Genealogies of containment: migrant labour, *bonifica integrale* and bio-carceral regimes in an Italian agro-industrial enclave

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Abstract. This paper begins from the present condition of migrant workers in the district of Foggia, south-eastern Italy, one of the largest agro-industrial enclaves in the country, employing tens of thousands of workers who live and labour in conditions of extreme precarity and exploitation. Techniques of containment of such labour force range from the spatial to the juridical and symbolic, through interlacing discourses and their material dimensions and outcomes, in which migrants are constructed as a security (and health) threat or a humanitarian emergency. Drawing on over nine years of engaged participant research and on archival and secondary sources, I reconsider the genealogies of such "*dispositifs*", which date back to pre-unification projects of agrarian and penal reform and to the emergence of a racialist paradigm in the post-unitary Italian context, in relation to criminal anthropology. In particular, I examine their application to carceral regimes of labour in projects of land reclamation, which have shaped many agro-industrial enclaves (and especially that of Tavoliere, in the district of Foggia). The current materialities of migrant containment can thus be shown to bear the stratified, spectral traces of past projects and modes of governance.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought migrant farm workers under the limelight once again, as it has happened recursively in the last three decades, in Italy and in many other parts of the world. Branded as "essential", they were the object of intersecting and sometimes conflicting discourses that ranged from the criminalising to the victimising and the humanitarian. [1] On the one hand, the "assemblages" (*assembramenti*[1]) of migrants in some neighbourhoods during the lockdown period wreaked havoc upon local residents, who perceived these "foreign bodies" as a health hazard. This is the case, for example, with Foggia, the capital of the second most extensive agricultural district in Italy, located in the northern part of the Apulia region of south-eastern Italy. [2] The neighbourhood adjacent to the city's train station, where a series of dedicated stores selling *halal* meat and specialty food from West Africa, Eastern Europe, and South-East Asia, as well as money transfer and communication services and betting agencies has flourished in the last decades, is a point of reference for

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[1] A term indicating the dangerous, spontaneous gathering of a group of people, revived from the times of Fascism and popularised from legal jargon precisely during the pandemic.

migrant farm workers who live scattered in slums, labour camps, derelict farmhouses or abandoned buildings outside the city. Throughout the years, the migrants' presence has repeatedly attracted the hostility of a portion of the citizenry, fuelled by far-right groups and often expressed in the biopolitical language of contamination. On the other hand, the appalling living conditions of many migrants, who are confined to isolated and unhygienic dwellings, rang the alarms among civil-society organisations, which feared an outburst of contagious diseases in those spaces. Such concerns, however, proved unfounded well into the summer of 2020, when the seasonal demands of the agro-industry prompted greater mobility and thus facilitated the spread of the virus. Whilst some of the most putatively authoritative news outlets in the Italian media wondered, in the aftermath of spurious declarations by eminent virologists, whether (black) African migrants might be immune to Covid-19 given the extremely low rate of detected cases among such population, [3, 4, 5, 6] explanations should evidently be sought elsewhere.

In the case of migrant farm workers, among whom the West-African component is rather large (in the order of several tens of thousands, and perhaps hundreds of thousands across the country, and of several thousands in the district of Foggia alone [1, 7][2]), living conditions structurally akin to quarantine, together with slum/camp dwellers' age-old experience in observing strict hygiene rules in dire conditions [8], might help understand how the pandemic was initially staved off. Indeed, the different "camp forms" [9] to which their inhabitants are confined can be seen to respond to the three interrelated logics which Marc Bernardot identified as subtending to such apparatuses of capture: the fear of invasion, subversion, and contamination. [10] Here, the protection of external borders and of internal cohesion is associated to the preservation of the healthy body of the nation. Historically, spaces of quarantine were juxtaposed with, and helped bring forth, the modern structures of sovereignty and migration management: if epidemics played a foundational role in the construction of modern states, since at least the 19th century the quarantining of migrants (at departure and/or destination) formed a core procedure in the selection of able and "safe" bodies to put to work, and of others to abandon to their fate as "excess" populations. As Bernardot has argued:

> "Foreigners' camps are inscribed on the one hand in the tradition of the medieval leprosy lazaretto, and on the other in that of maritime quarantine. They are their modern form, to the extent that they partake of their preventive function in health matters but extend it in repressive fashion […] to manage other types of risk, notably demographic and political. This goal is most often articulated to others, for the management of crises and migrations. Camps thus function as a decontamination or confinement chamber in exceptional circumstances, whilst health posts (which have replaced quarantines and lazarettos) are integrated into the healthcare and border protection systems."[3] [10]

From a health-risk management tool, the camp became a wide-ranging prevention device, imposing a generalised quarantine allowing for the sorting of individuals. The biopolitics of population management thus found in the camp one of its central architectural and juridical tools[4].

In the contexts I am concerned with, spatial devices intersect with juridical and symbolic-affective "*dispositifs*" to contain foreign bodies: socio-physical separation is not only

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[2] Providing reliable estimates for this population is particularly arduous, given high rates of illegality in relation both to immigration status and to labour arrangements. It must also be noted that following the outburst of the pandemic, many workers from Eastern Europe, the Balkan region and Northern Africa could not (and did not want to) return to Italy after the winter break, leaving West Africans and South Asians as the largest pool of available labour.

[3] The translation has been made by the author.

[4] For a more extensive treatment of these issues in relation to the pandemic and its effects on migrant farm workers, see [32]

engineered through formalised camp structures. Formal and informal spaces of segregation, and their legal underpinnings, are also produced through discriminatory migration laws that create differential access to citizenship rights along a continuum (up until total banishment) and reinforced by racist prejudice. Even those documented migrants who might afford it face difficulties renting houses in city and town centres, and often prefer to live in slums where they can rely on their community for the kind of support and conviviality that they are unlikely to get from those who do not identify with them (Italians but also migrants from other parts of the world). In the district of Foggia, several, partially differing living aggregates might be ascribed to the continuum of camp forms, and intersecting genealogies can therefore be traced to analyse their power to contain.

2 Camps at the intersection of military, carceral and humanitarian paradigms

In the district of Foggia labour camps, both in the form of tent and container cities and of self-contained blocks, for the most part have been erected or readapted in the last six years (with an important, though extemporaneous precedent in 1990). The stated aim of most of them relates to the need of replacing more informal slums, which however continue to exist and proliferate. Labour camps display both formal and substantial continuities with asylum-seeker reception centres and refugee camps, and in some cases, they served such purpose directly, if temporarily. This was the case for a camp currently named "Casa Sankara", located in northern Tavoliere (the agricultural plain that belongs to the district of Foggia) and funded through the years by emergency and ordinary State and regional budgets. First an experimental agricultural station erected in the 1950s as part of the land reform, in 2007 it was readapted to serve as a short-term, paying hostel for seasonal farm labourers, which was never operational. It was finally inaugurated in its current form in 2013 and has provided various kinds of accommodation: tents and containers, as well as brick-and-mortar dormitories. Since it was for the most part deserted by its putative users, during the summer of 2015 (the so-called "summer of migration") it was converted into a temporary asylum-seeker reception centre, until a series of scandals broke out concerning management. The camp currently remains operational for a few dozen farm labourers of West African origins.

As with all such institutionally managed spaces, strict rules apply that limit entry and exit times, constrain the possibility to cook one's own meals, and forbid hosts to receive visits from outsiders or to bring their families with them. Yet, in most such spaces literal and metaphorical loopholes allow for some tolerance. Another set of tents and containers was recently put in place by the regional authorities in what was formerly the largest slum in Tavoliere, known to its inhabitants as "Grand Ghetto", after the last in a long series of fires destroyed many shacks. The Ghetto was partially evicted in 2017, with an imposing display of force by law enforcement agents, and some of its dwellers transferred to a hostel in the outskirts of the nearest town, San Severo. After protracted conflicts between the administration and the hosts, the latter site is currently self-managed and under threat of eviction, for the building was allocated to host a financial-police (*guardia di finanza*) station.

Thus, camps are here inscribed within a humanitarian paradigm, in whose shade lurks a military and carceral underside. Some asylum-seeker reception centres and labour camps are erected on sites that initially served as military bases, materialising the continuities between military, carceral and humanitarian dimensions. Another large asylum-seeker reception centre, which the Italian government is currently planning to reconvert into a camp for farm labourers following the (partially successful) blockage of arrivals along the central Mediterranean route that started in 2017, was readapted from a military airbase built near the town of Borgo Mezzanone, in the heart of Tavoliere, during WWII. Adjacent to its fenced perimeter and the main airstrip, a large slum has sprawled in the past decade around a line of

containers, put in place between 1999 and 2008 by the Ministry for Internal Affairs to house asylum seekers - first from Kosovo, then from the Horn of Africa and West Africa -, and later excised from the official camp by means of a fence. The camp as much as its slum, together with the Grand Ghetto, are one of the main recruitment hubs for daily farm labour in the district.

Future plans for the expansion of the camp archipelago in the area confirm the military-humanitarian-carceral nexus. For the past several years, government proposals to evacuate all slums have contemplated the construction of a labour camp in the military air base of Amendola (the largest of its kind in Italy and still operational), along the road connecting Foggia with the port city of Manfredonia. The place is haunted by a past of internment and forced labour: during the Nazi occupation, in the spring and summer of 1943, it hosted a prisoner camp for the confinement of partisans from Montenegro[5]. [11] After having transited through several internment sites across different countries, in the month of May a group of prisoners staged a protest against their exploitation for various chores on the base. Whilst, following the strike, some interns were transferred to another concentration camp, in the central-Italian district of Perugia, those who had not taken part in the protest were instead employed as farm labourers for the reaping of wheat in a large latifundium near the town of Cerignola, in the southern part of Tavoliere. During World War II, the coastal city of Manfredonia hosted another internment camp, in which dissidents of the Fascist regime, as well as war prisoners, were held. Some of them were authorised to work outside the compound, in farming estates. [12] Currently in a state of abandonment, some years ago the ruined establishment hosted a few Bulgarian farm labourers who camped in its precincts until they were forcibly drawn out.

War prisoners, together with ordinary convicts [13, 14], were also one of the targets of the Fascist regime's plans for labour recruitment in the service of its grand land reclamation program, which had Tavoliere as one of its core foci. Indeed, an undated and unsigned memorandum found in the State Archives in Foggia, evidently written after Italy's entry into World War II, urged the construction of two concentration camps in order to employ 5,000 war prisoners in reclamation works. [15] The reclamation of malaria-infested swamps, or *bonifica*, was part of a much broader, biopolitical project of wholesale, organic renovation and cleansing of the nation (*bonifica integrale*). This included the human component (*bonifica umana*), also through racist and eugenic projects of social engineering that contemplated resettlement onto the newly reclaimed lands. [16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21]

Employment of convict labour in the reclamation endeavour of Tavoliere is hard to document, given the lack of references to reclamation labour in the archives (partly destroyed during the war), the late start of the works in this region and the regime's downfall in Southern Italy in September 1943. Evidence exists, instead, on the penal colonies built for reclamation works in Sardinia, [22, 23] and on previous projects to employ convict labour in Tavoliere and elsewhere, dating as far back as the latter part of the 18th century [24, 33]. Whilst racialist, biopolitical tones, and explicit references to concentration camps are most evident during the late Fascist era, the idea of employing convict labour for land reclamation projects, and the "reformist" criminological ethos subtending to such project, developed in parallel with 19th-century plans of penal reform and land improvement. [25, 26, 27, 28]

Genealogical traces linking the current farm-labour camp archipelago to a past of carceral and militarised racist projects of wholesale population government are also identifiable in informal settlements where migrant farm workers live today. Some of these, such as the Grand Ghetto and Casa Sankara, among others scattered across Tavoliere, are indeed sites

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[5] Dragutin Drago Ivanovic, an internee in the camp who later joined the anti-Fascist resistance in Italy and then became an army officer under Tito, recalled that his whole family was employed as forced labour already at the time of the Austrian occupation of Montenegro, during World War I.

that were once designed to house the recipients of land reclamation schemes, or of the 1950s land reform. Since the 18th century, resettlement projects in Tavoliere were aimed at "cleansing" the centres of its main agro-towns (Foggia, Cerignola, San Severo, Lucera, among others) from the farm day-labourer population, who at the turn of the 20th century had also engaged in a decades-old, and rather successful, struggle against the agrarian bloc, which Fascism crushed violently (as later did the Republican government, once the war was over and the struggle took off once more). [29] In a spiral movement, today the ruins of those settlements that were once the solution to rid urban centres of the unruly, untowardly presence of day farm labourers, have become yet another instantiation of the same "problem". At the same time, as recurrent complaints about migrant farm labourers' presence in the centre of Foggia testify, the same discourse persists within the urban spaces from which it originally sprang. Indeed, the notion of "*bonifica*" recurs in public statements about the need to "cleanse" city neighbourhoods as much as slums of this allegedly nefarious, dangerous, unhealthy presence. [30, 31]

3 Conclusion

The genealogy of current spaces for the containment of migrants, many of whom are employed in the farming sector, shows how the spatial, legal, and symbolic-affective dimensions that combine to create and reproduce such "*dispositifs*" partake of a racialist, carceral and biopolitical logic. The latter associates internal and external security policies to ideas about health and hygiene that have permeated recourse to camp forms and forced resettlement schemes since their inception.

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