

New plantations

Migrant mobility, ‘illegality’ and racialization in European agricultural labour

Project Abstract

This project focuses on labour market mediation in the domain of expanding agrobusiness in Europe. Starting from the observation that a large section of agricultural labour today is performed by transnational migrants from both within and outside the European Union, we analyze how these workers are typically caught in a web of multiscale institutional assemblages that channel, filter and differentiate their permissions, rights and claims in the context of Europe’s rapidly transforming border and migration regimes. At the same time, we analyze how migrant labour becomes actively integrated into intensified retail-driven and flexible commodity networks. New Plantations highlights this new labour paradigm while also pushing for a conceptual innovation to better grasp the multiscale and multidimensional framing of migrant subject positions in this context.

1. Research Plan

A large part of agricultural labour today is sourced from transnational migrants coming from both within and outside the European Union. While characterized by different subject positions, and also practicing different strategies of mobility, these labour migrants are caught in a web of multiscale institutional assemblages that channel, filter and differentiate this agricultural labour force on the continent. Considering this complexity, there is a need for a more exhaustive and in-depth analysis that addresses the structural processes at work while bringing together data from beyond the Southern European hotspots in an empirically more holistic way. This involves considerations not just about labour exploitation (or ‘forced labour’) in a strict sense, but also about market dynamics and labour-capital relations that ‘push’ and ‘pull’ certain labour regimes as well as the ways in which such relations are regulated by a conglomerate of state and non-state actors.

Our project adopts a comparative ethnographic lens towards contemporary migrant work on European agriculture, which takes seriously their agency and structural constraints. Rather than following the *a priori* categorisations of legality & illegality, or forced & free labour, our project prefers to examine such categories as dynamic conditions that are governed in complex ways through processes of (ir)regularization, racialization and in-|formalization. Instead of assuming migration as a ‘problem’ that needs to be ‘resolved’, therefore, the research seeks a more comprehensive understanding of the question of forced migrant labour –or what is understood as such– in the productive relationship between (supra)national legal frameworks, globalized/liberalized markets and migrants’ own political agency.

Our research framework involves a most different extended case study comparison. This means we confront most different cases (which demonstrate substantial differences with regard to the organization of labour, capital and government regulations as well as agricultural markets) to answer the question how migrant precariousness is actively reproduced across the different case sites. Our hypothesis is that precariousness is driven by two main factors, which we summarize as the ‘illegalization’ and ‘racialization’ of migrant labour, but which may involve quite

different dynamics in the various cases. More specifically, the research has addressed the following questions:

a) *Illegalization and precarity*

The question *how and why illegal migrant employment persists* in European labour markets involves an analytical distinction between different forms of ‘illegality’ and ‘precarity’ that are tied both to the juridical status and economic working conditions of labouring migrants. Specifically we ask ourselves how illegality has actively been reproduced i.e.: what kinds of ‘irregular’ migrants exist in the studied cases, how their status is produced and reproduced, by whom and/or by what means, and how, why, and by what means migrants move in and out of ‘illegality’, and how migrants’ illegal states influences both individual navigation strategies and collective action.

b) *Racialization*

The question how migrant labour is specifically framed along categories of ‘race’ in the context of postcolonial, gendered subjectivities in Europe’s agricultural labour regimes focalizes specifically on the production of ‘race’ (i.e. how racialization operates along a continuum of capitalist restructuring, mobile border deployments and the enactment of cultural/gender difference of European and extra-European migrants), segmentation (i.e. how processes of differentiation along race, nationality and gender contribute to the social/spatial segmentation of labour markets in this sector) and migrant subjectivities (i.e. which kind of hybrid or militant identities, which collective forms of action and resistance emerge in the midst of these flexible labour regimes and, to what extent are they able to overcome ‘race’).

Together, these questions address the project’s main concern with the widening segmentation and territorialisation of migrant labour markets in the European agri-food sector and its impact on migrants’ precarious social, economic and political status.

2. Research results

Building on this research agenda the project team decided to focus specifically on *labour mediation* as a central domain of analysis and intervention concerning the mobilization and precarity of mobile workers.

We consciously adopted an interdisciplinary approach, involving a deep (vertical) cooperation with local partner organizations as well as a triangulation of methods along the case studies (including participant observation, ethnographic and expert interviews as well as qualitative data analysis). This approach was privileged over a horizontal collaboration with international partners for two main reasons: (1) cooperation with international partners proved to be administratively challenging – particularly regarding the sharing of data as well as broader exchange – despite positive intentions from all sides; (2) the team pondered that research impact could be guaranteed through close partnerships with key local stakeholders, which proved to be indispensable to acquire access and establish relations of trust. We agree that this strategy continues bear fruit in the reported research outcomes. For this reason, we decided to involve some of the initial partner organizations only in the margins of the project (like e.g. ILO, CARITAS and WIEGO), while the participating non-

governmental organizations continued to be central to the research efforts. In terms of personnel, the project employed Ilaria Ippolito from January 2016 to December 2017.

2.1. Case Studies

2.1.1. Italy

After some preliminary considerations, the Italian team decided to focus on Piedmont, more specifically Saluzzo and the so-called Comuni della Frutta (Verzuolo, Lagnasco e Revello), as well as Basilicata's tomato growing region around Venosa, Lavello and Palazzo San Gervasio.

These regions were picked out both for analytical and for practical reasons: besides being almost uncovered in academic research (for exceptions see publications by Perrotta and Brovia, both partners in the project), they host a sustained labour force of respectively 700 and 1500, mostly African, migrant workers. The labour camps in these sites are managed by the Italian Red Cross and our project partner CARITAS as part of their nation-wide Presidio Project. The second reason was practical: over the past 5 years the research team (Ilaria Ippolito, Mimmo Perrotta and Timothy Raeymaekers) has developed a strong network of relationships with organizations that are actively assisting and defending migrants' rights.

With our local partners in Basilicata and Piedmont, we were able to gather 180 (in the first year) and 130 interviews (in the second year) with workers (men aged between 20 and 38, from Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Gambia and Guinea Bissau), employers of small and medium-sized agricultural enterprises, regional and local authorities with positions in agriculture and social policies; social workers of local associations; trade unionists (CIGL, CISL); and operators of charity organizations.

These interviews were gathered through a systematic study of (both formal and informal) migrant accommodation as well as direct testimonies collected from agricultural entrepreneurs, state authorities, lawyers, social workers, trade union staff as well as charity and non-governmental organisations.

In order to test the validity of these ethnographic data, we were able to gather first-hand and unprecedented access to the databases of the CARITAS Presidium project (over 1800 anonymized labourers' data) as well as the employment centres and national pension's databases for the region Basilicata (1000 workers). These data are now being analysed in comparison with existing field studies and statistics mentioned in the intermediary report.

Preliminary Insights

Mostly in line with our hypothesis, we observed the following trends:

1/ *refugeeization*: because of the rising number of asylum seekers and refugees in the agricultural workforce, we decided to examine more deeply the relationship between the Italian asylum system and labour exploitation, and the effects recent legislative changes regarding protection are having on the lives of migrant workers. Though it is premature to jump to conclusions, we observed indeed a high incidence of so-called 'informal' labour among refugees with temporal humanitarian status – and who find

themselves in a widening limbo – or grey zone – between temporary international protection and economic precarity.

2/ *ghettoization*: given the radical changes in housing conditions for mobile workers in both regions in 2017 (relinquishing and even destruction of temporary accommodation by regional authorities), we decided to adopt a more systemic approach, focusing more attentively on the relation between migrants' precarious housing situation, their precarious legal status, and their isolation from access to social services. Taking the analysis away from a purely legal framework towards a more systematic overview of the institutional mechanisms that continue to reproduce migrant workers' precarity proved to be fruitful strategy to unveil some of the less formal aspects of labour mediation, which persist despite the intensive legislative reform in Italy since the 'anti-caporale' measures of the last 5 years.

A major difficulty of this research has nonetheless been the restraint of one main stakeholders: the agricultural employers' organization Coldiretti. To tackle these constraints the Italian team decided to triangulate its interview data with official studies and reports (e.g. Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto 2014-2015; DaSud, Terra and Terrelibere 2015; UNAR 2015, MEDU 2015 and 2016) and with available statistical data (only available for the region of Basilicata in its employment database, which we compare to the National Institute for Social Assurance INPS, National Institute of Statistics ISTAT, and National Institute for Agrarian Economy databases INEA).

2.2. Switzerland

The Swiss research team decided to concentrate on one field site (horticulture sector in the Swiss Midlands). The two University of Basel master students Nils Wyssmann and Meret Barfuss (with Sarah Schilliger as supervisor) and the PhD student Tina Bopp did a follow-up of their field work on three big farms in the Canton Solothurn and the Canton Basel-Land. The students traced the individual trajectories / biographies of migrant workers on these two farms (with whom they kept in contact since a time period between one and three years) and put them in relation to the institutional dimensions of e.g. citizenship status, employment relations, social reproduction. Tina Bopp also conducted six interviews with employee of the Swiss Farms' Union. Linked to the issue of labour rights and the forces of regulation in the agricultural sector, Simon Affolter analysed the governmental procedures regarding the granting of controls (within his PhD research, he accompanied labour inspectors during their work and conducted interviews with cantonal authorities: see Affolter forthcoming).

As part of the Swiss 'travel back' research, researcher Tina Bopp conducted 7 interviews with employees from NGOs, IOs and employees in different labour recruitment offices as well as 13 interviews with agricultural farm workers and family members in Moldova. These interviews enabled the team to develop a pilot study in order to understand migrant conditions from Moldova to Europe and Switzerland and the effects on migrants who themselves often operate as smallholders at home. By following back the migrants to their villages in Moldova they were able to establish trust and strong connections in order to conducted interviews and do participatory observations.

Preliminary insights

Differential inclusion: different from Italy, the Swiss team did not notice a ‘refugeeization’ of the workforce, and this despite governmental initiatives like the pilot project „Refugees as workforce in agriculture“ since 2015. Instead farmers prefer to recruit seasonal workers from Eastern Europe (mainly Poland and Romania) and Portugal with whom they have a long tradition of collaboration. The number of undocumented migrants from non-EU countries has declined in the Swiss Midlands since the introduction of the ‘Federal Act on Illegal Employment’ in 2008. Nevertheless, there still exist some form of semi-compliant labour (i.e. short-term labour without announcement at the cantonal labour office). On the farms, the team observed a hierarchization and rivalry between different migrant groups, with refugees having a very low status, while migrants from Portugal often having supervising positions.

Isolation: Our analysis of selected trajectories of migrant workers shows a strong tendency to social isolation. This is especially the reality of many migrant workers from Eastern European countries. Despite their annual return to the same village/farm, they hardly establish social networks in Switzerland, can’t improve their language skills and often suffer from loneliness. The main reasons for this social isolation are the very long working hours, the remoteness of the farms and the hard physical work which leads to a fatigue and missing power for leisure activities.

Care and labour chains: specifically concerning the Moldovan migrants, Tina Bopp observed that while agricultural workers from Moldova perform harvest abroad, other people take care of their agricultural subsistence, family members and extended social networks in their home country. This results in transnational labour and care chains, a phenomenon of social inequality, which specially affects rural areas in Moldova. We also observed that an ever-increasing number of recruitment offices are popping up in Moldova recruiting people to work especially in the fish and meat industry in Germany and Poland. Because of the highly exploitative working conditions, recruitment agencies are facing serious difficulties in recruiting people in this agricultural sector. Furthermore, Tina Bopp also noticed increasingly ethnized transnational labour chains in rural areas in Europe, which have not been studied until today. As part of her PhD project Tina Bopp will continue this pilot project and is trying to establish an East European network based on these findings and research questions.

2.3. Belgium

Building on the research framework established in 2016, the Belgian team decided to engage in a participant observation in three different farms in Limburg, complemented with different interviews with former seasonal workers in different parts of Belgium (Kortrijk, Liège, Brussels, Tienen), as well as follow-up encounters with institutional stakeholders (i.e. fruit farmers, big & small, ‘traditional’ & organic as well as outliers; employers & employees, and commercial support organizations - including 8 additional interviews). Students Abby Golub (whose research was concluded in November 2016 among seasonal workers from Punjab, which included 35 days of seasonal work in 3 different farms producing cherries, apples & pears, as well as interviews with 23, partly former, seasonal workers, their families and employers in Limburg) and Walenka Raeyen (whose research ended in September 2016, including 19 days of fruit-picking in 2 different farms as well as interviews with

12 mainly Polish, male and female seasonal workers) resulted in two successful MA theses at the University of Leuven.

In addition, Karel Arnaut decided to replace the ‘travel back’ research to West Africa to Eastern Europe for two reasons: the lack of follow-up contacts as well as the preponderance of East European workers (predominantly from Romania) in the Belgian field sites. In November, this research crystallized in 8 interviews with, partly former seasonal workers, active in agriculture and care in Belgium and Germany.

While the data of these different fieldwork sites collected during previous years are currently being processed (including transcripts of all 53 interviews), 12 additional interviews were made in 2018 with key interlocutors in order to tease out the tensions with other stakeholders in the fruit sector, with the aim of publishing a video document (jointly produced by partners Zoo Humain and Masala vzw).

Preliminary findings

The research in southern Limburg resulted in a detailed mapping and in-depth examination of the ‘agro-industrial’ complex in southern Limburg, the regime of mobility/diversity in which it is deployed and the way it regulates the labour and lives of ‘seasonal workers’ who also resist and renegotiate the regulatory systems in which they operate. This results in a threefold analytics:

1. The *regime of diversity and mobility* which regulates the migration infrastructures of seasonal labour in southern Limburg. This regime is a composite, multi-scalar assemblage of legal arrangements and regulatory and controlling institutions at the European, national (Belgian) and regional (Flemish) level. In most general terms, there has been a major shift in legislation and organisation encouraging intra-EU labour mobility and discouraging labour influx from outside the EU. Over the last 25 years, there has been a gradual but now almost complete shift from non-EU (Punjabi, African) to EU workers from Poland, Bulgaria and Romania predominantly, with a minor but significant participation of workers from Southern Europe but with a Maghrebi migration background. Seen from a broader historical perspective, the current regime of mobility/diversity shows the traces of the Belgian/European colonial past (Africans as exploitable subjects) and the post WWII labour migration from the Mediterranean which in Belgium produced an autochthone-allochthone dichotomy. This regime lays the foundation of mechanisms of *racialisation* of the work force in the agro-industrial complex of fruit production in southern Limburg
2. The Limburgian *agro-industrial complex* in which employers/farmers and seasonal workers operate, comprises: (a) public, semi-public and private centres of expertise built-up and knowledge/technology transfer and distribution, (b) networks and centres of commercialization (cooperatives / fruit auctions, tourist offices,), (c) mainly informal networks of labour mediation and recruiting based on both strong (kin-based, ‘ethnic’) or weak (friends and acquaintances, religious, or nationality-based) ties. This agro-industrial complex forms the dynamic infrastructure for the ongoing neoliberalisation of the fruit production activity. In the face of the extraversion/globalisation of all aspects of the fruit production/marketing, one observes a double process of ‘*domestication*’. Farmer-seasonal worker relationships are framed as family-like but accommodate deep misrecognitions and inequalities, and Fruit production is increasingly/spectacularly framed as a local (heritage) tradition; This ‘autochthonisation’ fits the racialisation dynamics observed in the hegemonic regime of diversity/mobility (see above) and results in hierarchization

along the autochthone-allochthone continuum, the denial/misrecognition/effacement of the constitutive role of ‘allochthone’ seasonal workers, and strengthens racialisation.

3. In line with the general goals and theoretical outlook of the project, part of the research focused on (a) the way seasonal workers *navigate* the established regime of diversity/mobility in which they find themselves caught, and (b) *resist/renege* the racialisation processes and inequalities which are constitutive of the human resources dimension of the agro-industrial complex. Mapping the tactics and resources, as well as empowering the precarious positions and voices of the seasonal workers was the main goal of the dissemination projects, the NP Discussion Group and the various round tables.

3. Dissemination

In 2017-2018, the team continued to work intensively on the dissemination of its research results in different venues. These included:

3.1. Research meetings

- Leuven set up a New Plantations Discussion Group between the research coordinator, MA, doctoral students and postdocs from the social and political sciences faculty, interested members of partner organisations (Masala, Zoo Humain), and interested non-partner organisations (Boerenforum): 8 meetings between February and November 2017.
- Zurich engaged two workgroups with partner organizations (OMB and Cantieri Meticci; and cooperative Mary Poppins) in order to work on public outreach, research teaching activities in Italy and Switzerland: 12 meetings between January 2016 and May 2018.
- Basel is involved in a coalition of scientists and NGOs on the issue of food sovereignty and tried to strengthen the aspect of labour conditions of migrant workers within this coalition.

3.2. Conferences

- Karel Arnaut & Trine Thygaard-Nielsen (Antwerp, 5 July 2016): ‘New plantations: Migrant mobility, ‘illegality’ and racialization in European agricultural labour’ at the kick-off meeting of the scientific research community ‘Solidarity in diversity: community, place-making and citizenship’ (University of Antwerp)
- Karel Arnaut (Copenhagen, 24 February 2017): Decolonising contact zones: reconceptualizing multiplications from within. Keynote address at the University of Copenhagen
- Karel Arnaut (Berlin 18 July 2017): ‘Anthropological explorations of race and/in capitalism in the margins: seasonal mobile labour’ at the Session Migration, Labour, Whiteness, Meeting of the Anthropology of Race and Ethnicity Network of EASA (Free University Berlin)
- Karel Arnaut (London, 19 September 2017): Participation in roundtable with Vivienne Jabri, Jef Huysmans and Diarmait Mac Giolla Chríost, on Languages and legacies of conflict (King’s College London).

- Researchers Sarah Schilliger, Tina Bopp and Domenico Perrotta presented their findings at the International Conference ‘[Migration and Agriculture in the Mediterranean and Beyond](#)’¹ in Marseille on 15/16th March 2018.
- The Swiss team took part in a workshop (organized by Longo Mai/European Civic Forum) with migrant farm workers, unionists and researchers from France, Italy, Spain, Morocco, Tunisia and Greece on the subject of claiming rights practices of migrant workers in the agriculture sector in different countries (17th March, Saint-Martin-de-Crau/France).
- Timothy Raeymaekers presented his findings at the XXXII Congresso Geografico Italiano in Rome, on 8 June 2017.
- Researchers Domenico Perrotta and Timothy Raeymaekers will organize a panel on labour mediation at the ‘7th Ethnography and Qualitative Research Conference’ in Bergamo on 7 June 2018.
- Sarah Schilliger presented the Swiss case study in a public lecture at the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies at University of Osnabrück, 4th May 2017.
- Tina Bopp presented her findings at different Conferences such as: the international conference „Transnational Families: Generations, differences, solidarity”, 7th -8th of July, 2017, in Cluj-Napoca, Romania; the European Society for Rural Sociology Congress “, On the move: International migration to/ in rural areas”, 24th – 27th of July 2017 in Kraków, Poland, the Telciu Summer Conference “Postsocialist/Postcolonial Rural Lifeworlds vs Degrowth, Defuturing, Decoloniality”, 11th-12th of August 2017 in Telciu-Bistrița, Romania, and the [World Congress on “Migration, Ethnicity, Race and Health”](#), 17th - 19th May 2018 in Edinburgh, Scotland.

3.3. Public meetings

The project team organized four public meetings in Bologna (March, December 2017), Brussels (December 2017) and Bern (June 2018) to share and discuss its research findings with the wider public. Under the direction of Cantieri Meticci and Timothy Raeymaekers, the Bologna and Brussels workshops were organized around four interactive tables, in which participants were given the opportunity to personally experience the situation of labour migrants and to think along with solutions. Illustrators, Graphic designers, and live actors worked together with the research team to translate complex findings into a lived performative interaction. A general impression of the workshop was published on the SNIS website:

<https://snis.ch/2018/01/12/closing-event-workshop-raeymaekers/>

The public conference in Berne was attended by 40 persons: scientists from different universities (migration studies/peasant studies), representatives of NGOs (European Civic Forum, Bread for all, Fastenopfer, Solifonds), farmer’s association (Uniterre, Kleinbauernvereinigung), migrant solidarity networks and the Swiss Platform for a sustainable agriculture Agrisodu (among others).

Flyer: <https://agrarinfo.ch/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/einladung-snis-23-juni-mailformat.pdf>

¹ https://f-origin.hypotheses.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/4016/files/2018/03/MAM2018_Programme_en_14mars.pdf

Radio emission/interview with Simon Affolter/Sarah Schilliger:

<http://rabe.ch/2018/06/22/migrantinnen-landwirtschaft-zeid-al-hussein/>

Report in the journal of the Swiss Farmer's Association:

<https://www.bauernzeitung.ch/news-archiv/2018/bittere-bedingungen-fuer-ernteheifer>

The Brussels meeting also involved a first attempt to bring different stakeholders together around the voices of seasonal workers in Belgium. 7 participants with very different stakes (fruit farm owners, national unions, official seasonal labour support services, civil society immigrant worker support services) are confronted with excerpts from interviews with seasonal workers or other narratives and written documents eliciting the voices of seasonal workers, and discuss the concerns, anxieties, frustrations but also the joys and yields (both material and immaterial) of seasonal work in the fruit sector.

3.4. Other dissemination activities

- While the Belgian is concluding a video document with its partner organizations, the Swiss team organizes a workshop open to the partners and a wider public and presents the results from the Swiss Case Study on 23th June in Bern. A public panel discussion with different stakeholders (farmer's association, unions, migrant workers) on the subject of working conditions in Swiss agriculture is planned for autumn 2018.
- Ilaria Ippolito was able to present her interactive table, called Rotte Migranti (Migrant Routes) in several courses and public meetings during the course of 2017-2018. The table follows the path of 6 African labourers who she has followed and worked with to collect their testimonies, photographs and other documentary material. The table has proven to be an excellent tool for training, reflection and awareness on the issue of labour exploitation, and for this reason has been on high request in high schools, universities, public events as well as specialized training courses, producing 14 meetings and reaching about 220 people by May 2018.
- The Italian team decided to apply for additional funding to consolidate one of the four table formats that emerged from this project. The table will involve a didactic package on the theme of industrial tomato production in South Italy –which has been a central theme of the project and of public discussions today. For this purpose, an additional work group has been set up, which includes members of the Cantieri Meticci collective, researchers Domenico Perrotta and Timothy Raeymaekers, as well as didactical expert Rosy Nardone (University of Chieti). The objective is to produce a fully operational package by the end of 2018.

3. Publications

- The project team has continued to produce a number of small public contributions online (particularly <http://www.osservatoriomigrantibasilicata.it> and <http://www.timothyraeymaekers.net>)
- Currently, the team is preparing a collection of partly co-written articles for *Critical Sociology*, which agreed to consider the edited issue (planned submission date late 2018).
- In the meantime, the main applicant continues to work on a monograph that zooms into Black African immigration to Southern Italy.

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