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I DIRITTI UMANI TRA PRATICHE
DI GUERRA, RELAZIONI DI POTERE,
MOBILITÀ INTERNAZIONALE
E RESISTENZE

A cura di Marco De Biase e Stefania Ferraro

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SARA ANGIUONI

CAPORALI AND GANGMASTERS

A comparative study of informal labour
intermediation and workforce reproduction practices
in Italy and the U.K.

A research in progress

Abstract:

Starting in the late 1970s, the agricultural sector has undergone dramatic changes in Europe, leading to the development of an intensive model of production that is oriented to global markets. In this context, the use of low cost migrant labour and the resort to informal labour arrangements have become the main tools to support this system and to face the increasing competition from cheaper foreign goods. This research is aimed at the study of the informal management of migrant agricultural labour in Italy and the UK and the role of informal brokers that provide a variety of services to local employers. The hypothesis proposed here is that these intermediaries are rational and functional economic actors, whose role is embedded in a wide process of informalization of the economy. Moreover, this system requires the presence of an extremely malleable labour force, which is reproduced through a series of practices of power that push migrants into a condition of vulnerability. The research will be conducted through an ethnographic approach based on direct observation and in-depth interviews with migrant agricultural workers and informal brokers. This will help understand the different dynamics of informal employment and shed light on the hierarchical structure of the agricultural labour market.

Keywords:

Agriculture, Migrant Farm Workers, Labour Intermediation, Informal Brokers, Structural Vulnerability.

1. Introduction

This research project aims at analysing new forms of labour organization in the globalized agricultural sector. More in detail, it attempts to investigate the relationship between the recent economic restructuring of agriculture, the informalization of production and the proliferation of a series of professional figures that contribute to the management and reproduction of the workforce. The research question guiding this study is: how has the globalization of the agricultural sector affected the organization of labour? And what is the role of labour intermediaries?

In the last few decades, as a consequence of the rising international competition, European agricultural firms have tried to drastically reduce production costs through the use of cheap and flexible migrant labour and the resort to informal labour arrangements. In this context, informal intermediaries who structure the relation between employers and migrant farmworkers have gained a central role in the management and reproduction of the migrant workforce. This research project advances two main hypotheses: these brokers are versatile and well-organised economic actors, who are able to adapt to the needs of the globalized labour market and act as a bridge between formal and informal economic activities, which have become increasingly intertwined in the new configuration of agriculture.

Moreover, it is argued that, in the current system, the presence of an extremely vulnerable labour force has become a necessary element of production and the reproduction of this malleable workforce is achieved through a series of practices of power, which involve employers, informal brokers, migrant farmworkers and society as a whole.

This paper provides an overview of the socio-anthropological literature on this subject with the purpose of highlighting gaps and flaws in the existing studies and identifying possible lines of analysis for further research in this field. The first section focuses on the relationship between the latest transformations of agriculture and the structural role that migrant labour has acquired in this system. Subsequently, the condition of marginality and exclusion experienced by migrant farmworkers in European countries is examined starting from their extremely weak position in the labour market. The third section of this paper focuses on the different forms of labour intermediation and, above all, on the role of gangmastering in the UK and *caporalato* in Italy. Finally, the last section introduces some analytical tools that could facilitate the understanding of this problem and suggests new interpretive paths that have been overlooked or not sufficiently explored by the existing literature.

2. *Intensive agriculture and migration in Europe*

Agriculture, more than other economic sectors, has always been characterized by a tight relationship with migration (Castles, Miller 2009). In recent decades, with the progressive transformation of the primary sector and the intensification of production, this relationship has become even tighter and the number of foreign workers reaching Western Europe to be employed in the fields or greenhouses has grown significantly (Berlan 2002). Consequently, horticulture and some other sub-sectors have become more and more dependent on seasonal and flexible labour for activities such as harvesting and fruit picking.

The process of specialization and intensification of agriculture, supported by a growing demand from the global food industry, has been analysed by a series of studies which explain how recent economic policies are reshaping European agricultural sectors leading to a convergence towards a production system that is rooted in the United States (Guthman 2004; Berlan 1986; McWilliams 1939). As a matter of fact, the neoliberal socio-economic transformations of the late 1990s have pushed the majority of European countries to adopt specific modalities of production, which belong to a system that a number of scholars have defined as the “Californian model” (Berlan 1986; McWilliams 1939; Martin 1990; Fischer 1953). This model combines the intensification of production processes, the increasing specialization of crops, an extensive exploitation of lands and the massive use of low cost labour “imported” from peripheral countries.

In this system, migrant labour is unevenly employed throughout the year in activities of harvesting, planting and maintenance of the fields (Berlan 1986; Wells 1996; Martin *et al.* 2006). In other words, the demand for labour is heavily influenced by seasonality and this model requires the presence of a fluctuating workforce to be used in specific moments of the production process with the highest peaks in harvest times (Zabin 1997; 1939). These particular characteristics have affected the structure of the labour market in the sense that farmworkers’ living and working conditions have become increasingly precarious (Berlan 2002). This phenomenon has become more and more evident in the last three decades with the huge diffusion of greenhouses, thanks to which the seeding/harvesting cycle of crops has become continuous and the demand for cheap labour even higher (Avallone 2013; Goli, Rezaei 2008). Therefore, in the wake of the Californian model, European producers have reorganized their activities to keep up with the globalized market and face the rising competition from cheaper

foreign goods (Colloca, Corrado 2013; Romano 2006; McMichael 2005; Guthmann 2004).

The European labour market has changed accordingly to ensure a constant supply of flexible labour that is able to support the international production and distribution chains (Berlan 2002). For instance, the agricultural output of countries such as Italy, Spain, France and the U.K. utterly relies on international migratory flows and especially those from Northern or Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern European countries (Corrado 2013; Goli, Rezaei 2008; Boels 2013). More precisely, the presence of a massive reserve of migrant labour is used to control the cost of labour, which would immediately rise in case of workforce shortage and affect the already variable price of agricultural products (Avallone 2013; Berlan 2002). Indeed, as shown by a number of studies, even in periods of intense activity, a share of the workforce is kept unoccupied and, on average, for each employed farm worker at least three are seeking for a job (Berlan 2002; Colloca, Corrado 2013; Rogaly 2008).

Furthermore, in this context, the role of labour unions is extremely marginal and wages are arbitrarily regulated by employers in the absence of any form of social bargaining. The most common types of payment are piece rate, time rate, or a fixed daily pay, the amount of which is informally agreed by the farmers at the start of every season. The system of piece rate implies that the actual sum earned by the worker depends on the level of production he/she manages to realise in a working day, in other words it depends on the number of boxes of fruit and vegetables he/she manages to fill in one day (Pedreño, Gadea, de Castro 2013; Hellio 2013; Perrotta, Sacchetto 2012). This mechanism eliminates the necessity of a stable relationship between the employer and the employee, making the labour market “anonymous”. It works as a tool of control on the heterogeneous, fluctuating and temporary nature of the workforce and balances the risks connected to the use of poorly skilled labour (Avallone 2013; Rogaly 2008). In most cases, labour relations are partially or completely informal and they are not directly managed by the producers, who prefer to subcontract the selection and supervision of the workers to different kinds of intermediaries, with the result that direct contacts between the farmers and the workers employed in their fields are extremely rare (Perrotta, Sacchetto 2012; Brovia 2008).

One of the most important features of the agricultural labour market in Europe is its marked segmentation, which entails that the lowest sections are almost totally occupied by migrant workers who are more inclined to accept poor working conditions, longer working hours and lower wages

than the local population. According to a series of sociological studies on this subject, the majority of migrant farmworkers considers employment in agriculture as a possibility for social advancement if compared to job opportunities in the countries of origin. In reality, this type of mobility often proves to be illusory (Rea *et al.* 2010; Berlan 2002; Colloca, Corrado 2013; Papadopoulos 2009; Goli, Rezeai 2008). Consequently, the agricultural labour market is not only shaped by the economic structure of one country, but also influenced by international migration policies, which regulate the quotas of workers allowed to regularly enter the different countries.

In the last decades, European migration policies have been clearly marked by a common restrictive approach to the mobility of selected groups, which is based on the principle that the number of immigrants allowed in a country should be proportional to the internal demand for labour (Boels *et al.* 2012; Amnesty International 2012). This trend has gone hand in hand with the production of a series of discourses on migration, framed as a security issue, which put emphasis on the necessity of fighting illegal immigration; as demonstrated by the strengthening of controls at the borders and the introduction of criminalisation measures in national legislations (Martiniello *et al.* 2011). Nonetheless, irregular immigration in Europe has significantly increased in the last years (Morehouse, Blomfield 2011) and agriculture, as well as other economic sectors that rely on the use of informal labour (construction sector, domestic care sector, etc.), has absorbed the greatest part of those “clandestine” workers (Avallone 2013; De Vito 2009; Hellio 2013; Kasimis, Papadopoulos 2005).

Hence, it is important to highlight the functional role of illegal migration and restrictive immigration policies with respect to a labour market that is situated at the limits of the formal and the informal (Saitta *et al.* 2013; Hess 2006; Hartman 2008; Reyneri 2003; Markova 2006). Indeed, despite the tendency of European policies to link the regulation of immigration to the demand for labour, the limited number of workers legally authorized to enter the labour market every year is not sufficient to support the massive demand for labour and the high rhythms of production in agriculture, which can exclusively be sustained through the constant resort to informal and flexible labour (Pugliese 2012; Amnesty International 2012; Reyneri 2001). In this context, the numerous obstacles to these workers’ mobility have fostered the development of some networks that arrange the legal or illegal entry of these migrants in a number of European countries. Those networks, as highlighted by Avallone’s study on the South of Italy, are often composed by the same actors who provide the labour force to local producers and sometimes select the workers directly in the countries of origin.

In such cases, migrants are frequently involved in frauds and required to pay conspicuous sums of money (from 5.000 to 10.000 euro) in exchange for false documents to enter the receiving country (Avallone 2013; IOM 2010; Botte 2009).

Thus, an analysis of the inextricable link between the agricultural productive structure and international migration policies entails a thorough reflection on a series of social, economic and political factors which deeply affect migrant farmworkers, determining an extremely vulnerable status and a weak position in the labour market.

3. Migrant farmworkers between social exclusion and discrimination

This section explores the scholarly literature that focuses on the condition of subalternity, discrimination and social exclusion of migrant farmworkers in Europe (IOM 2010).

Lately, an increasing number of socio-anthropological inquiries has analysed how migrants' marginal position in the labour market, combined with an irregular legal status, negatively affects a series of aspects of their daily life resulting in limited access to basic services such as health care, decent housing and legal assistance (Schenker 2010; Ivancheva 2007; Basok 2002; Cabrera 1991). On these themes, the literature that investigates Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain and Greece highlights the connection between the organization of agricultural labour and the reproduction of the workforce through marginalization dynamics (Gertel, Sippel 2014; Perrotta, Sacchetto 2013; Hellio 2008; Lawrence 2007; Hazard 2007).

Certainly, spatial segregation is identified as one of the factors determining social exclusion. Indeed, in the south of Europe, migrant farmworkers are usually confined to isolated areas where contacts with the local society are extremely rare. Those places are generally characterized by the absence of basic comforts and very low sanitary standards (Perrotta, Sacchetto 2013; Lyberaki 2008; Parron *et al.* 1996). Only a small part of migrant workers, mostly the ones with a regular migration status, lives in shelters and hostels set up by local authorities or NGOs. Those can only host a limited number of workers and are normally situated in rural areas (Avallone 2013). The greatest part of migrants, instead, rents a room or a bed in the abandoned or decaying houses, often unsupplied with water, heating and electricity, which are placed in proximity of cultivated fields (Cicerchia 2010; Cole, Booth 2007). Others, in Spain and Southern

Italy, build small shacks in the countryside using plastic sheets and materials stolen from greenhouses (Caruso, Corrado 2012; Suarez-Navaz 2007). Another typology of housing, described by a series of studies on the South of Italy, is the “ghetto”, which is usually a deserted factory or building where hundreds of farmworkers seek refuge (Perrotta, Sacchetto 2013). Those structures, which are completely isolated from residential settlements, have started to catch the attention of the Italian media in the last years, due to the indecent living conditions that characterize migrants’ existence in such places. In addition, the “Grande Ghetto” of Foggia (Puglia), that of Rosarno (Calabria) and the one of San Nicola Varco (Campania) have been examined by a series of sociological studies which have analysed migrants’ working and living conditions in those areas and especially the thorough state of segregation that marks life in the ghettos (Avallone 2013; Perrotta 2012; Mangano 2009; Botte 2009; Hazard 2007).

To the same extent, extremely unsafe living conditions have been documented in Northern European countries such as Belgium, Norway, Germany and the UK, but according to the available literature on those countries the majority of migrant workers find housing in the same farm where they are employed (Boels 2013; Rye, Andrzejewska 2010; Rea *et al.* 2009; Rogaly 2009; Hess 2006, Strauss 2013). This condition, which is the sum of different forms of exclusion (spatial, economic and social), has been deeply investigated by Perrotta (2012; 2014) in the context of the South of Italy and explained through the concept of seclusion (Gambino 2003), defined as a «spatial arrangement that reinforces the overlap of work, leisure, rest and, more generally, all aspects of daily reproduction of an individual or a group in one place, from which they are formally free to leave» (Gambino 2003, pp. 104-105). This concept is, according to Perrotta, a useful tool to understand the processes of exclusion and reproduction of agricultural labour. In his view, seclusion is an organizational modality of daily life marked by the fact that migrants are in principle free to move from the place they live or work in, but that freedom is exclusively expressed through the movement from their houses to the fields (which are both spaces of exclusion and suffering), without entailing an “invasion” of local society’s spaces. This condition differs from the modality of internment as this latter implies a formal restriction of the freedom of movement, but they are similar in the sense that, in fact, migrants are trapped in a space of suffering (Perrotta 2012).

Similar situations of poverty and deprivation are portrayed by some anthropological studies on Latino farmworkers in the USA (Vallejos *et al.* 2011; Holmes 2011; Gentry *et al.* 2007; Basok 2003). Those studies

disclose the tight links between poor living/working conditions and bad state of health among Mexican farmworkers employed in North-American agriculture. More in details, they show how the prolonged exposure to chemicals and unfavourable weather conditions (excessive heat, rain, etc.) which characterizes the work in the fields – combined with the low sanitary standards of their houses or shelters and the lack of access to fundamental social services – pushes migrants into a position of absolute vulnerability and increases the risk of contracting certain diseases (Holmes 2011; Quesada 2011; Duke 2011). Moreover, those researches examine the different factors that prevent migrant farmworkers to access important services such as healthcare (irregular legal status, lack of economic resources, etc.) as the result of a long process of subordination, which touches multiple aspects of migrants' lives determining a state of social suffering that extends far beyond the work context (Quesada *et al.* 2011).

Residential segregation and economic exploitation are only two of the innumerable factors that contribute to generate migrant farmworkers' exclusion. Other fundamental elements to complete this picture of marginality are racism and cultural discrimination. In the last years a lot of studies have called the attention on the different forms of "institutionalised" racism, which are becoming increasingly established in many western countries such as the USA, Canada, Norway and Southern Europe (Holmes 2013; 2011; Perry 2012; Agudelo-Suarez 2009; Geiger 2008; Kasimis, Papadopoulos 2005). These forms of racism are embedded in a series of discourses that represent migrants as a threat to the security and unfair competitors in the shrinking economies of western societies (Ivancheva 2007; Markova 2006). These discourses affect both the legal and cultural sphere of migrants, concealing the severe condition of exploitation they experience as workers and the structural role they play in the economy (Michalon, Morice 2008; Potot 2010). Moreover, they reinforce sentiments of "indifference" within the host population and naturalize the situation of marginality in which migrants are forced (Basaran 2013; Chavez 2008; Dal Lago 1999). The systematic stigmatization of migrants carried out through the media and discriminatory political discourses has given origin to episodes of violence against foreign national farmworkers in a number of European countries. For instance, in 2010, in Rosarno (Calabria – Italy) some Sub-Saharan pickers were shot by members of the local population while returning to their homes after a day of work in orange plantations (Corrado 2011; Mangano 2009), but similar events have also taken places in Greece and Spain (Kasimis, Papadopoulos 2005; Hellio 2008). Thus, in a context in which migrant farmworkers are subjected to cultural discrimination,

denied access to services, and institutional actors such as unions, labour agencies and sector associations do not supply an effective intermediation between workers and employers the satisfaction of basic needs is filtered by a series of informal intermediaries, who not only negotiate the relations between farmworkers and employers, but also influence migrants' relation with the host country's society.

4. *Different forms of labour intermediation*

One of the most interesting aspects of the study of migrant labour in agriculture and also the main focus of this research is certainly the analysis of the different forms of intermediation that characterize the management and reproduction of the workforce. Recently, with the dramatic changes of agriculture, a great deal of studies has tried to investigate informal labour relations in this sector and, more precisely, the different professional figures operating within it (Boels *et al.* 2012; IOM 2010; Goli, Rezaei 2008). These figures, which go by the name of *gangmasters* in the UK, *caporali* in Italy and *furgoneros* in Spain, are present, although with slight differences in their roles and functions, in the majority of European agricultural sectors (Perrotta 2011; Hellio 2008; Rogaly 2008).

For instance, in Belgium the selection of the workforce is informally carried out through two steps: in an initial phase the producers employ a small number of trusted migrant workers and subsequently charge these latter with recruiting the remaining share of labourers among their friends and nationals (Boels 2013). In addition, as shown by a report of the Undocumented Worker Transition (UWT) project (Goli, Rezaei 2008), those intermediaries select groups of workers in pubs or community places, they gather them early in the morning at established meeting places, bring them to the fields, pay the workers at the end of the day and drive them back to the city. Moreover, lodging is a very remunerative business for the intermediaries, who, often in association with employers, convert old buildings into hostels to house migrants in exchange for a rent (*Ibidem*). Likewise, in Norway, notwithstanding the strong regulation of labour and the important role of labour contracting agencies, recruitment of Eastern European farmhands is mainly carried out using family circles and friendship ties (Rey, Andrzejewka 2010). These informal mechanisms of recruitment, which revolve around the role of the intermediaries, are equally common in the U.K., where, although with the introduction of the Gangmaster Licensing Act in 2004 an attempt has been made to regulate these practices,

the intensification of agricultural production has brought about an increase in informal employment and an overall worsening of working conditions (Rogaly 2006, Brass 2004).

Rogaly uses the concept of *workplace regimes* to indicate «the whole set of labour arrangements made largely by employers, with varying degrees of negotiation with labour contractors and workforces, and in response to wider labour market, legal and commercial conditions» (Rogaly 2006, p. 499). These arrangements include also decisions about whom to employ and how (directly by the producer or through a gangmaster), the type of remuneration (daily pay, piece rate, time rate, etc.), the length of working hours and so on. He argues that, with the globalisation of agriculture and the rising international competition, British growers have opted for an intensification of workplace regimes with the aim of maximising profits. The intensification is based on three main non-technical innovations: the substitution of the local workforce with migrant labourers, the use of the gangmaster system as a tool of labour management and the introduction of piece rate (which has already been discussed above). In his analysis, the gangmasters, whose activity can vary from simple brokering to more or less pronounced forms of exploitation, have the function of providing growers a constant supply of flexible and compliant labour and to ensure a certain degree of control over the workers. Indeed, again according to Rogaly, the gangmaster is in a position of power with respect to migrant workers, due to a series of advantages and resources to which he/she has exclusive access. Firstly, he/she has a closer relationship with employers and consequently more information about jobs. Secondly, he/she is frequently the only one who can arrange transport to the work place, which exacerbates migrants' position of dependence on him/her (Rogaly 2008). Of course, the gangmaster is aware of his/her advantage and seeks to capitalize on it, for instance by deducting a sum from the workers' pay and establishing a price for the transport, or, in extreme circumstances, using violence or intimidation (Brass 2004).

Such forms of labour organization are clearly present in many other European countries such as France (Potot 2010), Germany (Hess 2006) and Greece (Kasimis 2008; Lawrence 2007), but to deeply understand the multiplicity of practices and actors that participate in these dynamics it is necessary to focus on the literature that investigates Spain and, more importantly Italy (Hellio 2008; Pedreño, Gadea, de Castro 2013), as the analyses of this specific context are certainly among the most detailed available in international scholarship.

Some ethnographic inquiries have described the complexity of this phenomenon starting from a historical analysis of its roots (Colloca, Corrado 2013; Perrotta 2011; 2012; Avallone 2011; 2013). In the South of Italy, as well as in Northern regions, gangmasters (or *caporali*, as they are called in Italy)

have played a crucial role in the organization of agricultural labour since the aftermath of the World War II and the development of a market-oriented agriculture. At that time, the Italian *caporali* moved groups of local farmhands, prevalently women, from the inland to coastal plains during the harvest season (Avallone 2013; Gribaudi 1990). In that context, the role of the intermediaries was not linked to the intensification of production, it was rather connected to a lack of workforce which negatively affected the price of agricultural products. On the contrary, starting from the 1990s, the transformation of the labour force due to the massive immigration from the North of Africa, combined with the higher rhythms of production induced by the new globalised agriculture, has led to a rise in these practices of brokerage and the replacement of the old Italian *caporali* with new figures coming from the same countries of the migrants who sought employment in agriculture (Perrotta, Sacchetto 2012). Hence, in present days, the majority of the *caporali* is of foreign origin; nonetheless, some Italian intermediaries still play a role in this sector as heads of hierarchical structures of intermediation and as joining link between employers and migrant *caporali* (*Ibidem*).

Although this phenomenon appears to be very complex and heterogeneous, a series of recurring elements characterize the activity of the *caporale*. The ability of the *caporale* to recruit workers is determined by his/her capacity to establish trust with the workforce. For this reason, it is quite common that a *caporale* prefers to employ workers who belong to his/her own national group or even family and circle of friends.

His/her role is to find a certain number of workers and bring them to the fields where they are needed, supervise their work and pay them at the end of the day. On the basis of the agreement made with the employer, the reward for the *caporale* goes from 5 to 10 euros deducted from each labourer's pay, plus an additional 3 to 5 euros for the transport to the work place. The recruitment can take place in several ways. Very often a *caporale* meets the workers in one of the many "hands markets" (*mercati delle braccia*) taking place along the fields early in the morning. Alternatively, the *caporale* can act as a foreman and play an active role at the worksite. In these circumstances he works with a selected group of farmhands and tries to build trust with employers, but he also exercises a more rigid control over his team's performance. This kind of organization is especially demanded when the job requires particular care (harvest of delicate crops) or when farmers have to respect specific quality criteria to sell their products to certain companies. Moreover, becoming a *caporale* is not a complicated process and does not necessarily imply connections with criminal organizations, contrarily it entails the accumulation of a certain type of resources, such as good knowledge of the local language, relations of trust

with local employers, established reputation within the migrant community and sufficient means to arrange transport (Perrotta 2012). For these reasons, *caporali* are frequently migrant farmhands who have spent a long period of time in the host country. Sometimes the *caporale* also acts as a provider of a series of key-services such as housing, credit, legal assistance etc. These services are especially necessary for newly arrived migrants and those who lack a regular legal status.

Recently, a significant amount of Italian and international literature has portrayed the *caporali* as cruel slave drivers and proposed stereotyped interpretations of this phenomenon, which draw the attention to the links with criminal networks and interpret these practices as a legacy of old (hierarchical) economic and social structures (Brovia 2010). Conversely, more in-depth ethnographic analyses have highlighted that all the actors involved recognise the necessity of this mediatory function and that the use of explicit violence is rather exceptional. Indeed, if on the one hand employers benefit from the services supplied by the *caporali*, on the other hand migrants are aware that the bridging action of the *caporali* allows them to use a series of resources that would otherwise not be available.

Based on this assumption, Perrotta has argued that this particular structure of labour relations could be interpreted with the concept of “broker capitalism” developed by Jane and Peter Schneider in their study on criminal organizations in Sicily (J. and P. Schneider 1976). This type of capitalism differs from merchant, financial and industrial capitalism because it develops in peripheral areas of the world system. Moreover, broker capitalists are able to control only marginal assets and their principal resource is their network of contacts, through which they can promote their interests and improve their position in the market. In Schneider’s words:

Broker capitalism flourishes at the periphery because core interests are unable, or do not choose, to monopolize and administer the local level activities connected with the production, marketing and export of primary products. For this reason, it promotes short-time speculative investment, reflecting the uncertainties in which ultimate control over markets lies in the hands of unpredictable foreigners. It selects for those who are able – by structural position or personality – to seize opportunities, to engage in ad hoc creative planning, mobilizing friends and friends of friends to live, as it were, by their wits. Finally, BC advances by means of short-term, fluid, egocentric coalitions, reinforced by friendship ties, rather than by the long-term corporate associations which organize commerce, industry, and finance in the metropolis. Friendship and *furberia* are broker capitalist codes (*Ivi*, pp. 10-11).

Relying on this interpretation Perrotta examines the work of the *caporali* and explains their function through the category of “social broker”. In a context such as the one described above a social broker is a subject who is able to fill the gaps in social networks by bridging communication between groups of people and different interests. By doing so, he manages to acquire a strategic position and establish trust relations with the different social actors. In other words, he makes profit by monopolising communication between different social groups (Boissevain 1974).

In this view, the role of the *caporale* is rooted in a system of informal relations that originates from the “peripheral” nature of the economic context and is aimed at facilitating and accelerating certain processes of the agricultural production (Perrotta 2012).

This analysis of the management of farm labour is undoubtedly useful to go beyond stereotyped explanations of this subject that emphasize the backward character of this type of organization and understand the dynamic nature of social brokers’ activity. However, this interesting analytical perspective could be applied not only to understand socio-economic factors, which restrict the interpretative scope, but also to pay attention to the global forces and dynamics that shape the context in which these actors operate. Therefore, a comparative approach would place emphasis on these elements and highlight how the recent restructuring of agriculture has produced similar circumstances in profoundly different contexts. Furthermore, the study of the concept of “social broker” combined with a critical research perspective on informal economies could help to put the practices of the informal intermediaries in relation with a wider process of transformation of the capitalistic economy.

Hence, in this study *caporali*, gangmasters and other sorts of intermediaries will be referred to as “informal brokers”. This definition draws on the concept of “social broker” used by Perrotta (2012), but aims at underlining the relationship between these practices of intermediation and the process of informalization that has affected agriculture at a global level. Thus, this concept builds on a series of critical studies which have investigated the proliferation of informal activities in advanced economies in the last few decades (Portes, Sassen-Koob 1987; Porters *et al.* 1989; Chen 2007).

5. “Informal Brokers” and “Structural Violence”

The origins of this critical research perspective on the informal economy lie in the study of informal economic activities in developing countries

(Ponsaers *et al.* 2012, Hart 1973). Indeed, some liberal economic theories assume the wide presence of informal activities is mainly a feature of developing countries, which is bound to disappear as they embrace the principles of capitalistic development; consequently informality is associated with traditional economies and obsolete forms of labour (Portes, Sassen-Koob 1987; Chen 2007). At the same time, when such activities are present in advanced economies they are connected to the intensification of migration flows from Third World countries or to the fact that industrial growth has failed to absorb a share of labour in the formal sector (Chen 2001; Reyneri 2001)

However, with the significant revival of informal activities in industrialised countries, starting from the 1970s, a series of critical studies has focused on the role of informal economic activities in advanced societies (Sassen 2007; 1997; Chen 2007; Portes *et al.* 1989). Those studies reject the hypothesis of informality being a characteristic of peripheral economies and highlight the complexity of the informal sector, which is made up of a huge range of activities varying from old forms of employment (manual labour in agriculture) to more modern and dynamic occupations (provision of goods and services for formal enterprises). In this view, the proliferation of informal activities in western countries is linked to the process of restructuring of the capitalistic economy, which has exacerbated some of the intrinsic trends of this model, such as decentralization of production and flexibilization of labour (structuralist school of thought). Indeed, according to Sassen (1997), starting from the 1970s, some sectors of the economy, i.e. finance and technology, have maintained high levels of productivity (in terms of profit-making and earning capacity of workers), while some low-return sectors have reorganized production through informal economic regimes, characterized by the absence of institutional regulation and consequently capable to grant increased flexibility and higher margins of profit. This process of informalization has had different effects on different sections of the labour market; for instance, it has put pressure on the lowest rungs of the labour market entailing a significant reduction of wages and a pronounced worsening of working conditions, but it has also created new forms of employment at higher levels of the labour market and opportunities to increment incomes (Carr, Chen 2001).

Building on this perspective, this research project aims at analysing the effects of the recent economic transformations of agriculture on the different categories of workers employed in this sector. More in detail, it aims at investigating: a) the role of “informal brokers” as a bridge between the formal and informal sectors and b) the impact of the process of

informalization on the weakest segments of the labour market, i.e. migrant farmhands. Indeed, in the new production regime, the presence of a docile workforce has become essential to meet the needs of the globalised market and this condition is fulfilled by the constant influx of migrant labourers from developing countries. This malleability is related to a condition of extreme vulnerability (deriving from a number of factors explored above), which is continuously reproduced through a series of power relations that involve employers, informal brokers and society as a whole (Guthman 2004; Colloca, Corrado 2013).

As noted by Quesada, Hart and Bourgois (2013), this condition could be better explained through the concept of “structural vulnerability”. This concept is a valuable analytical tool to grasp the complexity and heterogeneity of the dynamics that contribute to determine this particular status (Holmes 2013; Quesada *et al.* 2011). The roots of this category are usually identified in Johan Galtung’s (1969) theorization of “structural violence”, defined as an indirect form of violence that is not exerted by specific institutions or actors, but stems from a given social order and is inscribed in the hierarchies and power relations it entails (Farmer 2003; Gilligan 1997). In Galtung’s understanding it is the difference between the potential and actual levels of realization of an individual or group, meaning that any constraint or obstacle to it implies the presence of “structural violence”. Although this concept has often been used to explain gender discrimination, racism or other forms of cultural discrimination, its original conceptualization emphasized its “materialistic” dimension and insisted on factors such as economic exploitation, class differences and access to resources. More recently, a series of researches conducted in the field of medical anthropology has offered a more neutral and comprehensive version of this concept and changed the term in “structural vulnerability” (Holmes 2013; Quesada 2012; Quesada, Hart, Bourgois 2011; Green 2011). In this new conceptualization

structural vulnerability is a positionality. The vulnerability of an individual is produced by his or her location in a hierarchical social order and its diverse networks of power relationships and effects. Individuals are structurally vulnerable when they are subject to structural violence in its broadest conceptualization. This includes the interface of their personal attributes—such as appearance, affect, and cognitive status—with cultural values and institutional structures” (Quesada *et al.* 2011, p. 341).

Hence, structural violence refers to the ways in which the economic and political structure of society inflicts (physical and emotional) suffering

on vulnerable populations (Farmer 2003). It establishes a direct link between power and affliction and shows the multiple facets of the oppression mechanisms that work on subaltern groups of people producing “disposable subjects” (Green 2011; Bourgois, Schonberg 2009). In other words, it allows to grasp both the materialistic aspects and the symbolic dimensions of violence experienced by vulnerable populations in their daily life (Sheper-Hughes, Bourgois 2004), as violence is intended as a continuum that includes «not only direct political violence but also structural, symbolic and everyday violence» (Holmes 2013, p. 89). “Structural vulnerability” has been used to analyse the position of Latino migrants in the USA and to illustrate the effects of an unequal social order on their state of health (Holmes 2013; Quesada 2012; Green 2011), but it could be applied to any population (defined on the base of gender, race, social class, etc.) which is subject to a systematic experience of deprivation and exclusion. In this research project the concept will be used to interpret the condition of migrant farmworkers employed in European agriculture and to explore the dynamics of marginalisation and exploitation that contribute to the production of a docile and malleable workforce. In addition, it will be argued that the production of vulnerable and disposable subjects is functional to the logics of competition that rule the globalized agricultural sector. An ethnographic approach, based on the use of direct observation and in-depth interviews with migrant workers and informal brokers, will allow a reconstruction of the various practices through which “structural violence” is exerted on migrant farmworkers at a micro level and shed light on how certain economic actors benefit from this condition and, at the same time reproduce it.

6. Gangmastering and caporalato: similar practices in different contexts

In order to operationalize what is said so far, this research will be carried out through a comparative study that focuses on the analysis of the informal management of migrant labour in two different countries, Italy and the United Kingdom. The choice of these specific cases is justified by the necessity to understand why in two profoundly different socio-economic and political contexts the organization of agricultural production is characterized by similar elements: the use of informal labour arrangements and the exploitation of migrant labour.

As a matter of fact, the two countries differ not only for a number of historical and political factors, they are also dissimilar in terms of dimension and orientation of their agricultural sectors and in particular of horti-

culture, which is the area of interest of this research. Indeed, whereas Italy is the biggest European producer of fruit and vegetables, providing about 20.9 % of fresh vegetables and 21.7% of fruit cultivated in Europe, the UK only accounts for 5.2% of the production of fresh vegetables and 3% of fruit (Eurostat 2012). Moreover, while the southern European country is a major exporter of horticultural goods (3.611.417 thousands euro in 2012) (Eurostat 2013), the value of British exports in this sector is significantly lower (156.951 thousands £ in 2012) (Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs 2013). Furthermore, they have adopted extremely different policy approaches to fight the rise of gangmastering in agriculture: in 2004, the British Parliament approved the “Gangmaster Licensing Act”, which aimed at legalising certain practices of labour intermediation and regulating the activity of informal brokers in order to improve working conditions for farmhands. Contrarily, in 2011 the Italian Parliament introduced the penalisation of *caporalato* with the Law n. 148/2011, which defined informal labour intermediation as an extreme form of labour exploitation punishable by 5 to 8 years of detention. However, notwithstanding the introduction of different measures to contrast this phenomenon, several studies have showed that these informal practices have actually increased in both the countries in the last few years (Rogaly 2008; Avallone 2013; Colloca, Corrado 2012).

Therefore, the study of informal brokers’ activities in such different realities would help understand that the centrality of their role does not stem solely from domestic circumstances, but is embedded in a global dynamic of economic restructuring and affects countries with different historical and socio-economic backgrounds (Portes, Sassen-Koob 1987).

7. Conclusion

This paper has provided a survey of the academic debate on the recent transformations of agriculture in Europe and the role of migrant labour within this sector. As testified by the breadth of the reviewed literature, a lot of work has been done to shed light on the relationship between the neoliberal reshaping of the economy and the exacerbation of some forms of labour exploitation.

The reviewed studies could be roughly grouped into 2 branches: a first one which examines the matter from a sociological perspective and focuses on the economic processes that have remodelled the labour market, leading to an increase in flexibility and segmentation; and a second branch, which,

from an anthropological point of view, gives an account of the extremely precarious working conditions and the experiences of discrimination and social exclusion that characterize this type of migration.

Despite the fact that the phenomenon of gangmastering or *caporalato* has progressively gained importance in the domain of agriculture, only a limited number of studies has endeavoured to examine the various forms of informal labour intermediation and shed light on the nature of this practices. As highlighted above, the greatest part of the available literature on this specific subject is focused on Southern European countries and tends to explain the revival of these activities as a result of the permanence of old social and cultural structures in the economic system, or as a consequence of the imperfect penetration of the capitalist mode of production in the local economy. On the one hand these studies provide a quite detailed account of the practices and strategies implemented by informal brokers, on the other hand their explanation in terms of local dynamics and factors is not fully convincing and does not allow to explain the rapid growth of this phenomenon in different contexts. As for the few works that deal with the activity of informal brokers in North-European countries, some of them are mostly descriptive, while others interpret this issue in terms of a lack of regulation in the agricultural sector or weak enforcement of the existing regulation.

Therefore, it could be argued that further research is needed to better understand the origins and goals of the informal brokers, the impact of their practices on migrant farmworkers and, above all, the ways in which their activity is related to a wider process of transformation of the economy. A good way to start could be using a comparative approach to the study of this subject to overcome “localistic” interpretations and put emphasis on the global dynamics that connect the agricultural economy with informal brokers and migrant labourers.

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