

## LABOUR RELATIONS AND LABOUR STRUCTURES IN MEDITERRANEAN CAPITALISM. *CAPORALATO* AND ROMANIAN MIGRATION IN THE SOUTHERN ITALIAN AGRICULTURE

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper I will examine the structural and social features of the gang-mastered labour system (*caporalato*) as it appears in the agricultural production process in Italy. I will discuss the functions of this type of labour regime through an analysis of the role (Romanian) migrant labour plays in the Italian agriculture process and its need for the (informal) labour market mediation in agriculture. My aim is to critically map the function of *caporalato* within a production circuit that starts with the low price imposed on agricultural goods, and ends up at the top of the production process, namely with the food empires and corporate retail and distribution chains. The economic constraint for an ever cheaper labourforce, and its social context, will guide our critique of *caporalato*.

**Key words:** (Romanian) migration, caporalato, Italian agriculture, labour relations

### Introduction: Migration and the gang-master labour system (*caporalato*)<sup>2</sup>

When one says *caporalato* (the gang mastered labour system) what immediately comes to mind are dramatic images of (immigrant) women from all over the globe who are exploited on the agricultural fields of the Mediterranean countries, but also UK, or the United States, whose stories about sexual and labour exploitation have circled the globe. Aside from this atrocious dimension of the phenomenon, a critical discussion about the repressive and exploitative regime of labour imposed on agricultural (immigrant) workers requires a theorization of its historical and structural origins, of the functions it fulfils,

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and the larger economic determinants it is subjected to. To understand this type of labour regime, one must first map the vital points of an economic chain of production and reproduction of certain labour relations, which starts with the low price of agricultural goods and ends up calling into question the savage capitalistic model imposed by retailer-driven chains of food distribution and food empires. In between these extreme points, a form of unfree labour becomes diffused calling into question the issue of labour rights and the founding principles of modern economy.

The issue of unfree labour in the context of economically developed Western countries is widely discussed especially because it challenges the wide-spread narrative of its presupposed incompatibility with the functioning of capitalism, and, as such, theories of contemporary cycles of primitive accumulation, or feudal labour relations, or modern slavery have been called into effect in order to circumvent the structural issues that this type of labour regime renders visible. As Tom Brass argues, globalization of free market entails the transformation of the regime of unfree labour into “not just an option, but in some cases a necessity” (Brass T., 2011). The dimension of unfreedom can take many forms: from the forms of bonded labour to the isolation, separation and repressive control of labourers, who are only formally free, but in fact subjected to extra-economic forms of constraint and coercion which over-determine the labour process and labour relations. In this context, the aim of this paper is to map these vital economic-political points that serve as the backdrop of *caporalato*, through a critical discussion of the situation of (Romanian) immigrants in the agricultural sector of (Southern) Italy. Moreover, it is our goal to make evident the historical and structural determinants that render *caporalato* one of the most repressive labour regimes, whilst completely compatible with the functioning of free labour market capitalism. Before advancing any further, a discussion about economic migration becomes necessary, such as to situate the issue in the wider context of the general mobility of the labour force.

For the past three decades Stephen Castles and Mark Miller have argued that we live in the *age of migration*, a period in which international migration “has accelerated, globalized, feminized, diversified and become increasingly politicized” (Brass T., 2011). Modern societies were and are the result of global, long-lasting and recurrent waves of (economic) migrations. Contemporary labour markets of developed economies adjust and distribute the supply of labour force drawing from a global, or at least regional, reserve of (cheap) labour power. As a result, migration studies need to be embedded into the super-structural and sovra-national entanglement of social relations, economics and politics (Castels S., 2008). Understanding migration as a social process of transformation, one that has deep roots in European history, entails

a critical stance towards political and social attitudes that spring out a conceptualization of (economic) migration as a crisis or a social emergency, opposed to which there would be an ideal normal social fabric of society, composed by homogeneous elements that share the same ethnicity, citizenship, social status, religion or cultural background. Following Etienne Balibar's suggestion that the real universality of globalization implies the recognition of "the global character of the social relation of capital at a world level" (Balibar E., 2002), we can also infer that the issue of migration is intimately connected with the issues and the contradictions generated by the process of globalization and a global dialectic between labour relations and property relations.

Moreover, there is a "disjunctive rift" (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015) at the level of migrant labour between the processes of production and reproduction of migrant labour force. Regarding specifically the creation of the large mass of emigrants coming from the Eastern European states, Joachim Becker argued that a *class of dispossessed* people was left behind by the introduction of neoliberal policies and measures taken by the national governments in the Ex-soviet space, a class that had no other alternative but to emigrate in search for a labour market where not only their labour force would sell dearer, but where they could also actually sell it, as the waves of privatizations, flexibilization of labour markets and the general pauperization made it impossible to do so in their countries of origin. Indeed, labour force is the commodity possessed by workers, and this commodity is worthless unless sold. The economic models assumed by the countries in Eastern Europe work on two different sets of fundamental dependency: finance or finance and industry (Becker J., 2016). This situation profited both national and international capitalism, while discarding the needs of impoverished, unemployed, precarious masses of workers. Briefly put, and this is what we have tried to show here in a synthetic manner, there are a set of historical and economic conditions that together form the origin of what is known to be the creation of a global reserve of (cheap) labour force.

### ***Caporalato*: definition and occurrences**

The case of the gang mastered labour system (*caporalato*), as it appears in the economic agricultural (but also in the services sector, or construction, to name just two other most relevant examples) landscape of Italy, but also UK, Spain, or the US raises a specific set of issues within the general theory of economic migration, as here the question of migration is over-determined by the issues of unfree labour and the set of labour and property relations that bring to the fore the connection between capitalism - as a set of economic norms and practices - , and unfree labour. Regarding agriculture, the imposition of this repressive labour-regime, does not only signal the vulnerability and the inferior position

of the labour force towards the class of employers and middle-men (*caporali*), but it is also an issue connected to the question of the low rate of technological investments in Mediterranean agriculture, where the absolute productivity realized through the employment of cheap labour force serves the role of bridging the economic shortcomings of low technological investments.

To get a clearer image of the magnitude of the phenomenon, it is worth mentioning that, for example, in 2016, 40.3 million people from every part of the globe were victims of modern slavery - slavery being understood as an umbrella term covering the various forms of coercion prohibited in international instruments on human rights and labour standards. Out of these, 24.9 million were in forced labour. Moreover, there are more females (71%), than men in forms of modern slavery. 4.8 million people are victims of forced sexual exploitation. Out of the total number of people in conditions of forced labour, 3.5 percent were in the agricultural sector, and from the total number of 150 billion Euros profit derived from forced labour, 9 billion were the fruit of exploitation in agriculture. In Italy, there have been approximately 80 epicentres identified as contexts of *caporalato* and extreme labour exploitation. In Italian agriculture there are an estimated number of 430.000 people potential victims of *caporalato* with irregular and illegal labour contracts, out of which 100.000 have been identified to be in serious conditions of vulnerability and exploitation. Between 2 and 5 billion Euros are estimated to have been rolled through illegal agriculture, while the economic damage caused by this irregular and illegal dealings in this sector have been estimated to stand at 3.6 billion Euros. The *caporalato* is a diffused regime of labour management that needs a conceptual and historical clarification.

Domenico Perrotta defines *caporalato*, present in agriculture, but also in other productive sectors, as “an informal system of labour mediation, where the intermediary (the *caporale*) retains a part from the worker's salary” (Perrotta D., 2015). Such procedures of informal/illegal labour mediation have been legally forbidden in Italy since 1919. The system of *caporalato* relies on a few structural factors such as: the distance (geographical and linguistic) between (immigrant) labourers and agricultural firms, the management of labour teams necessary for seasonal production cycles in agriculture, the monopoly on the labour supply and other services necessary for the management of the (foreign) agricultural labour forces, and the inefficiency of state policies to organize this sector of the labour market and production, to name just a few. In this type of labour organization numerous social and economic relations sprung between the labourer and the *caporale*, between the usually isolated immigrant worker and the community in which the farm operates. Although the *caporale* is seen as exploiter, she/he becomes also a model of social mobility, while most

workers will maintain mainly instrumental rapports with their labour mediators. But, and this is the strongest support pillar of the *caporalato* system, the provision of disciplined teams of agro-laboures to local employers and full responsibility and accountability of the *caporali* towards mentioned employers, especially in situations regarding labour conflicts and worker insubordination are the main functions of the gang mastered labour system (Perotta D., 2015). This last aspect, points beyond the mere economic dimension of *caporalato*, namely to its social function of disciplining and coercing the (immigrant) labour force into a labour regime, which is both highly exploitative and socially toxic for the employees. Also, this last point, together with the physical and social isolation of immigrant agricultural labourers demonstrate that this type of labour management relies on extra-economic authoritative means of worker-control that render the process of profit creation and extraction also as an asymmetrical relation of power.

The contemporary model of gang-mastered has spread from the agriculture of Southern United States to Europe at the turn of the sixties. The United States have ended their *Bracero Program* (employment of Mexican immigrant workers in American agriculture, through contract schemes that formally bonded them to the farm they worked for, and denying them any other social and political rights in the United States) in 1964. This type of labour regime in American agriculture has ended and after this type of labour regime has ended a gradual massive technologization of the agricultural process became necessary, “the lack of this essential labour pool prompted the development of harvesting machines; the transformation was rapid: in 1963, 66 machines harvested 1.5% of California's tomato crops, but by 1970, 1521 machines were harvesting 99.9%” (Perotta D., 2016). The “Californian model”<sup>3</sup> of intensive-labour regime in agriculture has spread to the Western countries since 1960's onward, from France to Greece and from the UK to Spain. The immigrant labour force has supplied these countries relying on this type of agricultural model with the much needed cheap, flexible and vulnerable labour-force, the driving human capital behind the realization of profit margins in this sector. The pressure on the farmers from international trade liberalization norms and “the oligopoly of large scale retail chains” (van der Ploeg J.D., 2009) have pushed toward an ever-growing reduction of the price of agricultural products, this in turn driving even lower the price of the employed labour force. In this context, *caporalato* - the gang mastered labour

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<sup>3</sup> The coinage of the term belongs to Jean Pierre Berlan, who has discussed at length the history of the labour exploitation in agriculture, the “Californian model” in his “La longue histoire du model californien”, in *Le gout amer de nos fruits et legumes. L'exploitation des migrants dans l'agriculture intensive in Europe*, Ed. Forum Civique Européen, Paris 2002, pp. 15-22.

system, appears as an informal intermediary between the need for labour force from the part of small and large farmers and farms, and the workers themselves, whom are rendered precarious by the migration policies implemented by national governments, and thus forced to seek the support of the *caporalato* network. In order to complete the structural landscape of the position of the *caporalato* system in today's economic production, one must also address the coercive mechanisms that create and reproduce it from above, namely the fact that this form of labour exploitation has emerged as one of the primary factors behind the "restructuring of global agri-food sector" (Bonnano A. and Cavalcanti J.S.B., 2014).

Regarding specifically the agricultural production, the main change that has occurred regards the pre-eminence of retailer-driven in agricultural intermedium, with big retailers assuming "dominant position in the global chain of food production" (Perrotta D., 2016) - over the erstwhile pre-eminence of producer-driven over the agricultural networks of distribution and production. The first and most important consequence of this shift is the global diffusion of the constraint upon retailers to get access to land and labour at the lowest possible cost. We will quote here at length, Perrotta's argument regarding the relationship between retailers and the *caporalato* system, as is it vital in the economy of our article:

The most recent research on migrant labour in agriculture and on the global restructuring of the agri-food networks bring us to asking ourselves if the retailer-driven agriculture is possible without the exploitation of labourers; regarding this, it is possible to hypothesize that, in Southern Italy (but not only), one of the responses given by the agri-farms to the pressure on prices and the productive standards imposed by the retailer driven networks was the attempt to compress, as much as possible, the price of labour; this reduction of the labour costs was achieved through intensive use of migrant labourers, more vulnerable and cheap, and the efficient and disciplined organization of this labour force by the system of *caporalato*<sup>4</sup>.

To this argument, we can also add that, from the perspective of the labour and land productivity, the use of a massive labour force in agriculture is inversely proportional with the high degrees of mechanization of the labour process. The particularity of the labour cycle that the *caporalato* intermediates resides, on one side, in the temporary character of the production cycles, and

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<sup>4</sup> Domenico Perrotta, "Il caporalato come sistema: un contributo sociologico", in (Ed.) Enrica Rigo, *Leggi, migranti e caporali. Prospettive critiche e di ricerca sullo sfruttamento del lavoro in agricoltura*, Ed. Pacini Giuridica, Pisa 2015, p. 28.

on the other, in the inefficiency from the part of the state to supervise this process and offer protection to migrants. According to Lucio Piscane, the high temporary structural demand for cheap labour force in the agricultural production cycles is also conditioned by the “inefficiency of the formal channels of labour recruitment and the control that organized crime has on one part of the labour force available on the territory” (Piscane L., 2016). Moreover, the socioeconomic function of *caporalato* is not limited to labour brokerage, but also extends to transportation, lodging and protection of immigrant workers. The effects of such economic practices are the lowering of the price of labour, through the deduction from the pay of a day's labour also for the other services, but the exploitation of agricultural labourer is further enhanced through the relative monopoly that *caporalato* systems have on the recruitment of labour force and the crass inefficiency of the public labour inspectorates. Further, we will instantiate our claims about the general features of the gang-master labour system through a critical description of the Italian Case.

### **Italian agriculture and *Caporalato***

Any discussion about the significance of economic migration for Italy must start from a clear understanding of its economic and social situation. For instance, Marco D'Eramo goes as far as to define Italy as “a state in free fall” (Eramo M, 2017), with productivity, employment and industrial production declining. From a global perspective things look just as bad, and according to the latest report regarding work and employment produced by ILO, given the worsening of the labour market situation in various regions of the planet, the deterioration of economic conditions, the inability of national economies to generate more jobs and betterment of the already existing working conditions in the global East and South, “with global unemployment levels and rates expected to remain elevated and unlikely to dip below pre-crisis rates”<sup>5</sup>, the global flows of migration are likely to rise in the following period, while the risk of social unrest is heightened in almost all global regions. According to the same ILO report *World Employment Social Trend 2017*, productivity rates all over Western Europe tend to stall, while unemployment is expected to rise, with only the notable exception of countries like Spain, Croatia, Netherlands, Ireland, and Portugal. In Italy the unemployment rate will pass from an average of 11.4% in 2017 to a hopeful 11.1% in 2018<sup>6</sup>.

Italy belongs to the group of Southern-Mediterranean-states pattern of migration, which stabilized itself as a model and direction of migration flows

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<sup>5</sup> *World Employment Social Outlook. Trends 2017*, Report issued by ILO Press, Geneva 2017, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem.*, p. 30.

at the turn of the eighties, when historically defined countries of emigration like Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain have become states with positive migration rates, attracting labour force and asylum seekers from Africa, Asia or Eastern Europe. In the case of Italy, the first attesting of a positive migration balance dates back to 1973, a phenomenon that has transformed modern Italian society, especially when it comes to its social composition and labour market workforce distribution. Research has identified three main causes for this sudden and recent increase in the numbers of migratory flows towards Italy: western closure of borders, weak Mediterranean post-colonial ties, and structural pull force of cheap labour (Veugelers J.W.P., 1994).

This sudden and relatively recent change in the status of Italy from an emigration country to an immigration state, has been framed as a type of 'social emergency', a crisis that affected all sectors of Italian society, from discontents of social and cultural integration of migrants, to the reconfiguration of the labour market, to the accentuation of the political, to legal and economic problems created by the rise of the informal economic sector. Situating the issue of migration within the larger frame of the process of globalization, two trends can be discerned when it comes to assessing the particularity of the Italian migration system: "the growth and supremacy of East-West migratory flows" (Cangiano A. and Strozza S., 2008), consequentially, the Europeanization of the immigrant population. Since the eighties it has been true that Italy has a particularly large underground economy and a rigid segmentation of the labour market, and this determined the stabilization of a dual labour market Italian system, with profound social implications upon the process of migrant integration and rise of migration related social conflicts and tensions. The low social status associated with an inferior position on the labour market – given the concentration of migrants in labour-intensive sectors of economy – has created a climate of classism, where although the labour market integration has taken place, the social integration of immigrants is an ongoing process hampered by prejudice, racism, sexism and even hatred towards the immigrant community.

### **Romanian migration to Italy. Data and discussion**

Romanians account for more than 1 million immigrants on Italian soil, and they are followed by the Albanian community that numbers only 490.000, and Moroccans (449.000) as the three largest migrant communities in Italy. The Romanians present on the Italian territory come mostly from "the Eastern province of Moldavia, several regions of Transylvania, and some North-Western regions" (Ban C., 2012), from Romanian regions where the balance between agriculture and industry is tipped in the favour of the former. Mostly rural or



semi-urban areas, where the low degree of industrialization and economic investments have impacted negatively the local labour markets. When it comes to the gender difference, studies have shown that migrant men and women list “family motives as the main drivers of mobility” (Mara I., 2012), such as that there is no longer a gender gap between economic reasons and family reasons as main individual drivers of migration. From a socioeconomic perspective the condition of immigrants can be described as precarious, given the fact that they tend to become unemployed more often than the natives, although they tend to find new employment more easily. Nevertheless, the general context shows a deterioration of labour contracts and social relations of production in the case of migrants who are professionally immobilized and restricted to only such areas like the three C's (cleaning, care, and cooking) and the three D's (demeaning, dangerous, and dirty), where they “experience lower levels of job security, earn lower wages, and tend to be concentrated in seasonal industries” (Riva e. and Zanfrini L., 2013).

Italian agriculture is characterized by corporate concentration upstream and downstream of farming, such as under the pressure and costs of large scale production, many small and medium size Italian farming enterprises and farmers turn to the employment of low paid labour force. Thus, in the past three decades the number of migrants employed has increased exponentially. Moreover, when it comes to the situation already described, the lack of regulation is a structural component. The working conditions are: 10-12 hours labour-days, 15-20 Euros a day's pay, dirty, dangerous, demeaning and demanding. The workers live in isolated places in the countryside, this situation exposing them to danger, while the control of employers and middlemen over their working and non-working time becomes almost total. The insertion of Romanian immigrants in the agricultural sector is a relatively recent event, following the previous two massive waves of African (Northern and Sub-Saharan) migration. The arrival of Romanians and their permeation of this sector of the labour market was facilitated because of their status as EU citizens, something that allowed Italian employers to avoid the accusation of exploitation and facilitation of illegal migration, especially in the agricultural sector.

Regarding Italian agriculture, the total number of immigrants working in this sector amounts to 466.111, out of which 200.103 are non-Europeans and 266.008 are Europeans<sup>7</sup>. These numbers are calculated based on the

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<sup>7</sup> Given the empirical difficulty of establishing exact information when it comes to data connected with grey, non-formal, illegal or seasonal labour in Italian agri-system, it must be mentioned that the numbers given here are taken from Lucio Pisacane's, “Immigrazione e mercato del lavoro agricolo”, in (Eds.) Francesco Carchedi et al, *Agromafie e caporalato. Terzo rapporto*, Ed. Ediesse, Roma 2016, p. 38.

official data elaborated by ISTAT, and must be kept in mind that the real are most probably higher. When it comes to the specifics of this type of occupation and the way it impacts the immigrants, Perrotta argues that

their work situation is characterized by seasonality, long periods of unemployment, irregular employment conditions, hiring through the illegal mediation of gang-masters, wages lower than those established by the collective bargaining agreements, piece-rate payment, long working hours, high physical exertion, unhealthy working conditions and exposure to occupational hazards<sup>8</sup>.

The mediation of labour in agriculture through *caporalato* is a structural feature of the agricultural Italian process of production and organization. The structure of *caporalato* also reproduces and imposes various types of separation: between the teams of workers under the control of various gang-masters and the populated centres of the local communities; economic - because the local agencies of employment are unable to effectively mediate between the agricultural employers and immigrant workers; cultural - immigrants are furthermore ghettoized through their isolation from the cultural and political life of the region they settle in; political - ignored by national and regional politics on account of their inability to vote, immigrants are also cut off from the political means of fighting for the betterment of their labour and social conditions. However, the area of the *caporale's* intrusion in the life of the immigrant worker under his control can be more or less limited. In some cases, he or she controls completely the life of the workers, but in others they merely act as mediators between teams of labourers and employers. In this sense, the *caporale* is often seen as a *social broker*, who negotiates - and earns a profit upon - between the immigrants and the local farm employers, and this is also precisely why, some authors discuss the issue of *caporalato* in Southern Italy as a sort of *broker capitalism*.

In order to get a clearer picture on the economic and social dimension of the phenomenon of *caporalato* in Italian agriculture, The Fourth Report on Agromafia and Caporalato, produced by The Placido Rizzotto Institute of FLAI/CGIL, in 2018, states that the informal/grey economy of Italy is estimated at around 208 billion Euros, of which the business of irregular labour and *caporalato* in agriculture is worth around 4.8 billion Euros. Around 430.000 labourers in agriculture are believed to be working under the gang-mastered labour system. There are around 30.000 farms that use the services provided by the gang-mastered system.

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<sup>8</sup> Domenico Perrotta and Devi Sachetto, "Migrant Farmworkers in Southern Italy: Ghettos, Caporalato and Collective Action", in *International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflict*, vol.1, no.5/July 2014, p. 76.

As stated above the gang-master is usually a person in charge of a determinate team of workers for whom he intermediates employment for a local farm. With the arrival of immigrant workers in Southern Italy, the gang-mastered chief figure has replaced the Italian boss, with gang-masters from the countries of origin of the immigrants themselves. This has happened in the case of Northern Africans, of Sub-Saharan Africans, but also Eastern Europeans such as Romanians, the latter exercising the function of *caporale* all throughout the year and for a variety of agricultural labours. Usually, the teams of Romanian *caporali* are composed of relative, acquaintances and enlarged origin-community of the gang-master himself/herself. Before advancing any further another point must be mentioned regarding the particularity of Romanian migration towards Italy, and the specific condition of Romanian immigrants in comparison to other migrant communities. As European citizens, Romanians can move freely on the territory of the Union, and this has come to shape profoundly their economic and political collective strategies, but also their complete disorganization in front of grave forms of labour and sexual exploitation (from the part of Italian employers or gang-masters) present in some farms, under Italian employers. The research on the migratory trajectory of Romanian has shown that this type of unfettered mobility explains why Romanian labourers seem to accept wages much lower than those accepted by migrants of other nationalities, "Romanians can afford low wages that are anyway superior to those they would receive working in Romania" (Perotta D., 2013). (One of the social and economic cost of this easiness of migration, has led to the labelling of Romanian works as untrustworthy by Italian employers.) In the light of what has been discussed, apparently the Romanian migrant strategy is exit, as for the group of migrants under consideration dealing with worsening of labour conditions entails "to keep moving" (Potoc S., 2008). However, the price of this constant movement and adaptability to various contexts is also a loss of collective and political identity, that was replaced by group recognition within external labelling by the host community: as Potoc argues, "collective identity never appeared" (Potoc S., 2008) in the studied Romanian communities. If one can speak of the constitution of a Romanian collective identity abroad, then it must be conceived only in negative terms, as differentiation or distancing from subjectively perceived inferior social groups, such as Roma or other types of minorities back home, or even worse, a form of individual un-identification with an accepted perspective upon the negative labelling of the group of which the individual is a part of.

When it comes to the attitudes of Romanian gang-masters themselves it is particularly interesting to note that they see themselves as "protectors of their co-nationals" (Perotta D., 2013) against foreign exploitative employers, although even the Romanian *caporali* perceive a tax of mediation and charge

for transport, food, housing, and other services to their Romanian teams. From the perspective of the immigrant, his/her relationship to the system of the gang-mastered labour is mediated through different types of narratives such as: the fact that this system creates a sense of community and belonging - an attempt of discursively whitewashing the clear hierarchical structure of *caporalato*; secondly, the gang-master is often viewed as a model of social success; thirdly, in most cases the gang-mastered is perceived as yet another cog in wheel of labour exploitation. Regarding Romanians, they usually have “an instrumental relation to their *caporale*” (Perotta D., 2015). However, as long as the three pillars of the gang-master system remain in place - separation, seasonality, and lack of alternatives, both farmers and workers remain dependent on the mediation offered by the *caporale*.

### **Differential games of exclusion and inclusion**

We will close our paper with a final discussion about the relationship between (Romanian) immigrants and host societies, as it is a final point to be taken into consideration in the mapping of the social world of *caporalato* and the context that allows it to come into being. Within the field of migration-integration studies there is a conceptual differentiation between the concept of “differential exclusion” (Castles S., 1995) and “differential inclusion” (Hall S., 1986) as conceptualized by Stuart Hall. Differential exclusion refers to the integration or inclusion of immigrants in the host country's labour market, while they remain excluded from welfare and citizenship. This was the case with immigration programs such as guest-workers or the *Bracero* program, or rigid seasonal migration, where migrants have a limited working and staying permit that extended only a season of work, after which they were obligated to return to their home country. This description also applies to the condition of immigrant labour in Italian agricultural production. On the other side, differential inclusion deals with “specific forms of incorporation associated with the appearance of racist, ethnically segmented and other social features” (Hall S., 1986). Differential inclusion registers how divisions move to the centre of political life, and “stage a conflict between the containing qualities of inclusion and the capacity of difference to explode notions of social unity” (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015). The problems such a concept raises are connected to the acceptance of migrants as labour force, but also accounts to the limits of the process of larger social, political and cultural integration, on the background of a social space traversed by tensions and antagonisms.

A possible explanation for this situation is that divisions arise as the migration processes traverse various “fields and relations of power practices” (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015).

Here again, we contend that the subaltern position in which immigrants find themselves in relation to employers and middle-men, and their high and complete dependence to a subsistence wage, put them in a social inferior position, which triggers their social rejection by the native population, while assigning them a perpetual demeaning role of mere live labour force, rarely being perceived as Subject in her/his own right.

In order to better illustrate this concept, we shall focus on a more concrete problematic, described by Maurizio Ambrosini as the deadlock of economic acceptance and political rejection. The situation has been created by the Italian economic demands for foreign (cheap) labour that have arisen in the last decades, on one side, and social policies that have tried to restrict and limit the magnitude of migratory flows, but failed in the face of economic actors' demand and the rise of informal economic sector and factual transgressions of labour market regulation, on the other side. Based on this need-rejection pattern, Cornelius et al define Southern-Mediterranean countries of immigration, such as Italy, as "reluctant importers" (Cornelius W.A. et al., 1994). It is a paradoxical situation, as Italy needs foreign labour to occupy the gaps in the national labour market that the local workforce is not willing to fill due to the low wages and low social status associated with specific jobs in the labour intensive sectors, but on the other hand, it has demonstrated strong social resilience against a full social integration of foreigners whom are still regarded with suspicion, prejudice. However, this process of cultural resilience combined with a form of subaltern economic acceptance has been described as a situation in which "having received hands, Italy still has to receive people" (Ambrosini M. 2013). A statement particularly valid for the situation of many Romanians residing in Italy.

### **In lieu of conclusions.**

As we have attempted to show all throughout our paper, the phenomenon of *caporalato* is highly diffused, ingrained and embedded in the history of labour relations in the Italian agriculture. This type of labour mediation between farm-employers and (immigrant) workers, provided by a network of middle men (*caporali*) has transformed labour in agriculture into a form of repressive and highly exploitative regime of labour, where mere economic labour relations are rendered as asymmetric power and domination relations, exposing vulnerable categories of employees to dramatic forms of labour, and in some cases even sexual exploitation. In order to fully grasp the significance of such occurrences, one must try to map the entire circuit of production and reproduction in agriculture, as the necessity for cheap, flexible, seasonal, docile and plenty labour force is conditioned from above, through the constraints imposed by food-empires and corporate retailer

distribution chains, whom in their quest for larger profit margins, impose on agricultural producers low prices for agricultural goods, and this in turn can be realized through further lowering of the price of labour.

The structure of the labour process and the various types of separation between immigrant labourers and local employers has carved a structural space for the labour brokerage supplied by middle men, a phenomenon that is yet another layer of exploitation and control of the labour force. As we have tried to emphasize in our paper, the gang-mastered labour system does not only offer a neutral mass of workers to the employer, but rather disciplined, vulnerable and unprotected teams of workers, who become caught in a web of unequal social and power relations. When it comes to the social context of this phenomenon, we have shown that an insufficient integration of the immigrant labour force within the social and political life of the community, albeit fully integrate economically, renders the above-mentioned labour force even more vulnerable and prone to the abuses of local employers and the network of gang-masters. Although, many migrant communities have organized and took collective action against the phenomenon of *caporalato*, unfortunately much still remains to be done, and a more powerful collective political and social implication of Romanian immigrants still needs to take place. As we have seen, having the ability to move more freely on the territory of the Union, this has led also to the non-participation of Romanians to the fight against various types of labour and sexual exploitation by the local Italian employers.

As we have tried to show in our paper, the issue of unfree labour - understood as labour employed under conditions that entail some form of coercion, violence, isolation, separation or illegality - raises the bigger issue of its relationship with the economic system and the structural reasons this capitalistic system needs, uses, and reproduces the condition of unfree labour. Moreover, the pervasiveness of such a repressive regime of labour management, such as the gang-mastered system in the Mediterranean agriculture, brings to the fore the productivity deadlock such a sector experiences, and how its market competitiveness relies on broker practices delivered by exploitative middle-men and a constant pressure to devalue even further the price of the immigrant labour force on which has come to be dependent. For the immigrants themselves, the imposition of such an overlapping of exploitative, repressive and parasitical network of labour and social relations weakens its chances for upwards social mobility and denies the conditions for a decent life achieved through dignified work. Unfortunately, such a form of labour regime has come to be embedded in, and rendered necessary, for various economic sectors of the economy of contemporary developed societies, such as a critique of this form of repressive labour and social relations necessarily entails a critique of the general

framework of contemporary political economy of capital, and its domination over labour. In the last instance, it has become clear that a comprehensive and critical discussion about *caporalato* shows that contemporary processes of production have become very efficient in accommodating and managing *labour-hands*, but they still are unable of accommodating *human beings*.

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