispositifs.
Sub-Saharan Africans belong to ghettos or camps - like Roma people. They too work in the fields of Apulia and Calabria, often with their entire families, and in many cases move back and forth between Romania or Bulgaria and Italy, or other parts of Europe. And increasingly so in the last decade. Indeed, the spectacular exposure-cum-invisibilisation of the containerised black workforce masks a much more complex and nuanced reality, where the majority of agricultural day labourers in many areas are EU citizens, and not all of Roma descent.9

Whilst those who arrive by sea are contained in humanitarian-cum-labour camps, together with fellow black migrants who were displaced because of the crisis and with other populations made ‘nomadic’ or ‘seasonal’, an even more numerous, docile and readily disposable army of workers is in constant supply from Europe’s eastern peripheries. Given the availability of large reserve armies of labourers, after more than 30 years of restrictive immigration laws in the context of neo-liberal restructurings, all workers earn extremely low salaries. Often they have no work contract, or a fictitious one, which in any case is grossly infringed: working days are twice as long as prescribed, with no recognition of extra time; hourly rates are half the minimum wage, and in many cases during harvest workers are paid at piece rate; no social insurance is paid on their behalf, whilst intermediaries of different sorts (in some cases workers’ fellow nationals or even relatives) erode part of their salaries in exchange for transport and food, and on account of their brokering role with farm owners or companies.

Here, ‘the container’ is not only a geographical/physical space, but also a system for the organization and disciplining of work that functions through multiple dispositifs: legal and extra-legal, more broadly social and relational, sometimes physically violent and coercive. They may be predicated on kinship, on common origin or language, or vice-versa on complete misrecognition of common humanity. Sexual difference is one such dispositif, which
subjects women (usually from Eastern Europe) to a further form of exploitation in the form of harassment, binding work and salary to female employees’ willingness to provide farm owners with free sexual services. In other cases, as with the Africans, women are locked in the role of care providers – sex included, at appallingly low rates ranging between 5 and 10 euros. Their wages are locked to those of farm workers, and thus bind them to even higher levels of exploitation.

As far as the law (and its transgression) are concerned, different bureaucratic tools, and multiple, arbitrary breeches of ‘normal’ bureaucratic procedures and legal prescriptions, bar different categories of people or different individuals from accessing different sets of rights. People who are nomadic (by choice or by force, where of course the line between one and the other is anything but clear-cut), or who do not live in ‘proper’ houses recognisable as such by the institutional apparatus, are arbitrarily denied residency rights – and thus access to the national healthcare system (but for emergency care), for example, or the ability to obtain a bank account or a driving license. EU citizens from the peripheries can formally enjoy ‘freedom’ of movement similarly to their western counterparts, but in practice many are excluded from healthcare for residency or other reasons. And their greater inter-national mobility makes for their readiness to accept even worse labour conditions compared to their African colleagues, who cannot spend their yearly wages in their country of origin. Of course, immigration status is another such differentiating device for non-EU citizens, as mentioned.

Furthermore, the process of ‘containerisation’ is certainly not peculiar to the sphere of agro-industrial production, but part of a wider trend. Particular kinds of zoning invest many areas of the globe and many facets of production, distribution and consumption (where these phases cannot even be clearly separated any longer, for value is extracted from each of them). More broadly,
we might say they are tools of ‘government’ in the Foucauldian sense. Alongside labour camps and agricultural districts, we also witness the proliferation of different forms of spatial organisation (read enclosure): special economic zones, foreign trade zones, financial districts, offshore enclaves, new cities-within-cities, gated communities and much more. As a whole, they complicate any linear, continuous and totalising representation of territorial sovereignty and the law, and thus of borders. Indeed, borders are fragmenting and proliferating, whilst the state and its laws become an instrumental tool for government. National, continental, economic, cultural, ‘ethnic’ or ‘racial’ borders articulate to one another to form ‘hybrid’ dispositifs of control and regulation. As we have seen, such proliferation does not give rise to binary distinctions between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. In other words, if no-one is immune from containerisation, some containers are more spacious, airy and pleasant (but also costly) than others. Some containers encapsulate others. Or, simply, containers might belong to different orders altogether.

Ultimately, human beings’ flows and movements are processed in similar ways to those of commodities, information, and money. In fact, they too can be channeled and containerized; they too are managed by law, made legal or illegal; they too yield a profit, when the media spectacle turns them into spectral, shallow characters, into mere examples of an undesirable life (where, in this alleged undesirability, lies the only difference between them and the commodified advertising people); they too are subject to economic gambling (for instance, they are the matter on which the derivatives of the military-humanitarian complex blossom). Sometimes they are actually imported, as it happens with the EU’s newer citizens; sometimes they live in extraterritorial zones; sometimes they experience both conditions together.

The Grand Ghetto which we described at the beginning of this chapter is one such zone. It arose and grows in the middle of land
owned by the Caccavelli Group, a consortium of agricultural producers, which “deals directly with the national and international large-scale agricultural retail trade”\textsuperscript{12}. The development of the Grand Ghetto, and of other ghettos in the area, is not at all a collateral effect as we are led to believe, but the result of a specific formation of capital which recalls plantation-style set-ups and at the same time is projected into the future of \textit{Made in Italy} export districts.

The new logistical geography of Europe, which in contemporary agribusiness is the very geography of mass distribution, is characterised by a polycentric development on a regional scale, by the creation of distribution networks, of hubs, of districts that are interconnected even at a great distance, and apparently disconnected from their immediate surroundings\textsuperscript{13}. We can already make out the contours of an economically and functionally integrated continental web. Large globalising capitals are eager to put it in place, and European institutions are supporting it, for instance through the funding of new Rail Freight Corridors and other infrastructure spaces. The EU is a dispositif for the production of space as well, in the sense that Henri Lefebvre gave to this expression. It is historical speed becoming space, dis-placing local balances, modifying people and commodity flows, digging new tunnels underneath the Alps. The EU integrates differentially. It is the process of creation of a new geography, a globalising force, perfectly synergistic with that of centralized capitals, which spatially expresses itself through a web of enclaves, terminals, and other zones where abstract, digital, economic-governmental thought becomes a(n) (extra)territorial configuration.

The Grand Ghetto fits perfectly within this new continental (and global) geography: or, rather, \textit{both share the same historical speed}. In fact, the Ghetto is the result of the combined activity of a changing form of capital and of continental policies in the economic and social field. People who transit from a node to another,
getting stuck in and beside the network of Italian agro-industry (and of humanitarian profit), are the mirror image of the incredible and (from the point of view of labour, health and the environment) irrational mobility guaranteed to agricultural products – and more generally to the flows of commodities or money.

The Grand Ghetto, like every other similar, ever-spreading form of dwelling, is often described as a margin. Now we can realise that, from a different point of view, it lies at the core of an *eccentric* typology of space, which is produced on a European (and thus global) level. The Ghetto arises in a nodal space not so different from a Free Zone or from a financial district. Then, to those African labourers who claim “this is not Italy”, we can answer “you are right: this is the EU”.

3. THE EUROPEAN DISPOSITIF: LABOUR MOBILITIES, DISPLACEMENTS AND AGRICULTURE

A specific containment device, the European Union appears as a significant dispositif, one which we wish to bring to the front, in the governmental chain that re-articulates places, peoples and the relationships between and among them. It exceeds any political and geographical border: the EU is not in Europe, it is a global machine which works within an expansive - and at the same time defensive - paradigm.\textsuperscript{14} This is so at the level of both migration and agricultural policies, of processes of expansion and externalisation of its frontiers and borders, through war as much as through bureaucracies.

Looking at patterns of migration in southern Europe, we are immediately led from tiny sun-burnt islands in the middle of the sea, such as Lampedusa - which serve as backgrounds to the spectacularised staging of an invasion (one which includes the zombified spectres of those the militarised sea has swallowed, who only in some cases shall deserve a last, wooden box to be contained in
for eternity\textsuperscript{15} - to the (themselves secluded) spaces in the heart of the containing-continent dispositif, where many decisions are made and lives shaped.

Remember Schengen?

Internal ‘freedom of movement’ (for those with the right kind of passport, bien sûr) re-positioned European borders towards the Community’s outer edges. The beginnings of migration to Italy roughly coincide with the implementation of the Schengen Treaties, initially ratified by France, West Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Belgium \textit{aboard a boat} (uncanny resonances haunt this choice of location) on the river Moselle, at the intersection of three national borders, in 1985 - but fully adopted only in the late 1990s. At the time of its initial sealing, signatories introduced further restrictions on migration which had to be abided by all adhering states, including a quota system and increasing border controls. Italy, like Spain and Greece, thus became European borderlands, and entry points for migrants \textit{en route} to northern Europe.

At the same time, restrictions in immigration made of asylum one of the few, indeed the main remaining channel to get legal status for non-EU migrants. And along came the externalisation of border controls and the Dublin regulations, once again confining asylum seekers coming from sea and land to Europe’s southern edges. Hence, we can link the out-of-place spaces with which we began to the post-Schengen Euro-Mediterranean borderzone. Camp-Ghettoes are ‘decompression chambers’\textsuperscript{16} for that excess of bodies that the sea, the air, the land carry to EU shores, driven by aspirations, desires, dreams and hopes stronger than any attempt at crushing them.

Then came EU enlargement to countries such as Poland, Romania and Bulgaria - and with it new patterns of labour mobility.
Seasonality could become Europe-wide, and not intra-national as with the yearly circuits of agricultural labour, where those trapped by the border regime (because they did not possess the right kinds of papers) moved from one harvest to the other. Whilst patterns of internal mobility have not disappeared (and might even have witnessed an increase in absolute numbers, as a consequence of the Libyan crisis and its production of ‘excess black bodies’), in relative terms intra-European seasonal mobility plays an ever more central role for the organisation of the agricultural workforce. Invisibilised by the military-humanitarian spectacle of non-EU bodies (rescued or buried first, examined, contained and subsequently put to work), European agricultural workers are, in some regions, the majority of the seasonal labour force. They are paid the same wages, and sometimes less – indeed, since their first arrivals, still as extra-EU citizens, salaries have lost half of their absolute value.

Whilst increasing numbers of potential workers might have contributed to the fall of wages in agriculture, several other factors, many of which also internal to the European dispositif, must also be considered. Chronologically, Common Agrarian Policies (CAPs) are doubtlessly the first, and they are quantitatively significant as well. This is one of the areas of European governance where a unitary direction has been in place for longest (since the 1960s), and has had the highest amount of common resources at its disposal: for the period 2014-2020, 362,8 billion euros have been allocated, corresponding to 37,8% of the total EU budget. Whilst agricultural policies have undergone several changes through the decades, analysts indicate that their effects have tended towards a progressive concentration of agricultural land in fewer hands, with a visible reduction in the number of small and medium farms. Concomitantly, the prices paid to producers have progressively fallen, also as a consequence of large-scale, global processes of industrialisation of the agri-food chains, in the context of just-in-time and to-the-point neo-liberal restructuring.
Heavy competition from subsidised EU products, as well as land grabbing and policies of structural adjustment have heavily affected small subsistence farmers in poorer regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe, who in many cases were (and are still being) turned into migrant wage labourers in agriculture and in other sectors. And, let us not forget, processes of large-scale displacement are also the result of another great European dispositif: that of war. The new European wars inside and outside its (shifting and ambiguous) borders - Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Libya, Syria, Somalia, Eritrea, Ukraine, to mention just the most blatant cases-, as much as the silent war against the poor the world over, waged also by means of EU austerity, have effects on migratory flows and attempts at their containment (where border control is itself part of a military-industrial complex, as we have already noted). 18

At the same time, production everywhere is ever more directly controlled by large-scale retail players who compress wholesale prices and force small farmers out of business. Of course, the highest price is paid by workers, whose reproduction costs are also outsourced, first to their countries of origin and subsequently to the informal economy that we gave a glimpse on earlier.

‘The zone’, then, is a fully EU/ropean product.

4. STEPPING OUT - AND IN FRONT - OF CONTAINERS

Now for some good news and hopeful collective projects. Containters are not air-tight, and wherever they proliferate so does resistance. Of course, to fight against such gigantic machines as EU border policies, austerity, agri-business, military-industrial-humanitarian complexes and infrastructures of many other sorts is no simple endeavour. Even when struggles do spark up, in the situations we described here they could easily backfire - as it was
the case with the wildcat strike that involved over 400 casual farm workers in Nardò, southern Apulia, in 2011. After their requests were accepted, and some farm owners put on trial for gross violations of labour and criminal law, African workers could not find employment in the area any longer, and were substituted by Eastern Europeans. At the same time, undeniably, this was one of the most significant migrant workers’ struggles in Italian history to date, all the more so given the dire conditions in which it took shape. And it was not an altogether isolated incident: ever since 1989, farm workers’ struggles have marked the political significance of migrants as subjects of struggle and change. Villa Literno, Rosarno, Castelvolturno, Castelnuovo Scrivia, Saluzzo, Foggia: these are some of the places, across the length of the Italian peninsula, where smaller or bigger instances of resistance against containment of the agricultural workforce have occurred, and which have encompassed demands ranging from better working conditions to proper housing, recognition of legal status and the right to work, and physical safety from racist attacks. In many cases, these have been articulated together in single instances of struggle, which gave these mobilsations the character of truly social strikes, anticipating and in some ways inspiring more conventional social movements. They have inspired (and in some cases were inspired by) militant projects aimed at opening up these enclosures, at building counter-camps and alternative infrastructures, for which research such as the one we attempt to carry out is a crucial weapon, to be able to trace the workings of those chains that bind shantytowns at the southern European borderzones with supermarkets in large metropolises across the continent and beyond, through factories, warehouses, lorries and ships, ports and roads, identifying their weaker links. But our research as one aspect of the practices of mutualism and solidarity we have put in place, inspired by farm workers’ struggles, also serve to get out of
our own containers, the ones that contemporary precarity imposes on our existences.

We have learnt much about anti-containerisation tactics precisely from another crucial cycle of struggles involving migrant workers and containers, this time of the literal sort. Since 2008, logistics workers in different parts of Italy have engaged in multiple strikes, pickets, blockades, and demonstrations that exposed and made evident the importance of this aspect of capitalist value extraction in the present conjuncture, and consequently also the efficacy of struggles in this domain. To block the circulation of commodities has proved as a particularly effective way to hinder the interests of capital and gain some terrain in the struggle for a more just and equitable form of living. And it is with this hopeful and suggestive note, that brings us back to, or better in front of, and opposed to, containers of the literal and the metaphorical kind that we wish to end this paper, and continue the struggle.

NOTES

4. Ibid., p. 33.


9. In Italy as a whole, considering only those workers who were registered with the National Institute for Social Security (INPS) and thus who had some contractual form, in 2014 of over 320,000 foreign-born agricultural labourers more than 119,000 were from Romania, and another 44,000 from Poland, Bulgaria and Slovakia put together, cf. UNAR, 2014. Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2015. Rome: Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS.


