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Gilles Reckinger

HOW ARE SUB-SAHARAN TRANS-MIGRANTS ORIGINALLY BASED IN ITALY AFFECTED BY THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, AND WHAT IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH?

Abstract:

This contribution is organized in three parts.

The first part analyzes how West African migrant harvest workers in South Italy often try to escape from hyper-exploitation by temporarily travelling to other European countries to seek better working and living conditions. While this has always been a complicated endeavour, the COVID-19 pandemicis widely jeopardizing these projects, mainly because of the travel restrictions imposed by national governments within the Schengen area.

The second part considers some methodological challenges for ethnographic fieldwork – where social proximity, instead of social distancing is key – in times of COVID-19. By elaborating on the problematic of keeping contact with people in the field in a highly precarious research setup, the article shows the structurally insurmountable differences between the migrant's living conditions and those of the ethnographic researcher.

In the last part, a few key points on the recent trajectories of some migrant workers are reported to highlight how they are affected by the ongoing violence of the European border regime and how their condition is aggravated under the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords:

African Migrants, European Border Regime, Ethnography, Precariousness, Social Effects of COVID-19

I have conducted ethnographic research in and around the Calabrian town of Rosarno and in other places in South Italysince 2012. On the citrus plantations around Rosarno, thousands of mostly West African migrant harvesters – often coming to Italy through the island of Lampedusa (Reckinger 2013, 2016) – are exploited to an extent that leaves them no alterna-

tives than to live in makeshift camps made from cardboard, tin and plastic. I have analyzed the use of their labour force to finance the Western imperial lifestyle (Brand, Wissen 2017) and their relegation to remote places in Europe (Reckinger 2019) not as a deficiency in the european border regime or a humanitarian emergency (Falk 2011), nor as a dysfunction of the (neo) liberal economic model, but rather as an integral part, precondition and expression of its functioning (Reckinger 2018, 2020; see also Dörre 2009).

After completion of my work in Calabria in 2017, I have continued to follow the trajectories of some of the migrants I met in Calabria using a multi-sited approach in order to understand their strategies of survivalunder conditions of illegalization within the Schengen territory and their further trajectories in Europe. Every single person indeed strives to escape from Rosarno, and, very often, from Italy[1]. In a border regime (Hess, Kasparek 2010; Heimeshoff *et al.* 2014; Hess *et al.* 2017) that ties refugees and migrants to the country that has first started their administrative registration process, travelling over Schengen borders in order to seek a better life than in Italy has been a complicated, and often dangerous endeavour already in pre-COVID-19 times.

But the urgence to escape a racist environment with scarce job perspectives and an extended propensionfor exploitation and abuse has led a growing number of migrants present in Italy to temporarily or permanently move to other european countries like Malta, Germany, France, the UK, Sweden, or the Benelux-countries over the last years. If it is obviously true that racism is not a genuinely Italian problem, those who escape from Italy often hope to stay under the radar in other european countries, in whichthe presence of people of colourhas been common for a longer time dueto the colonial past of these countries. Other motivations are economic dynamism (often associated with Germany), the imagination of a more open-minded society (associated with Sweden), or the colonial language

1 This is only one of the numerous proofs that the Dublin agreements produce secondary migration and refugees within the very Schengen area and challenge Europe's self-perception as a safe haven for extra-communitarian migrants. Little to no change is to be expected from the current renegotiation in light of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum (European Commission 2020). Neither the European governments nor the European Commission have shown much interest to revisit their unidimensional perception and discoursivation of migration as a threat instead of a global reality largely grounded in the colonial continuities of its own historic and current imperial global actions (Reckinger 2021). At the same time, accentuating nationalisms are far from offering genuine solidarity towards other member states when it comes to sharing the so-called burden of irregular migration (Reckinger 2017).

the migrants have learned in their countries of origin (mainly France, Belgium and the UK).The duration of migrants' stay abroad is determined by their obligation to regularly have their Italian documents renewed, or, if they have been illegalized, by their capacity to avoid police controls and thus, deportation.

Even before COVID-19, the respective provincial authorities in Italy in charge of document renewals have been known to be slow and not to indicate clear perspectives on when to expect the process to begin and to end, constraining the individuals affected by this administrative process to leave their new or secondary European country of residence and their jobs for about two to three months every year – or every second to third year, depending on the papers they had – in order to wait for their case to be completed in the country of their first arrival into the EU. During this waiting period, they had and still have to live off their scarce earnings[2], obliging them to find a place to stay in Italy that does not cost too much, mostly without an opportunity to find work during this period. On top of that, they have to deal with the risk of their (generally precarious) job in their new living place not being available to them anymore upon their return. Some migrants reported that they got into trouble with the executive forces during travelling for reasons of racial profiling and even were denied entry into countries although their documents allowed them to legally cross intra-Schengen borders (Reckinger, Neuner-Schatz 2019).

All this has changed considerably since the COVID-19 pandemic, jeopardizing the whole concept of travelling to other european countries in order to find more decent (informal) working conditions. If a person cannot be sure that he or she will be allowed or will manage to travel back to Italy, or travel forth again to another European country where rent has to be paid continuously nonetheless, he or she has to choose: i. either to take on these risks which might endanger their material existence, ii. to refrain from the project and go back to Italy for good, iii. or to accept loosing their Italian documents and expose themselves to illegalization and every dangers that come along with it in their new countries of residence.

My plans to travel to South Italy since March 2020 (and other European countries, for that matter) for field trip reasons have been largely undermined by COVID-19.Of course I have been trying for months to get to

2 A part from the fact that even if their – mostly informally gained – wages in other European countries are usually higher than those in Italy (which often do not exceed 1.500 Euros a year), living costs are also higher, i.e. rents, travel costs, remittances.

Calabria, Sicily and Camapnia but failed each time because of cacophonic regulations in the different European countries I would have had to leave, cross or enter, preventing me from going there, and being able to get back to my everyday obligations afterwards.

Ethnographers face serious methodical challenges in the wake of COVID-19.Their most basic research strategy, i.e. going out to the field and research *in situ* with social actors on the scene, where social proximity, instead of social distancing is key, is jeopardized (plus the fact that the ethnographer can be a vector for the virus, exposing the vulnerable to further increased risks; see Fine, Abramson 2020).

Over the past eight years that I have worked with sub-saharian migrant workers in South Italy, it has always been difficult to keep up the contact. Their lives are marked by so much violence, so many changes, disruptions and uncertainties that we cannot be surprised that their telephone numbers change often and that informing an anthropologist doing research on their living conditions of yet another address or phone number change is not necessarily a top priority for them. There have been a few contacts, though, that have proven stable over the years. Some have tightened, and we have been talking regularly on the phone. I have also travelled to visit them in the new countries and places where they stayed, but also in Rosarno, where a lot of – often older – persons are stuck.

But since the COVID-19 pandemic, some of these contacts have disrupted all of a sudden. This obviously is a sign that the situation is tense and is a reason for serious concern.

Scarce local media coverage expectedly reported that the crisis hit the migrant workers in Calabria especially hard. Even before the pandemic, the seasonal harvesting work was underpaid to an extent that the workers merely, even hardly, survived. Workers mostly do not have other housing options than to gather in overcrowded, mostly informally organized slums and shantytowns, often lacking even the most elementary sanitary facilities.

It seemed clear to me that their constrained living conditions would expose them to a very high risk of infection, since almost no public efforts were undertaken to help this population gain access to better housing or even face masks, while the lack of public support continued to force them to go to work anyway in order to surviv[3]. I apprehended the workers would face even more hostilities and racist attacks from disabused locals[4]

3 Following a few dozen cases of COVID-19 in October 2020, the biggest camp, housing more than 200 people, was put under quarantine.

4 Hostilities, verbal and physical abuse against migrant workers are commonplace in this region. Some are lethal, and little effort has been done by the authorities in

for not complying to lockdown and hygienic regulations, while forgetting on the one hand that they had no alternative to risking their lives at work as well as in what we have to call their homes, and that their underpaid work was one of the main sources of income for the local population on the other hand.

My methodic problems stretched further than that, though. While putting serious challenges to my work, and accounting for individual frustration, these problems blatantly show the outrageous gap between the privileged researcher's life world and the conditions of this specific population of migrants (Reckinger 2018, 2020). The scattered regionalism may be annoying for us as researchers and it definitely puts an enormous threat to the European project. But it is plainly life-threatening for some of the migrants. Let us recall, firsty, that migrants have been killed in racist riots or deadly accidents in different places of relegation (Agier 2010, Reckinger 2019) in Italy and in Europe in recent month and years (Duflot 2011; Reckinger 2018, 2020; Dorau 2020). Secondly, being constrained to leave their shelters to seek to survive while the pandemic rage increases their risk of falling ill and to be attacked for appearingly not respecting lockdown regulations. Anyway onelooks at it, the distance between the migrant's hyperprecarious living conditions and those of the ethnographic researcherareinsurmountable.

In the following last part of my contribution, I will very briefly sketch a few key points on the recent trajectories (Bourdieu 1984) of some of the people[5] I have been in contact with over the last years.

Benedict, a man around 50 from Ghana whom I met in Rosarno in 2012 still works on the same remote farm in Central Sicily with a legal contract but with five to six times the workload stated in his contract. This has allowed his employers to buy a new formerly abandoned farm half an hour away that they cultivate for themselves, thus almost doubling their income while letting Benedict do all the work on the farm he is affected to[6]. He has

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the past to find and condemn the perpetrators of these attacks (Reckinger 2018, 2020; Dorau 2020).

5 Given the fact that most migrants harvesting oranges in Rosarno are male, so are the poeple mentioned here. Aside from being highly racialized, informal labour markets in Italy are also widely gendered, with women often working as nursing staff in private, often urban homes, but also in greenhouse agriculture, and, often, forced prositution (Da sud 2016; Loiero 2019). More background about some of the persons mentioned here can be found in Reckinger 2018, 2020.

6 This *praxis* becomes more and more common in South Italy. Just as the Calabrian citrus production was down in the 1980es because of the low global market

been suffering from extreme solitude for years now, but he sees no other option to be able to send remittances to his wife and kids. The administration in charge of the renewal of his documents is nearby – a big advantage, as compared to other migrant workers' situation, this allows him to work coninuously and not to have to travel and expose himself to the related risks and violences. COVID-19 barely affects Benedict directly, but he is worried about the alarming developments of the pandemic in Africa and the risk of unequal global distribution of vaccines and that this might affect his family back in Ghana.

Frédéric – he calls himself Federico – a man well in his fourties has escaped from Rosarno in 2015 for Naples, where he lives among a community of fellow Senegalese street vendors. He shares a small apartment with two other men from Senegal near the Central Station. His grandfather had been a king in Northern Senegal known for his philanthropy and anti-colonial posture. It is with Federico that I talk most these days.

In the beginning of the pandemic, he described that his selling activity dropped abruptly from anincome of around fifty euros a day to ten euros every two to three days. Even the money he would still earn at that time would rather be donations by Italian people he knew and who had already given him small amounts of money more or less regularly before. As the COVID-19 measures tightened, it got significantly harder for him. Very few migrants manage to accumulate small savings for themselves, because many set small amounts of money aside nonetheless their precarious situation, which they tend to send on a regular basis to their families. Seeing as their families often don't have access to an account in an institutionalised bank, they use worldwide direct money transfer services that apply usurer interest rates.

Obliged to leave the house to earn a living, Federico highlights that racist accusations have been worsening. A growing number of strangers baselessly incriminate him and his colleagues to be responsible for the spreading of the virus[7], and Federico thinks that most potential customers think similarly since sales have dropped completely by now.

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prices before the arrival of the exploitable population of boat migrants, many rural regions of South Italy that had been and continue to be marked by emigration nowadays witness a slow but steady change coming up, with migrants increasingly employed in remote places to make farms, whose owners had emigrated long before, viable again for the heirs.

7 Quite on the contrary, most migrant workers I have met tended to avoid crowded places or even to set out to the streets at nights by fear of racist attacks even before

This sharpensthe already preexisting problems with his landlady. Conflicts with landlords are common amongmany of the migrants I have talked to over the years – that is the ones who have been lucky enough to find a flat. Their relationship to their landlords is always ambivalent, to say the least. The landlords' self-perceptions are situated on a continuum ranging from a paternalistic "we have to help these poor souls" – preventing them from even trying to understand their tenants' own views and problems – to overt racism. In this case, they makeillicit profit out of their tenants' precarious, vulnerable situation by trying to hold them responsible for deteriorations of their often worn-down properties, which often times preceded the rental to migrants. Federico and his cohabitants strive hard to gather the money to pay the rent – they know that losing their roof would have dramatic consequences for them. They never failed to pay so far, but they explained to their landlady that they could only pay small rateson a day to day basis, which she would not accept. For now, the conflict is unresolved but they still live in the flat.

While Federico is striving not to loose his home, his opportunities to send money home to his family are fading. He recently has had to borrow money from an acquaintance – in the form of an informal credit with interest rates – in order to be able to pay school fees for his son back in Senegal, who is finishing secondary school this year. Federico is very proud of him and wants him to go to University in the second largest Senegalese city of Saint Louis because Dakar seems saturated to him, and he absolutely wants his children to find opportunities to stay in Senegal and to not even think about coming to Europe.

I have last met *Samuel*, a man in his fourties from Ghana, in a small Dutch town close to one of the biggest cities of the country in the fall of 2019. I had first met him in Rosarno in 2013 and we have been in contact very regularly ever since. He had left Rosarno for Malta in 2016, where he found work in a flower shop for a month. From here, he took a plane to the Netherlands, where his sister already lived. I was surprised when I learned that he was back in the makeshift camp of San Ferdinando, the neigboring community of Rosarno when I conducted fieldwork there in December 2017. Samuel had come back to Italy to have his documents renewed, and in the meantime he stayed here again. He was proud to show me pictures of the apartment building he now lived in in the Netherlands. He had found an informal job as a car washer, but he earned significantly more money

COVID-19 (Reckinger 2018, 2020).

than in Italy – his monthly income was around 800 euros – and he had the possibility to go to work every day, even on Sundays.

When I went to visit him in the Netherlandsin late 2019, I understood to what extent his life had improved. He had just returned from a two-month-stay in Naples to have his documents renewed. He showed me the appartment he shared with a couple from Ghana, his workplace, and he enjoyed going for a drink with me without being looked at condescendingly. He was proud to be able to pay for his eldest son's highschool and sending his two younger children to school while renovating the roof of his wife's house.

At the beginning of lockdown in Europe in March 2020, we were in touch to make sure our families and beloved ones were okay. I tried to contact Samuel again just a few weeks later. Both his numbers were dead.

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