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RESEARCH ARTICLE

South(s) of the South(s): race, *caporalato*, and the 'Southern Question' renewed in contemporary Italian border-making

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Abstract

In contemporary Italy, media and public actors frame the exploitation of migrant agricultural labourers as the outcome of *caporalato.* This concept – translated as labour brokerage or gang mastery – connotes the violent treatment of workers and their exploitation by powerful individuals, who are today increasingly racialised and understood as being Black and immigrants. However, our fieldwork in Apulia and Sicily uncovered a more complicated picture. This article considers a variety of sources to explore how *caporalato* is constructed and to what effect. Our argument is that, though rooted in real dynamics, *caporalato* is also a reductive, sensationalised, and racialising framing device that transposes historic tenets of Italy's 'Southern Question' onto 'othered' migrant workers. It affects policy by creating categories of people who are made 'illegal' and 'deportable'. In also reinforcing derogatory stereotypes about the Italian South, it makes visible further South(s) of the Italian South(s) – offering insight into how and where borders are created and what their effects are.

Keywords: immigration; southern Italy; borders; *caporalato*; race

Introduction

Seasonal agricultural workers in Italy face brutal working and living conditions. During our respective fieldworks – in Foggia, Apulia and Campobello di Mazara, Sicily – we witnessed them first-hand: in Sicily, workers arriving in Trapani province for the olive-picking season lived in makeshift huts in abandoned lots without running water or electricity. Local authorities seemed loath or unable to do much to change the status quo. If anything, the opposite was true: for instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, they stopped collecting trash from the encampments. As a result, the camps, marked physically by massive piles of waste, sank into further abandonment and physical marginalisation, adding pressure to the already difficult working conditions, in which people were paid a few euros an hour to do physical work that resulted in injuries and chronic pain.[1]

This stark reality is rife for activism and social change. But it is also complex: who, or what, is at fault? What policies need to be enacted to ensure real change? In fieldwork observations and interviews, answers were diverse and pointed to the multifaceted nature

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of the issue. Many *braccianti* (farmhands) we spoke to pointed to the need for increased pay. Activists and agricultural workers spoke about Italy's harsh border policies and the increased difficulty in obtaining residency permits (*permessi di soggiorno*) that would enable people to get jobs with contracts. Their 'illegal' status set them up for exploitation: they had little leverage if bosses were to short-shrift them or make them work in (literally) backbreaking conditions. Small landowners noted that they could do nothing to improve worker pay if policies were not enacted to counter the price-lowering incentives of the agri-food value chain (Perrotta 2016). Yet, in the Italian media and public political dialogue, this complex panorama has often been reduced to a single phenomenon – *caporalato,* with emphasis placed on criminalising the individual *caporale.*

The term *caporale* may be translated in English as several middlemen figures: labour recruiter, intermediary, or the more sinister 'gangmaster'. A definition provided in the 2020 issue of the *Agromafie e Caporalato* report illustrates how *caporalato* is a shifting and heterogeneous concept: 'a historically rooted phenomenon in various Italian agricultural areas, capable of reinventing itself to adapt to socio-economic transformations … and managing … to conserve its central role in the system of relationships underpinning the rural agricultural world' (Carchedi and Bilongo 2020, 425). In line with these observations and preceding literature, this article does not propose a conclusive definition or value judgement on *caporalato*. Instead, it seeks to unpick a dominant narration of the concept and its entanglement with racialisation processes that connect as much to the outer boundaries of Europe and Italy as to its historic internal bordering (Rigo and Dines 2015; Howard and Forin 2019).

Today, across various facets of Italian public opinion – mainstream media, policy-making, and activism – the so-called *caporale* is routinely represented as a criminal figure who uses physical coercion to enforce 'slave'-like conditions among workers (Perrotta and Raeymaekers 2022, 5). Commonly, this representation relates to the supposed (under) development of the Italian South (Castaldo et al. 2019). Whether such views were expressly stated or vehemently rejected by our interlocutors, the ubiquity with which the North/South divide organically emerged in discussions about *caporalato* points to its longstanding place in an imaginary which sees the phenomenon as *belonging* to the South: an offshoot of its stereotypically 'backward' and 'mafia' culture. Increasingly, this term appears to designate Black and immigrant men.

Compared with the complexity of what we witnessed on the ground, the emphasis on *caporalato* emerges as reductive, sensationalised, and 'racialising' (Murji 2017; Omi and Winant 1986). It is not that there was no exploitation, or violence, or that actors involved did not sometimes allude to a figure called *caporale* or *capo*. However, in addition to our argument above – that many other factors lead to worker exploitation (Lo Cascio and Perrotta 2019; Perrotta 2014; Perrotta and Raeymaekers 2022) – it also became evident that the concept of *caporalato* ceases to make neat sense when applied to empirical contexts. In both field sites, we observed entrepreneurial practices that blurred the line between exploitation and 'helping out' – from ambiguous '*taxi-men*' providing necessary transportation, to hot water sellers commodifying a service that some believed ought to be provided by the municipality. Were these *caporalato?*

The discrepancy between the nuance and complexity experienced on the ground and the reductive simplicity of a prevailing representation – that of the *caporale* as a violent, mafia enslaver – thus sets up the intellectual puzzle that guides our research questions: (1) what is obfuscated and what is revealed by the canalisation of attention around workers' rights and exploitation onto the issue of *caporalato*? (2) what are the effects of the sensationalising of *caporalato* on the public imagination and governance of people on the move? And (3) given the importance of imaginations of the 'South' in these discussions, what might we conclude about the continued relevance of the 'Southern Question' in Italy?

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We base our findings on our respective fieldworks and interviews, as well as textual evidence. In 2020–21, research in Sicily included a year of ethnographic fieldwork following activists and socio-legal workers who moved in and out of informal and formal encampments where several hundred mostly West African workers lived. Research in Foggia in 2023 involved a six-month stay within a state-sanctioned secondary reception centre, an 'alternative to the ghetto' for roughly 300 West African seasonal labourers. The site was run by an NGO vocally involved in the fight against *caporalato,* which often perpetuated the prevalent representation discussed herein. Together, we conducted about 70 interviews with agricultural labourers, activists, socio-legal aid workers, NGO operators, trade unionists, journalists, and policymakers.

Alongside interviews and participant observation, we also analyse books, reports, and media sources. These texts, all contemporary (dating from the twenty-first century, once the 'refugeeisation' (Rigo and Dines 2015) of the workforce fully predominated) were chosen for their relevance and influence on popular debate: the articles and headlines were all from mainstream news sources, either national (*La Repubblica, La Stampa)* or local to Foggia and Campobello (*FoggiaToday*), or singled out as important influences for and by policy-makers (Gatti 2006). In including a variety of source material, we hope to show how pervasively actors and the media discuss *caporalato* in terms that echo tenets of the Southern Question.

Although other scholarship on worker exploitation has touched on the Southern Question, missing from this literature is a substantial engagement with how the Question continues to frame the logics of the public conversation around *caporalato*. In bringing the Southern Question to the foreground, we build on Giglioli's (2017) exploration of how 'the "othering" of cross-Mediterranean migrants and the marginalisation of Southern Italians [can] both be considered part of a longer process of defining the "civilisational" boundaries of Europe' (408). Following Giglioli and critical border theorising, we understand the border 'as part of a broader relational geography of difference' characterised by 'discourses and practices through which certain forms of socio-spatial difference … [come] to be seen as the key dividing line between the "west" and the "rest"' (409). It can be argued that historically, within Italy, this '"civilisational" boundary' (406) was the imagined line between northern and southern Italy. While we agree with Giglioli that the dividing line within Italy has become less significant in such definitional processes, we also believe that the discourses and stereotypes that created, sharpened, and upheld this internal Italian/European dividing line merit foregrounding in the context of understanding how contemporary framings of *caporalato* produce migrants as 'other' today. Without aiming to set up comparisons between the treatments of citizens and non-citizens, it is worth recognising that (and how) these logics of marginality are imbricated.

Destabilising *caporalato*: existing scholarship and the Southern Question

This article builds on existing histories and ethnographies of *caporalato* and labour conditions for agricultural workers, which dispel myths and oversimplified portrayals of *caporalato* as the principal culprit for labour exploitation in Italy's agricultural sector. They evidence scholars' discomfort with the reductive way this narration oversimplifies existing problems and risks sustaining unsuitable or discriminatory policymaking.

A complete historiography of the concept of *caporalato* in Italy is beyond the scope of this paper; however, Perrotta's (2014) historical account of *caporalato* provides a thorough overview of the role of the *caporale* across transformations in agriculture, politics, and economic structures from the second half of the 1800s to the present day. Despite localising the birth of the figure known as *caporale* in nineteenth-century Apulia, as a response to

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the demand for farmhands in the wake of the intensification of viticulture and grain crops, Perrotta analyses instances of *caporalato* up and down the Italian peninsula. He also traces the development of Italian legislation around *caporalato,* in each instance providing background that shows how criminalising *caporalato* was tied to other government interests, namely, efforts to weaken trade unions. Perrotta thus surfaces the construction of this figure and its vilification. He overturns common assumptions: that it is necessarily found in the South, or that the *caporale* is necessarily a *mafioso.* Indeed, at times, *caporali* were both *mafiosi* and labour activists. By providing this history, Perrotta also sheds light on the fact that, increasingly, *caporalato* is associated with immigrants, though a version of the *caporale* figure predates this contemporary context.

Other scholars have used ethnographic means to complicate and deconstruct reductive representations of *caporalato.* Some present *caporali* as occasionally violent and exploitative middlemen. Still, they argue that these individuals should be considered a node – and perhaps inevitable consequence – of a broader system in which state policy has failed to rein in the corporate players in global value chains who set prices and labour standards. For example, Lo Cascio and Perrotta (2019, 3), writing about camps in Sicily and Basilicata, argue that part of the reason that 'migrant workers perceive their ghettoization, discrimination and exploitation as "normal" and "acceptable"' is because *caporali* build 'communitarian relationships' that serve to make invisible, to the workers, broader 'structural violence'. Criminalising *caporalato* thus acts as a 'lightning rod' (Caruso 2022, 45), diverting criticism that might otherwise be leveraged towards the state or other actors in the supply chains. Similarly, Perrotta and Raeymaekers (2022) argue that we should pay attention to the *caporale* figure, but mostly insofar as it points to a larger system of labour exploitation that includes the increasing 'refugeeization' of southern Italy's agricultural workforce (Rigo and Dines 2015). Here, the *caporale* still emerges as a fundamental figure that 'recruit(s) and discipline(s) mobile workers' (Perrotta and Raeymakers 2022, 9). However, they argue that it is part of the 'migrant labour infrastructures' that 'complement neoliberal state policies' while 'externalising the cost of labour reproduction to informal workers who are increasingly caught in the web of illegality' (2022, 2).

Finally, some research has focused on quelling the idea that the figure called *caporale* is always violent or exploitative, through ethnographic research investigating the point of view of farmhands. Howard and Forin (2019, 590), writing about the large camp (*Gran Ghetto*) in Foggia, Apulia, argue that *caporali*, though 'much maligned … play a fundamental intermediary role'. Further, none of the workers they interviewed 'considered himself a modern slave', and all 'point to their circumstances (rather than any individual) as the primary coercive force they face' (2019, 588). Crucially, they write, 'physical coercion is simply unnecessary: "dull compulsion" alone is enough to maintain labour discipline, because every migrant there needs work, many are without papers, and in a context of crisis and social marginalisation, few have better alternatives' (Howard and Forin 2019, 591). Still other work has argued that the *caporale* figure is not exclusive or endemic to southern Italy, or even to Italy in general – but rather resembles labour brokers in the US, UK, and throughout the rest of Europe (Perrotta 2014). Indeed, this is a point that is growing in recognition (e.g. Papa 2021), such as through coverage of *caporalato* in places like Saluzzo, in the north-eastern region of Piedmont (Brovia and Piro 2020; Borratto 2019; Uleri et al. 2023).

Together, this literature shows how many popular imaginings of *caporalato* do not accurately describe the complexity of what occurs on the ground. And yet, in mainstream media, as well as in interviews, we found recurring ideas about *caporalato* that pervaded (cf. Rigo and Dines 2015; Erta 2014; Howard and Forin 2019). As stated, our goal is not to produce a scientific or quantifiable definition that would simply add to the long list of

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existing definitions of *caporalato*. Rather, we focus here on deconstructing popular conceptualisations of *caporalato* that dominate public imagination by showing how, while various and varying, they are commonly built on the historic Southern Question. This Question has been studied, defined, and redefined in ways too numerous to discuss in full; we thus provide a brief overview, focusing on how representations of the Italian South – be they positive or negative, created by insider southerners or outsider Italians or northerners – have drawn a dividing line between the imagined 'North' and 'South' of the country.

In his recent brief history of the Southern Question, Pescosolido (2017) argues that it was a product of the Unification of Italy because it was in unifying that a 'North' became defined as different to a 'South'. His reasoning substantiates Giglioli's (2017) argument that the 'incorporation of "difference" (from internal peripheries and colonies) accompanied the creation and consolidation of many European nation-states' (409). Indeed, Pescosolido notes that the South 'presented, vis-à-vis the Centre-north, a weaker economic development, less mature progress in terms of social relations, and a lower level of important aspects of civic life' (22, our translation). It thus became a 'problem' for the new Italian nation-state to confront.

While Pescosolido focuses on the historiography of the 'Question' and how it relates to the need to 'develop' (in his terms, to improve the living conditions of) the South, others have addressed how such differences have also been entwined with various representations of the South as underdeveloped and thus 'backward', or a 'problem'. Davis (1996) summarised the Southern Question as the 'well-worn stereotypes that equate the South with forms of social and economic backwardness, delinquency, organised crime, and political corruption'. Crucially, debates involved the idea of northern hegemony over the South, based on the 'presumed racial alterity of southerners' and the 'geographical designation of the South as a strip of African territory' (Derobertis 2012, 159). Some scholars have argued that this was crucial to Italy's nation-building project: it needed to project an aura of 'Europeanness' and thus displaced pre-existing ideas about its 'Southernness', 'Mediterraneanness', or 'Africanness' onto the geographic, but in many ways imagined, 'South' (Dickie 1997; Fogu 2020)

Pescosolido (2017) observes that representations of the South are not solely negative (23). Indeed, the South has been imagined in a variety of ways beyond those outlined by Davis: for example, as a place of authentic or pre-modern (thus 'pristine') social relations or as a place where it is possible to encounter, if in ruined form, the material culture of Classical Antiquity (see, e.g. Moe 2002). Thinkers and activists have also used the 'Mediterranean', 'Southern' or subaltern characterising of the 'South' to explore alternatives to forms of political hegemony (e.g. Cassano 1996).

While some of these descriptions of the Italian South could be understood as 'positive', we are interested ultimately in the demarcation of the South as different to the North, and how this difference has often been ascribed to normative and moralised qualities. Indeed, some of these more 'positive' portrayals amount to a form of Orientalism, as Schneider (1998) argues, and can still serve to 'other' southerners. Similarly, while many southerners have engaged in debates about the South, evidencing that the Southern Question was not solely created by northerners as a strategy for governing or state building, many of their contributions indicate a struggle to reckon with the terms of the debate, including the very differentiation of a North from a South (see, e.g. Fortunato 1904; Salvemini 1900). What emerges from this necessarily brief overview is that, while we can clearly see the creation of a kind of border between 'North' and 'South' (in quotes to designate imagined or created geographies within Italy), there are, in fact, many 'Souths' (cf. Donzelli 1990). In this paper, we seek to multiply this binary further without negating that the binary – however contested in scholarly literature – continues to hold firm in popular imaginations in and of Italy.

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Using these as our starting points, we now offer further analysis that examines how the 'processes of internal socio-spatial differentiation' (Giglioli 2017, 409) involved in the Southern Question are currently used in the production of popular imaginings of *caporalato.* Often, we found that *caporalato* was more broadly spoken of as a 'Southern phenomenon', without interlocutors exploring much of the nuance about the meaning of the concept 'South' that we have sought to provide. Rather, 'South' or 'southern' served as a stand-in for certain characteristics. We thus focus on some elements of the Southern Question over others – namely the supposed backwardness, underdevelopment, premodernity, Africanness, and criminality of the Italian South – because these are the stereotypes that reappear in current framings of *caporalato.* Through both continuity and the addition of new, if related, stereotypes, such narratives exacerbate existing tropes about the South to promote the idea that *caporalato* is the primary source of worker exploitation.

Continuity and rupture: Past and present *caporalato* violence and the Italian South

In 2006, Fabrizio Gatti's investigative piece *Io Schiavo in Puglia,* ('I, a Slave in Apulia') sounded national alarm bells on the emergence of a 'new *caporalato*' in Italy. He focused his work on the southern Italian province of Foggia in Apulia – one of Italy's most important agricultural areas, known for its significant contribution to the country's tomato output (Bagnardi, D'Onofrio and Greco 2020; Howard and Forin 2019). Gatti provides vivid descriptions of appalling living and working conditions:

> They house *braccianti* in unsafe hovels, where even stray dogs no longer go to sleep. Without water, light, or hygiene. They make them work from six in the morning to ten at night. They pay them, when they pay, 15, 20 euros a day. Those who protest are silenced, hit with metal bars. Some have turned to the *questura* [police] of Foggia, only to discover the law desired by Umberto Bossi and Gianfranco Fini. They were arrested or deported because of their irregular work permit. Others escaped. The *caporali* looked for them through the night, like in the manhunt in Alan Parker's film *Mississippi Burning*. Some they brought back. Others they killed. (Gatti 2006, 1)

Through such visceral descriptions, Gatti exposed the dark underbelly of the Italian agricultural sector, creating what a former regional administrator described as a '*casino mondiale*' (worldwide mess) as both national and regional officials scrambled to counter the image of (southern) Italy as a haven for enslavers and human traffickers. Beyond the immediate consequences of this public relations nightmare, Gatti's piece can be considered a cultural touchstone central to heralding a contemporary understanding of a 'new' *caporalato,* which, over time, has been espoused by much of the Italian media and some activists, NGOs, and policymakers concerned with labour exploitation in agriculture (Perrotta 2014; Rigo and Dines 2015; Dines 2018). This understanding is both in continuity with, and extends in new ways, the imaginary of the Southern Question. Dickie (1997) argued that Italy offloaded its 'otherness' onto its southern half as a means of state-building and creating a European Italy (Fogu 2020). Here, the symbolic attachment of *caporalato* to the southern half of the peninsula might well serve a similar salvific role for the country as a whole – particularly for its *Made in Italy* branding (Howard and Forin 2019).

'New' *caporalato* is represented as the latest link in southern Italy's supposed long chain of violence and underdevelopment. At the same time, the contemporary context is seen as an extreme outbidding of these previous forms of violence and criminality – rendered as

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such by the now *physical presence* of Africans on Italian soil, whereas before southern Italians were simply *depicted* as Africans (or other non-European peoples, including 'Arabs', 'Turks' or 'Mediterraneans'). The figure of the *caporale* is portrayed as being in continuity with a southern past and emanating from a southern geography. In addition, due to his physical, racial, and legal foreignness, the contemporary *caporale* is also often framed as an enslaver, an exacerbation of depictions of previous generations of Italian *caporali* built on a new set of racial stereotypes.

Headlines of mainstream newspapers like the *Corriere della Sera* illustrate how *caporalato* is depicted as a phenomenon that is endemic to an 'underdeveloped' South. In 2019, the headline for a *CorriereTV* special on *caporalato* read, '"The Story of a Tomato", *mafia* and *caporali*: the illegal supply chain of the product that is a symbol of our agriculture'. The subtitle read:

> We are the second biggest producers in the world, with 70 thousand hectares of cultivated land. But if in the North automation is advancing, in the South there is still *caporalato*. The testimony of the farmhand (*bracciante*) who survived killings (*strage*) and the driver forced into dealings with the *clans.* (Castaldo et al. 2019)

The implicit argument is that the South is a place that is 'lagging', and has thus long been fertile for such 'backward', violent phenomena.

These headlines continue despite a growing awareness that *caporalato* exists throughout Italy (Papa 2021; Carchedi and Bilongo 2020). The case of Saluzzo, for example, has been explored both in the press (Cravero 2020, 2022; *L'Espresso* 2023) and in academia (Brovia and Piro 2020; Uleri et al. 2023). It was also frequently brought up by interlocutors who disputed the notion of *caporalato* as a southern phenomenon.[2] As Franco, a migration rights activist and writer currently collaborating with a migrant-aid NGO, put it: 'The difference between North and South is contextual. [...] [T]he background changes but [not] the principal aspect, which sees this phenomenon reproduced all over the Italian territory' (Interview with Franco, September 2021). Still, the assumption remains that the phenomenon is *rooted* in the South. Take, for instance, a 2023 article in *La Repubblica*: on the one hand, it openly criticised the 'discriminatory tale' of *caporalato* as 'typically *meridionale*'. The headline of the article, however, plainly reasserted a sense of South-to-North contagion by stating, '*caporalato* conquers the North' (*La Repubblica* 2023). Often accompanying these discussions is an implication that, though *caporalato* is present in the North, it can be less extreme, more subtle, and 'sophisticated' (*La Repubblica* 2023).

If *caporalato* is depicted explicitly as a typically southern phenomenon and a problem of development, it is also often couched in sensationalised language that exacerbates the existing aura of southern 'backwardness', and leans towards emphasising violence, as was illustrated in Gatti's piece. As Giorgio, one seasoned journalist whom we interviewed, put it: in press coverage, articles focusing on *braccianti* garner the most attention – but also, arguably, the most clicks and revenue – when they emulate the shock-value of *cronaca nera* (true crime news). Indeed, headlines and social media posts, as well as articles, frequently couple discussions of *braccianti*'s deaths with other physical manifestations of their conditions: back-breaking labour in the fields, the *schifo* [disgust] of the *ghetto*, and the brutality done to migrants' bodies. For example: 'Sick at work, a desperate run from Foggia to Bari, dead at 27: "now he can go home to mom"' (*FoggiaToday* 2023); 'The Gran *Ghetto* of Rignano: trip to the no-man's-land where politics has lost face, between pyres, deaths and exploitation' (Gaita 2017); or medical NGO CUAM's statement, quoted in *La Repubblica,* that 'agriculture in Italy counts the dead like on a battlefield' (Nadotti 2019). The environment is clearly that of the Italian South – yet exacerbated. To quote

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Giorgio again: 'The imagery that has been created around [*caporalato*] has become [an] easy one to photograph and to construct [here meaning to market/to make a story for publication] [...] the Black slave, bent over in the fields, with the *caporale* standing up' (Interview with Giorgio, August 2021).

Unlike their Italian predecessors, new *braccianti* are not merely understood as abused but as *slaves,* again, as in Gatti's piece. 'This is how slaves die in our agriculture' reads another headline from Italy's daily, *La Repubblica* (Bonini 2021). While some argue that such language is crucial for calling attention to a vital issue of life and death, as noted by Rigo and Dines (2015), the portrayal of migrant labourers as slaves does not merely curtail their agency but also deprives them of the positive framings commonly associated with the South's agrarian tradition, namely 'the tradition of rebellion' and 'simplicity of lifestyles' (2015, 8).

Such notions of *caporalato* as a violent excess and a form of slavery also generate and are generated by the everyday activities of many NGOs and trade unions, albeit in uneven ways. For example, the Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto's *Agromafie e Caporalato* report offered a lucid and multi-faceted look at the current realities faced by migrant labourers in agriculture. But it also provides an illustration of language related to modern slavery:

> As we pronounce it, the word *caporalato*, a word that too many of us have become used to, another back is bent and broken under the sun and the cold, without any respect for the life that accompanies that very spine. Livelihoods, bought and sold, for a few tens of euros, modern slaves. (Carchedi and Bilongo 2020, 25)

This was the only explicit use of modern slavery terminology in the 400 pages of the report, highlighting how this polarising representation can coexist with a more nuanced understanding. Indeed, for all its nuance, the report continues to use a title – *Agromafie e Caporalato* – which implicitly validates the automatic connection between *caporalato* and the *mafia*. This apparent duality elicits an important question: if so many activists, trade unionists, and even policymakers know better, why are such representations so prevalent? In practice, many of our interlocutors appeared aware of the reductive nature of this portrayal but operated in settings where this framing seemed unavoidable. To give a salient example, we witnessed two union representatives, engaged in a nuanced conversation about the lived reality of the *ghetti* and the narrow-mindedness of repressive approaches, standing only steps away from the van they had arrived in, on which was plastered an anti-*caporalato* slogan.

In our research, as in the literature, there is a clear limit to the extent to which workers conceptualise themselves as slaves or point to *caporalato* as their biggest source of exploitation (Dines 2018; Howard and Forin 2019). Workers in both Apulia and Sicily pointed instead to pay, or not having the proper documents, or something else, as the main issue. Many workers we encountered voiced frustrations over organisations and journalists who came to take pictures of people and post them on Facebook with indignant captions. They were thus aware that *caporalato* had become a hot-button issue and that they rarely reaped the material benefits of this increased attention, which some perceived to be lining the pockets of NGOs and journalists alike. In the words of one particularly frustrated labourer: 'They are eating [profiting, earning] *on* us'. In a conversation with one older Senegalese worker in Sicily, he admitted the living circumstances were a 'disaster' but called the agricultural work he did 'dignified'. Similar conversations in Apulia often had workers emphasising their own ability to *choose* exploitative working conditions. One worker, a young Malian who had worked multiple seasons in Foggia, stated 'the *caporale* does not force you to get in his car'. Similarly, a Guinean migrant about to

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start his second summer in Foggia, directly challenged the term 'slave', noting that 'I know my conditions better than anyone. I know how hard it is.'

As these comments imply, the framing of agricultural work by Black men as 'slavery' is not only inaccurate, but it also constructs a world in which Black workers cannot exist *as workers*. This construction draws on very real historical categories associated with Black workers, the enslaved people of the American South, and brings these categories to the contemporary Italian South. It amounts to a denigrating gesture that does not account for choice, subjecthood, or constraining circumstances that affect all workers. This extends the Southern Question and builds on its stereotypes in new ways because of the presence of Black and 'foreign' bodies in Italy. It suggests a *more* savage, *more* exploitative, *more* 'other' South, but anchored geographically within the existing Italian South where such potential always lay. Indeed, these two 'Souths' are intimately connected.

Caporali as *mafiosi*: Law 119 and the criminalisation of middlemen

As well as being described as enslavers, *caporali* are also routinely associated with Italian organised crime. This narration connects them to a 'quintessentially' southern cultural problematic and leverages further concerns of underdevelopment, degeneracy, and pathological criminality. Ultimately, the twin designations of enslaver and *mafioso* come to shape the caporale as a sort of 'folk devil' (Howard and Forin 2019), an othered figure that illustrates the existence of 'South(s) of the South(s)'.

According to one anti-*caporalato* activist, this twin designation is partly created by a 'false media narrative'. The death or exploitation of *braccianti* is often directly connected to the cruel and sprawling influence of the *mafia* through the vehicle of *caporalato.* For example, in an article entitled 'The Innocents Killed by the Mafia Who Wanted to Live', a local Foggia newspaper featured the much-publicised demise of twelve *braccianti* in a traffic accident alongside an entire family slaughtered in a clan feud, gunned-down policemen, and entrepreneurs who had refused to pay the *pizzo.* As in other cases we have seen, the article featured an almost gory description, in *cronaca nera* style:

> A summer of blood. Accidents and a massacre of *braccianti*. Monday, 6 August: 12 migrant *braccianti* died after a hard day of work in the Apulian countryside. There were 14, probably travelling upright, squeezed into a small van with a Bulgarian licence plate which could transport at most eight people, overturned on the pavement following the impact. The scene is apocalyptic, with bodies strewn amidst the metal scraps. (*FoggiaToday* 2022)

Media and activism feed off each other in this mafia-isation of *caporalato*: the article also discussed how the prominent anti-Mafia organisation Libera listed the names of the deceased *braccianti* who had perished in the accident in its annual list memorialising victims of the Mafia. The point here is not that *caporalato* and *mafia* activity are never related – in fact, we witnessed first-hand during fieldwork how *mafiosi* used the vulnerable status of agricultural workers to carry out their dirty work and criminal activities. However, in sensationalised, media articles the link is often overstated and underqualified, leading a reader to assume that *caporalato* is not just *mafia* but Mafia – as in, belongs through affiliation to a known organised crime group. This reinforces the idea that worker exploitation is endemic to southern Italy – the land of Mafia and *caporalato.*

But this elision is not limited to newspaper headlines – it also crops up in everyday aid work as well as bordering tactics. A spokesperson for the Apulia region was explicit about drawing the connection between anti-*caporalato* work and anti-Mafia operations: 'We [regional policymakers] say beauty, legality, *Antimafia sociale* … and in this, there is also

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the fight against *caporalato*' (Interview with Martino, September 2021). The reference to anti-Mafia illustrates a blurring between the 'criminality' of being undocumented workers and that of being associated with *mafia*/Mafia activity.

Connecting *caporalato* to *mafia* is not anodyne. It ties the figure of the *caporale* to a particular kind of villain – a primarily southern criminal. This connection, we argue, between the Black *caporale* and the *mafioso* provides a logic that reappears in certain kinds of legislation that criminalise *caporali,* purportedly to 'fix' the broader issue of worker exploitation, such as Law 199, commonly referred to as the 'Law against *caporalato*'. Crucially, the law sought to open the way for the prosecution of Italian landowners but, by the admission of the law's own supporters, progress on this front has been limited, with much of the risk and consequences still falling upon the (non-Italian, often non-white) intermediaries (Carchedi and Bilongo 2020, 143). The law is generally understood to have resulted from the bubbling over of public outrage following the highly mediatised 2015 death of one of the rare remaining Italian *braccianti*, 49-year-old Paola Clemente.

Anti-Mafia sensibilities are highly present in the text of the legislation, which, as we were told by actors involved in its crafting, was also in part inspired by efforts to economically cripple the Mafia. As highlighted by journalist and long-time *anti-caporalato* activist Antonio:

> [Law 199] does not only arrest exploiters, it also sets up a system of *amministrazione giudiziaria* [judicial administration] which has already been applied several times and which, in my opinion, is a very important node … Why is this type of praxis present in Italy? It's because of the experience of the sequestration of mafia goods. A comparable mechanism is applied with this [anti-caporalato] legislation. (Interview with Antonio, August 2021)

Of course, not all agreed with Antonio's view. Some of our interviewees repeated the popular, at times folk-wisdom-like, idea that the Mafia wants nothing to do with agricultural labour simply because there isn't enough money involved. Some, on the other side of the spectrum, argued that there was no way that Mafias weren't involved at some point in the supply chain – whether in control of large horticultural markets, transporting products for transformation, or participating in forms of racketeering. As one activist, Carlo, put it, 'the links with *caporalato* are not evident … they're not known or proven, but it is difficult to imagine that a criminal phenomenon like *caporalato* developed in this land without the clan taking any interest' (August 2021 interview).

Nonetheless, our ultimate point is not that the Mafia is not sometimes or in some way involved, but rather that the complex system – with political, economic, social, and other facets – of worker exploitation is often reduced to this simple concept of *caporalato.* This gesture obfuscates other important dynamics. It is also revealing. As we've shown, this discourse is constructed by association to tenets of the Southern Question – be they the South's underdevelopment and otherness, the endemic nature of violence in its lands, or the historic power of the Mafia – exacerbated by the presence of 'foreigners' who are also 'enslavers'.

Crucially, we do not claim to be able to demonstrate a direct causal link between the echoes of the 'Southern Question' in the construction of popular imagination around *caporalato* and the creation of Italian laws like Law 199. Rather, as Erta (2014) also points out, media provide a key node between people and politics. The ways in which people are represented in the media and in popular culture more broadly helps legitimise government actions towards those people in the eyes of a state's citizenry. To provide a specific example, one former policymaker (who asked to remain anonymous) noted, in reference to Gatti's coverage of *caporalato* in Apulia (Gatti 2006), that the resulting outrage about the

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conditions of foreign workers created the 'right political conditions' for legislative interventions at the regional level, in a similar fashion to Clemente's death and Law 199 years later.

More generally, as we know from Said (1973) and others, representation is linked to power hierarchies and governance writ broadly. The differentiation of space and of people created by 'othering' mechanisms can be said to provide the necessary foundations for bordering. 'Othered' individuals thus become 'deportable' or criminalisable (De Genova 2002). It is interesting to analyse Law 199 through this lens, because rather than seeking to tackle the broader system that results in worker exploitation, Law 199 targets individuals who belong to this rather vague, difficult-to-define, and highly stereotyped category known as *'caporali'*. This is an example of what we mean when we say that such representation has bordering effects.

To understand these bordering effects, it is helpful to compare Law 199 with ongoing efforts to criminalise boat-drivers crossing the Mediterranean. On the one hand, both illustrate how governments criminalise Black or immigrant figures to 'fix' a broader situation that has become highly mediatised and politicised. Boat-drivers are framed as traffickers partly to have a scapegoat for the tragedies of death and violence that occur regularly in the Mediterranean (Borderline Sicilia 2021). Similar, if slightly different, efforts to criminalise *caporalato* have targeted a single, usually immigrant or Black man in a supposed strategy to end the widespread tragedy of worker exploitation, or, indeed, enslavement.

Second, as the interview with Antonio above indicates, criminalisation of both boat-drivers and of *caporalato* relies on the aura of anti-Mafia activism and legislative precedence. The criminalisation of boat-drivers, for instance, was instigated by prosecutors (*Pubblico Ministero* or PM for short) in Sicily before being taken up as a political strategy by the likes of Salvini's far-right Lega party. The PM position has historically been seen as the seat from which anti-Mafia justice is carried out. The crime of the boat-drivers, then, was depicted not just as being the deliberate violation of Italy and Europe's borders, but, apparently, also their involvement in Mafia-led human trafficking rings (Campbell and Agostino 2021; Hintjens 2019). As with the association of *caporalato* to *mafia,* it becomes confusing and impossible to discern whether media, PMs, and policymakers are necessarily referring to concrete proof of collaboration with an actual Mafia, or whether these middlemen broker activities are seen as proof of *mafiosità* – an altogether vaguer concept, for which it is not clear what proof is needed to be found guilty of an actual crime. The association is useful, though, as it permits the use of the (originally exceptional) logics and tools of anti-Mafia legislation to seep into other policing spheres. This includes, for instance, the ability to 'wiretap anyone suspected of having connections to organised crime' (Taub 2017). *Caporalato,* like immigration more broadly, becomes tied to the Mafia. This permits a whole other dimension and type of legislation to emerge. In this case, directed especially at Black and immigrant men, these otherwise exceptional tools become part of the security and bordering apparatus of the Italian state.

Conclusion: the South(s) of the South(s)

Italian coasts and islands have become overtaken by the security-humanitarian apparatus (Cuttitta 2015). Frontex, humanitarian organisations, detention centres, hotspots, the police, activists, and all kinds of radar, planes, boats, and equipment now populate these borderlands. There is no point – moral, ethical, or analytical – in comparing the historic denigration of the Italian South and its southerners with the deadly violence of the border faced by those trying to cross the Mediterranean to enter Europe.

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However, what our analysis and field research have illustrated is: (1) the degree to which borders, and border-making practices and representations, as understood more broadly by Giglioli (2017) or Parker and Vaughan-Williams (2009) exist *within* – and not just at – Europe's external borders; and (2) the ways in which the historic bordering of Italy, through discourses of the Southern Question, are imbricated with contemporary bordering of immigrants and Black people. Rather than being opposing, they feed on each other, illustrating not only the power of representation in influencing public imagination and bordering, but the ways in which forms of oppression or marginalisation may be linked – historically, materially, geographically, and conceptually.

Throughout its history, the discourses of the Southern Question, articulated by northerners and southerners alike, racialised southern Italians by painting them in all sorts of ways that distinguished them from their northern counterparts. Early on, this was explicitly articulated in racial terms. Eventually, the terminology changed, becoming couched in ideas like 'backward' or 'violent' or 'criminal'. But the idea that the South is a space of otherness persists, and, as we have shown, has also taken on a new role with the arrival of immigrant labourers. The depictions of the foreign *caporali* as enslavers and *mafiosi,* or of *braccianti* as slaves, is a similarly racialising move that draws in part on the Southern Question. It is also based on the use of stereotypes associated to foreignness and Blackness. This, as we have seen, helps to depict these workers as a worse, more violent version of historic *caporali* – a new apex of a certain kind of 'Southernness'.

These two things – the space of the South and the extremity of the depiction of *caporali* – are part of a discourse and imaginary that render immigrants (particularly Black men) 'illegal' and 'deportable', to echo De Genova (2002). They are othered – seen as foreign to a European Italy, and, particularly through the dual association with *mafia* and slavery, characterised as 'illegal'. This association strengthens an already robust phenomenon that exists in Italy as elsewhere: the illegalisation of people who cross borders (Andersson 2014). As such, these discourses can be seen to reinforce each other: Southern Question tenets give even more fuel to the idea that certain bodies are criminal, illegal enemies of the state, and thus punishable or deportable. The association of these individuals to the Italian South in turn reinforces the idea that it is backward or prone to 'becoming African'. On the one hand, this 'saves' the rest of the peninsula from the shame or economic consequences of the '*casino mondiale'* that a *caporalato* phenomenon might create. On the other, it generates a looming threat of contagion that must be stopped through bordering measures.

This paper has revealed how the tenets of the 'Southern Question' are still alive. Through continuity and rupture with this paradigm, long-standing stereotypes about the Italian 'South' are part of an intertwined 'othering' of the 'South' and immigrant workers. This results in a multiplying of what it means to be 'of the South' – as new 'Souths' emerge throughout history, ready to be wielded as needed. Exacerbated when it comes to immigrant labour, this is nonetheless part of the scaffolding on which the marginalisation, criminalisation, and deportability of Black workers is built in contemporary Italy. In turn, these discourses reinforce existing stereotypes about the Italian South, showing, among other things, their enduring symbolic power.

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Notes

1. While the pandemic may have marked foreign *braccianti* as essential workers, it also appears to have intensified marginalisation processes, including by normalising responses that were originally deemed to be for an

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'emergency'. This is in line with our central argument. For more on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, see Carchedi and Bilongo 2020, 15–23, Caruso and Corrado 2021, Dal Zotto, Lo Cascio and Piro 2023.
2. There are of course, many northern Italian contexts where *caporalato* appears to be present: for another in-depth example from Veneto see Carchedi and Bilongo 2020, 415–420.

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Italian summary

Nell'Italia contemporanea, i media e gli attori pubblici spiegano lo sfruttamento dei braccianti agricoli come derivato dal fenomeno del caporalato. Questa categorizzazione veicola l'idea che la violenza nei confronti dei lavoratori e il loro stesso sfruttamento, sia dovuto alla coercizione fisica di alcuni individui potenti – individui che oggi sono sempre più 'razzializzati' e rappresentati come immigranti. Il nostro lavoro di ricerca sul campo, in Puglia ed in Sicilia, rivela una realtà più complessa. Questo articolo esplora la costruzione e gli effetti del concetto di 'caporalato' tramite una varietà di fonti. Proponiamo che il concetto stesso di 'caporalato', pur essendo radicato in dinamiche concrete, è anche un concetto riduttivo, sensazionalizzato, e razzializzato, che traspone alcuni elementi storici della 'Questione Meridionale' sui braccianti stranieri. Questo processo ha un chiaro impatto politico, nella misura in cui crea categorie di persone che diventano 'illegali' e 'deportabili'. Rafforzando anche stereotipi dispregiativi sul sud, rende inoltre visibili altri 'sud' all'interno del 'sud' stesso – offrendo così un'idea di come e quando si creino frontiere, e quali ne siano gli effetti.

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