

Refugeeisation of the agricultural labour force? Humanitarian spectacles in and around Italian agro-industrial enclaves

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The paper will address the ways in which migration policies and their shift towards a military-humanitarian paradigm, in Europe and more specifically in Italy, have impacted upon the organization and reproduction of labour in agro-industrial districts across the country. Drawing on 6 years of engaged, participant observation and collaboration with political activists and migrants, especially in the district of Foggia and to a lesser extent in others, I will show how since 2012 the shift towards military-humanitarian migration policies has determined a swelling up of the slums where farm labour is recruited. As it will become apparent, the proliferation of different camp forms, including ever more securitised labour camps, and their relation to forms of confinement and containment, bears a direct correlation with such processes. Whilst attempting to contain and control, these policies can be seen to also externalise the costs of reproduction of the labour force through different (racialised and gendered) mechanisms.

At the same time, I will analyse the ways in which these dynamics have been co-opted discursively to spectacularise poverty and exploitation in the agricultural sector, drawing on the lexicon of slavery and the mafia to feed into exceptionalist narratives and policies, that centre on security and the camp form. A large proportion of the labour force – eastern European and hyper-exploited – is completely invisibilised by these means, shifting the attention away from the real dynamics of labour exploitation in the sector.

Finally, I will argue that whilst migration policies and the organization of the agricultural sector (as any other, for that matter) show some clear convergences, they cannot be wholly superimposed onto each other. Whilst irregularisation is functional to keeping the costs of labour low, a drive towards autonomy and freedom of movement animates attempts to re-take and transform spaces of containment into migrant counter-hubs.