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Migration and Agriculture

In recent years, Mediterranean agriculture has experienced important transformations which have led to new forms of labour and production, and in particular to a surge in the recruitment of migrant labour. The Mediterranean Basin represents a very interesting arena that is able to illustrate labour conditions and mobility, the competition among different farming models, and the consequences in terms of the proletarianization process, food crisis and diet changes.

Migration and Agriculture brings together international contributors from across several disciplines to describe and analyse labour conditions and international migrations in relation to agri-food restructuring processes. This unique collection of articles connects migration issues with the proletarianization process and agrarian transitions that have affected Southern European as well as some Middle Eastern and Northern African countries in different ways. The chapters present case studies from a range of territories in the Mediterranean Basin, offering empirical data and theoretical analysis in order to grasp the complexity of the processes that are occurring.

This book offers a uniquely comprehensive overview of migrations, territories and agri-food production in this key region, and will be an indispensable resource to scholars in migration studies, rural sociology, social geography and the political economy of agriculture.

Alessandra Corrado is assistant professor in the Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Calabria, and founding member of the Study Center for Rural Development, Italy.

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Migration and Agriculture

Mobility and change in the Mediterranean area

Edited by
Alessandra Corrado, Carlos de Castro and Domenico Perrotta

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To the memory of all the people who have died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea looking for a better life

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The preparation of this edited volume presented major obstacles. A key difficulty has been the issue of translation. The contributors are based in universities across the Mediterranean region and are trained in different disciplines (sociology, anthropology and geography); moreover, none of them is a native English speaker. Editing this book has involved the arduous task of translating concepts, arguments and ideas from different national traditions of agrarian research, and of continually crossing academic boundaries. To this end, the language revision carried out by our friend, colleague and excellent scholar Nick Dines has been invaluable. Without his commitment, this book would probably never have seen the light of day. As editors of this volume, we would like to express to him our gratitude.

Another major difficulty facing the completion of this volume has been the dire situation of academic labour in southern Europe over the last few years. Due to austerity policies and public disinvestment in university education and research, especially in Italy, many young, promising scholars after completing their PhD, find themselves employed on extremely precarious contracts that often prevent them from developing further their doctoral research.

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Finally, some of the editors and contributors to this volume have collaborated with, or have been directly engaged in organizations of peasants and farm workers: European Coordination of Via Campesina, Confédération Paysanne, Colléctive de Défense des Travailleurs Agricoles, Centro Internazionale Crocevia, Associazione Rurale Italiana, Campi Aperti, Brigate di Solidarietà Attiva, Fuori dal Ghetto, Osservatorio Migranti Basilicata, Funky Tomato, Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati di Caserta, SOS Rosarno, Sindicato de Obreros del Campo. These various initiatives have represented crucial learning moments for many of us. For this reason, we thank all those farm workers, peasants and critical consumers with whom we have shared common experiences, discussions and projects.

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Acronyms

AGCM	Autorità Garante della Concorrenza e del Mercato (Italian Antitrust Authority)
ANAEM	Agence nationale d'accueil des étrangers and des migrations (National Agency of Reception of Foreigners and of Migration)
ANAPEC	Agence Nationale de Promotion de l'Emploi e des Compétences (National Agency for Employment and Competences Promotion)
ANGED	Asociación Nacional Grandes de Empresas de Distribución
ANICAV	Italian National Canneries Association
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CAF	Family allowance fund
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CCOO	Comisiones Obreras (Workers' Commissions)
CGB	Confédération Générale des Planteurs de Betteraves (General Confederation of Beetroot Planters)
CGIL	Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (Italian General Confederation of Labour)
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail (General Confederation of Work)
CMO	Common Market Organization
CNSS	Caisse Nationale de Sécurité Sociale (National Bank of Social Security)
COAG	Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Agricultores y Ganadero (Coordinator of Farmers' and Livestock Breeders' Organizations)
CODETRAS	Collectif de défense des travailleurs agricoles saisonniers (Collective for the Defense of Seasonal Agricultural Workers)
COEXPHAL	Almerian Organization of Fruit and Vegetable Producers
COSAT	South Africa's Congress of South African Trade Unions
CUT	Brazil's Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (Unified Workers Central)
DEMP	Disaster & Emergency Management Presidency

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EACCE	Etablissement Autonome de Contrôle et de Coordination des Exportations (Authority for the Control and Coordiantion of Exportations)
EC	European Commission
EEC	European Economic Community
ELSTAT	Hellenic Statistical Authority
EMDA	Eastern Mediterranean Development Agency
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
EUROSTAT	European Statistical Authority
FDSEA	Fédérations Départementales des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles (Farmers' local union)
FGSTE	General Federation of Trade Unions of Egypt
FIDH	Federación Internacional de Derechos Humanos (International Federation of Human Rights)
FMO	Fédération Professionnelle Agricole pour la Main-d'Oeuvre Saisonnière (Agricultural Professional Federation for the seasonal work)
FMR	French Muslim Return
FNSA	Fédération Nationale du Secteur Agricole (Moroccan National Federation of Agricultural Sector)
FRCI	French returnee of Islamic Faith
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GLOBALGAP	Global Good Agricultural Practices
GRASP	GLOBALG.A.P. Risk Assessment on Social Practice
GVC	Global value chain
HPDA	Hatay Provincial Directorate of Agriculture
INAO	National Institute for Denominations of Origin
INE	Instituto Nacional de Estadística (Spanish National Institute of Statistics)
INEA	Istituto Nazionale Economia Agraria (Italian National Institute of Agricultural Economics)
ISMEA	Istituto di Servizi per il Mercato Agricolo Alimentare
INTERFRESA	Andalusian Interprofessional Strawberry Growers Association
ISTAT	Istituto Nazionale di statistica (Italian National Institute of Statistics)
KMU	Philippines' Kilusang Mayo Uno (May First Movement)
LMA	Lisbon Metropolitan Area
LOA	Leading Organic Alliance
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MINAGRI	Ministère de l'agriculture (Ministry of Agriculture)
MSA	Agricultural Social Insurance
MSSS	Ministry of Solidarity and Social Security
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization

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OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFII	French Office for Immigration and Integration
OMA	Oporto Metropolitan Area
OMI	Office des Migrations Internationales (French Agency for International Migration)
ONAGRI	Observatoire National de l'Agriculture, Tunisie (National Observatory of Agriculture)
ONI	Office national d'immigration (French National Office for Immigration)
ONS-MOI	Ouvriers Non-Spécialisés indochinois de la Main-d'Oeuvre Indigène (Indochinese Semi-Skilled Workers of the Native Workforce)
ORMVA/SM	Office Régional de Mise en Valeur Agricole du Souss-Massa (Regional Agency for Registration of Agricultural Value in Souss Massa)
PO	Producer Organization
REDI	Red Estatal por los Derechos de los Inmigrantes (National Network for Human Rights)
RGPH	Haut-Commissariat au Plan du Maroc (High Commisioner for Plan du Maroc)
RONA	Returnee of North-African origin
SAT	Sindicato Andaluz de los Trabajadores (Andalusian Workers' Union)
SE	Southern European
SEF	Portuguese Foreign and Borders Service
SOC	Sindicato de Obreros del Campo (The Field Workers' Union)
SODEA	Société de Développement Agricole (Society for Agricultural Development)
SOGETA	Société de Gestion des Terres Agricoles (Society for the Management of Agricultural Lands)
SYNAGRI	Union of Tunisian Farmers
TNCs	Transnational Companies
UGT	Unión General de Trabajadores (General Workers Union)
UGTT	General Union of Tunisian Workers
UMT	Union Marocaine de Travail (Moroccan Workers Union)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
US	United States of America
UTAP	Tunisian Union for Agriculture and Fisheries
WSRW	Western Sahara Resource Watch
WTO	World Trade Organization
WUAs	Water users' associations

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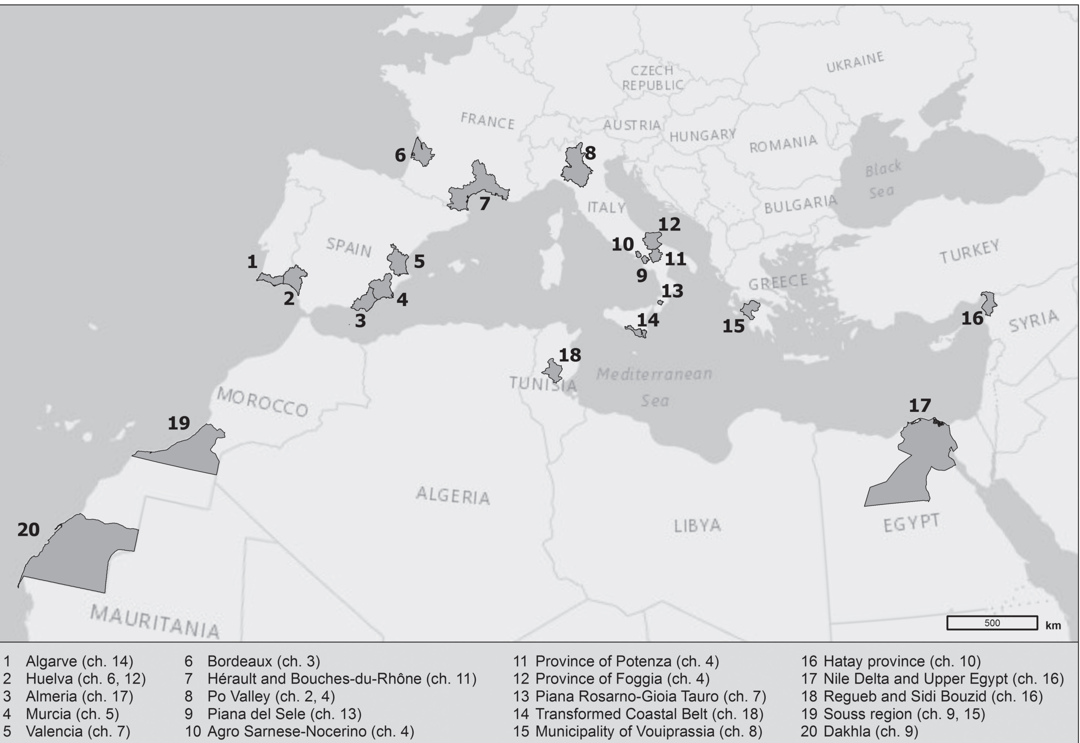

Map 1.1 The Mediterranean area.

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18 Entering the ‘plastic factories’

Conflicts and competition in Sicilian greenhouses and packinghouses

Valeria Piro and Giuliana Sanò

18.1 Introduction[1]

> It is still dark outside when the alarm of our phones tells us that it is time to get up. Outside, the streets are still lit by street lamps. We get in the car and we reach Hassan’s house. When we get there, they are already in the car, ready to go, and we follow them. After a few metres, Hassan stops at the roadside. A young man gets in and the car sets off again. We cross Piazza Manin, better known as the “Square of Tunisians”: from where the roads radiate out to the countryside. Someone is already there waiting for the employer. When the square and the city are some way behind us, we find ourselves in a completely new environment. Constructions of aluminium, wood and plastic devour up the land, consuming the scenery of carob trees and dry stone walls, to the point that the landscape disappears from view. At 7am we arrive at the district of Alcerito, our final destination. We get out of the car, as do Hassan, his wife, his son-in-law and Ahmed, the guy they had picked up from the roadside. Semi is there waiting for us. Semi is a Tunisian who lives in a little hut on the same land as Hassan’s greenhouses. Valeria and I approach the rest of the team. They do not seem bothered by our presence. We get to the greenhouses and there are not that many of them. The land on which they stand is not very large. Hassan puts us to work immediately. Valeria, Sanah (Hassan’s wife) and myself select the best tomatoes to be sent to market. Inside these very hot plastic factories, the three Tunisians relentlessly pick salad tomatoes and place them in boxes situated outside the greenhouses. On the back of a pickup van Valeria, Sanah and myself divide the tomatoes into first, second and third choice. “The best-looking tomatoes have to be placed on the top while the ugly ones go underneath”. Sanah explains to us. No one speaks, except for us on the back of the van. From inside the greenhouses, all that can be heard is the sound of scissors as they remove the tomatoes as quickly as possible: tac, tac, tac.
>
> (Giuliana’s fieldnotes, Vittoria, south-east Sicily, 5 March 2013)

In the south-east corner of Sicily, agriculture is ‘protected’ by a huge tract of plastic and polyethylene that stretches from Licata (in the province of Agrigento)

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along the coast to Pachino (in the province of Siracusa). This area, in fact, hosts the highest concentration of greenhouse farming in the whole of Italy. Like the rural areas of Almeria and Huelva in Spain and the Piana del Sele in Italy (see also Reigada, Hellio, Avallone and Caruso in this volume), this part of Sicily is characterized by the greenhouse cultivation of vegetables, especially tomatoes, aubergines, courgettes and peppers. The south-east province of Ragusa, where our ethnographic research was conducted, occupies the main, central section of this plastic landscape, which is commonly referred to as the 'Transformed Coastal Belt' (TCB), and where about 5,700 hectares are devoted to greenhouse crops (17 per cent of Italy's total greenhouse cultivation) (Istat, 2010). Protected crops in this area date back to the early 1960s, when local producers began to observe and experiment the advantages of early ripening of vegetables that could be attained thanks to placing plastic films over crops. Agronomic and technical transformations have led gradually to the deseasonalization of local agriculture, and have restored the fortunes of the primary sector as well as the general economy of the area. By greatly reducing the risks and problems associated with open field seasonal agriculture, greenhouse farming has enabled this particular province in Sicily to assume a prominent place in national and European production networks.

The high profits and the substantial turnover[2] connected with greenhouse farming are partly due to the strategic presence of one of Italy's largest wholesale fresh food markets, located in the nearby town of Vittoria. From here, tonnes of goods leave Sicily: local producers are able to deliver their produce daily to local fresh food markets as well as national and international supply chain platforms[3] – especially in northern European countries and, more recently, Eastern Europe.[4]

The improvement of economic conditions gave rise to an increase in workforce demand. Local people considered some agricultural tasks undignified, unprofitable and intrinsically *dirty, dangerous and demanding* (Cole and Booth, 2007). This led to a progressive shift from family labour to the employment of migrant workers and a process of labour market segmentation (Piore, 1979; Pugliese, 2009; Colloca and Corrado, 2013).

In the province of Ragusa, in 2013 there were 13,240 non-Italian agricultural workers, who roughly counted for half of the total workers working in the TCB. However, official statistics do not take into account the high presence of foreign workers hired 'off the books' in local agriculture or the significant number of Italian and non-Italian 'fake labourers' who are officially registered as employed but who either do not do the stipulated hours or do not work at all (Piro, 2015). The largest groups of foreign farmworkers are Romanians and Tunisians: out of the 13,240 workers, 4,349 are Romanian and 5,964 are Tunisian.[5] As in the case of Hassan, described in the fieldnote extract at the start of this chapter some of those Tunisians who arrived in the area during the early 1980s have recently started to rent greenhouses, and so have moved from the position of day workers to that of independent producers. This can be viewed as a social mobility strategy.[6]

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Within the agriculture sector, gender divisions that have their bedrock in cultural constructions are particularly prominent and are functional to the division of labour in agri-food production. In packinghouses, women are hired more frequently than men, because they are considered to be quicker, more accurate and more attentive to the appearance of the produce. Conversely, men are more readily employed in greenhouses. Romanian female farmworkers represent an exception to this pattern. In this case, the traditional gender division has been exacerbated as the effect of a profound sexist and macho culture that tends to project onto these female workers the image of freely available women, and which has sometimes resulted in cases of sexual exploitation.

This chapter is based on ethnographic research conducted by the two authors during six months living in the town of Vittoria. Over this period we observed various workplaces, in particular greenhouses and packinghouses and, in some cases, we were able to participate directly in work. Workplace ethnography is necessary to acquire a more accurate understanding of the relationships between farmers and workers, and especially the strategies adopted by employers to capitalize on the efforts of their farmworkers. Indeed, the local dominant idea of agricultural productivity based upon a low-skilled, highly flexible and vulnerable migrant workforce is the premise for widespread precarious labour which sees thousands of men and women being randomly hired direct from the streets and squares, as in the case of Ahmed in the opening fieldnote (see also Theodore *et al.*, 2006). This organization of work also tends to generate deep conflicts – especially at a horizontal level – in the various workplaces.

In this chapter we analyse three conflicts that we were able to observe closely during our participation in operations in two greenhouses and a packinghouse. In the first case, a farmer justified the different wages paid to two national groups (Tunisians and Romanians) on the basis of differing work speeds which, in turn, led to a particular kind of competition within the greenhouse. In the second example, the high rate of precarious employment frequent in packinghouses was the cause for tension between us – as participant (and privileged) observers – and a team of female on-call workers who accused us of 'stealing their jobs'. In the final case, religious habits were the premise used to explain different levels of productivity in a dispute between Muslims of different nationalities.

The examples discussed here are not meant to be representative of the different kinds of conflicts that occurred in the workplaces we observed. Each case focuses on an analysis of horizontal conflicts, in other words disputes over wages and work conditions that take place between employees of different religious, national or social backgrounds, and not between farmworkers and their employer. We contend that these horizontal conflicts are the corollary of high levels of job insecurity but, at the same time, they represent ways through which workers also 'come to terms' with job precariousness. Through a mechanism similar to the 'games of making out' studied by Roy (1952, 1953) and Burawoy (1979), these negotiations resolve themselves in a division of labour, which is functional to the strategies of exploitation and value extraction inside agri-food system.

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18.2 Theoretical inspirations and methodological strategies: a view from the field

In the study of the 'globalization of the countryside' (Colloca and Corrado, 2013), several authors have highlighted that salary reduction and the consequent degradation of agricultural work are the structural result of a gradual compression of a farm's profit margins due to the pressure of competition from international markets and retail corporations (see the Introduction to this volume; Holmes, 2013; Gertel and Sippel, 2014). Research has shown how the agri-food sector has been increasingly shaped by successive cycles of 'ethnic and gender substitution' in order to favour salary restraints through a continuous process of segmentation and competition (Berlan, 1986, 2008; De Bonis, 2005; Preibisch and Binford, 2007; Mannon *et al.*, 2011; Hellio, 2014). Moreover, it has been underlined that developments in agri-food production have been flanked by migration policies or mobility regimes often based on the temporality of migration, which are a root cause of the precarious condition of foreign workers (Morice, 2008; Morice and Michalon, 2008; Morice and Potot, 2010; Corrado and Perrotta, 2012; Décosse, 2013; Hellio, 2014; Lindner and Kathmann, 2014).

With this framework in mind, the aim of our research was to investigate these 'macro' dynamics through a 'micro' lens, looking in particular at how global processes influence and shape workers' everyday experiences in their workplaces. We thus posed ourselves some straightforward questions: what takes place on a daily basis in the work environments, namely, in our case, in the greenhouse and in the packinghouse? What mechanisms underpin the organization of production? What are the everyday conflicts? The main source of theoretical inspiration has been the sociology of labour, in particular the classic works of Donald Roy (1952, 1953), Alvin Gouldner (1954) and Michael Burawoy (1972, 1979) and other contributions that fall under the umbrella term of *workplace studies* (Heath *et al.*, 2000). From a methodological point of view, these scholars privilege the use of qualitative techniques and often draw on long-term observations in workplaces such as factories (Ngai *et al.*, 2015), building sites (Jounin, 2008; Perrotta, 2011) as well as the service industry (Ehrenreich, 2001; Alberti, 2014). In this direction, we provided a detailed description of agricultural work environments, more rarely considered by academic scholars, albeit with significant exceptions (Holmes, 2013; Castracani, 2014).

The possibility of conducting our field research together represented for us a great advantage. The fact of being together (instead of working separately) enabled us to access the field in an easier and safer way, and to take relatively higher risks and to feel more comfortable in a number of situations. Most important of all, it allowed us to deepen our reflexive approach, and to develop, between us, a greater degree of intersubjectivity that endowed our research with stronger 'validity' (Cardano, 2001). Too often, ethnographic research is limited through being constructed as an individual effort, with the ethnographer acting as a 'lone stranger in the hearth of darkness' (Salzman, 1994). Conversely, we are both persuaded of the importance of collective research methods (e.g. action research

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and workers inquiry) and have been inspired by several examples of joint ethnographic work (see, among others, Schneider and Schneider, 1976; Bourgois and Schonberg, 2009).

In any case, conducting participant observation in workplaces was not an easy task, primarily due to the difficulty for two young researchers to be hired in a labour market almost totally constituted by foreign workers, and mainly men in the case of the greenhouses. The structural differences – in terms of gender, social class and nationality – between the researchers and people normally employed in agriculture made access to the field particularly problematic. We opted for small periods of overt participant observation and mainly informal or unpaid work in a range of different workplaces: in the greenhouses of Hassan, a Tunisian farm owner in his fifties, over a total of 10 days; inside FreshCrops,[7] a medium-size farm managed by an Italian owner that 'hosted' us for 15 days (see Section 18.5); inside Just Tomatoes, a medium-size packinghouse where the Italian employer hired us for 15 days through an official seasonal contract. Also a period of covert participant observation was conducted on a small farm for about one week by just one of the two researchers (see Section 18.3).[8] In addition, in order to map the daily activities of the local fruit and vegetable market, we shadowed a broker as he went about his work at the wholesale market of Vittoria and in neighbouring towns. Finally, besides the life stories and informal conversations collected during the course of the research (with a total of 78 people), 43 semi-structured interviews were carried out with farmworkers and employers, members of local institutions, trade unionists and labour inspectors, priests, doctors and volunteers working with migrants in the province of Ragusa.

The accounts collected through the interviews and participant observation allowed us to analyse the daily processes of negotiation occurring in workplaces. Similar to the US shop floors studied by Roy and Burawoy, it was also possible to observe the deployment of several 'games of making out' and the emergence of micro-conflicts in the Sicilian 'plastic factories'. These different cases will be the focus of the following paragraphs.

18.3 SicilSerre: 'racing' during working hours

A first type of conflict, frequent in a labour market characterized by the presence of a foreign workforce, concerns the frictions that arise between workers of different nationalities. The example we discuss in this section is one of the most emblematic cases of how nationality explicitly becomes a significant issue during the definition of working conditions. Competitive pressures between Romanian and Tunisian workers emerged vividly during our short experience of covert participant observation in a small greenhouse farm, which we name SicilSerre. In this case, Ahmed, a Tunisian farmworker who we had met on a previous job, had managed to procure work for Valeria. Unlike Ahmed, who was informed of the purpose of our research, the employer did not know the reason behind the unusual presence of a young Italian woman in the greenhouse. During the same period inside SicilSerre, as well as the young researcher (employed on a temporary basis)

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and Ahmed, the farm owner had also hired off the books Nicola, a middle-aged Romanian man. This small group had just replaced the previous team, which had consisted of a young couple of Romanian workers. The arrival of the new workers had then prompted a delicate phase of negotiation to set the working conditions and, above all, to stipulate the 'fair' daily salary for each farmworker.

In order to determine the salaries, Giovanni, the employer, relied on a widespread convention in the TCB: that of paying a different salary according to the worker's nationality. At the time the research was conducted, the informal agreement in the area was €30 per day for Tunisians and €25 for Romanians.[9] As compensation for lower payment, the employer usually 'offered' Romanian workers the chance to live on the farm, generally in small houses (such as tool sheds or huts), which often cut them off from the services and places of sociability in urban areas. Moreover, hiring workers who lived 'in the countryside' gave employers other advantages besides paying lower salaries: it allowed them to demand more flexible (and often longer) working hours compared to workers living in urban areas. This overlap between places of production and reproduction largely limits the privacy of farmworkers: work and life tend to gradually coincide, lengthening the amount of time spent on the job and leading to a depersonalization and progressive loss of meaning of spaces and moments dedicated to personal life and intimacy (Ngai *et al.,* 2015; Andrijasevic and Sacchetto, 2015). Furthermore, the combination of work and home is a key deterrent against farmworkers abandoning their jobs, as loss of employment would mean also having to search for new accommodation.

The fact that there are farmworkers of different nationalities subject to diverse working conditions frequently encourages competition and conflict in the greenhouses. During our stay at SicilSerre, the competition turned into an actual 'race' where the prize was the chance to continue working with Giovanni. The 'competition' was deliberately fomented by the entrepreneur who suggested that the workers act 'as if they were in a boxing match', so that he could choose carefully and 'mathematically' the most productive worker to be hired (informally and irregularly) for long-term employment. The following long extract from fieldnotes recalls the declaration that Giovanni made once the competition was over. The result of the 'match' – the farmer's decision to employ both farmworkers, albeit with different working hours – suggests that the ultimate purpose of this recruitment procedure was the *competition itself*, which was deployed as a sort of device that induced employees to accelerate the pace of production (Burawoy, 1979).

Giovanni: I want to be clear once and for all. What you did [*referring to Nicola*], and what he did [*referring to Ahmed*] . . . was less compared with the work I do. Let's say, I do three *filagni* [*tomato rows*]: you [*N.*] do two and he [*A.*] does two and a half, just a little bit more. [*He pauses, as if to give greater solemnity to what he is about to say.*] Now, let's talk about money . . . [*Addressing A.*] How much do you think? €30? €30 is fine! [*Addressing Nicola*] What do you reckon? €25? So €25 it is! But, as for the work, you have to do at least as much I do. So,

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I've done some calculations: 8 hours are not enough for you to do the work that I do. And the same goes for him. So to do the work I do, you're going to have to work 10 hours a day [*to N.*]. He's going to do 9 hours, because he's a little bit faster [*to A.*]. If that's fine by you, then we're sorted. If not [*he makes a sign with his hand to indicate that they can leave*] . . . *amici eramu e amici restammu* [friends as always]. This is the deal. It's fast work. If that's not all right for you there's nothing I can do about it.

Nicola: Let's try to do 10 hours . . . as this is my first day in the greenhouse for two years. Perhaps I can do 10 hours for a bit, then we'll see.
G.: What do you mean "then we'll see"? I don't get you!
N.: If you don't agree, I'll leave! You can't get mad because I can't be like you.
G.: You don't want to get mad?
N.: I don't want you to get mad. For now 10 hours is better.
G.: 10 hours is better?
N.: Because I'm not fast. It's right. Because I still have problems.
G.: Right? [*triumphantly*]
N.: Right!

(Valeria's fieldnotes, Vittoria, 13 June 2013)

From the outset, Giovanni takes for granted the principle according to which the two workers are hired on a different salary because of their different nationalities. He does not question the common practice of paying a Tunisian farmworker €30 and a Romanian farmworker €25 per day. In addition, Giovanni imposes different working hours for the two labourers, justifying this on the basis of their different pace inside the greenhouse. At a later point, Giovanni says:

> Watch out, because you're Italian, so you must understand me. It's not that I'm taking advantage of the situation. Do you understand? I do a calculation based on what I do. If I do two tomato rows, and you do one, then you're half of what I am. If I go to work, as Ahmed does, and someone says to me, 'how much do you want for a day?', and let's say I tell him: '€40', so I have to do a job for €40, which means going fast. *That's what it's all about: it's mathematical!*
>
> (Valeria's fieldnotes, Vittoria, 13 June 2013)

An arbitrary principle is built discursively as something objective ('it's mathematical'), which forecloses the possibility of any criticism. The farmer's 'recruitment procedure' could indeed be debatable; however, the rules set in that context are not negotiable. Ahmed, for instance, expressed strong disapproval, frustration and even rage at being treated like 'a racehorse', and understood clearly that the employer's purpose was to accelerate the rhythm of work and to extract workers' productive capabilities to his sole advantage. Nevertheless, both he and Nicola were not in the position to refuse to participate. So, when the competition took

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place, Ahmed maintained an air of detachment from the situation in which he was embedded, concentrating exclusively – and even agreeing – on the very purpose of the 'game'. Thus, competition in the greenhouse appeared to *become a value in itself*. As a 'game of making out', the fact of competing becomes a subjective frame to motivate the action: it provides (short-term) meaning to the work effort in the actual moment of its performance, and thus reduces the strain of the endless series of meaningless motions (Burawoy, 1979).

Moreover, the situation of conflict leads the two workers to use common national stereotypes to describe their experience of competitiveness at work. In commenting on the result of the competition, for instance, Ahmed says: 'The Romanian is less of a man than a Tunisian', to highlight his greater physical prowess, which he associates with a stronger 'virility' and, by implication, 'morality'. Thus, the competition instigated by the employer is, in turn, interpreted by the workers as a conflict that regards their nationality. The strength of the game of making out relies on modifying the sense of conflict that occurs in the workplace by partially obscuring the employers' intentions of maximizing labour productivity.

18.4 Just Tomatoes: precariousness and competition in a packinghouse

The competitive pressures that arise between female workers in the packinghouses partially reflect mechanisms akin to those described above. In the example that follows, nationality is not an issue because all the workers are Italian. However, two issues are even more evident than before: first, the agricultural workforce is segmented and this segmentation relates to the different types of employment and hiring options; and, second, competition among the workforce is exacerbated by employment precariousness.

An incident that directly concerned us (and which made us query the plausibility of continuing to do participant observation) occurred during our first work experience in a small packinghouse. Like most of the food packinghouses in the area, this had an almost exclusively female and largely Italian workforce. Although in this particular case the friction was mainly due to the presence of two researchers, who were external to the work environment, what happened was nonetheless emblematic of how high labour turnover and high levels of precariousness constitute a constant menace for workers, even if the workers here were all Italians and thus were more 'protected' by their legal status.

The company where we had just started to work, which we will name Just Tomatoes, employed 16 workers: 4 men and 12 women. Through the company's manager, we were able to organize a short period of unremunerated employment for the purpose of conducting our fieldwork.[10] As Carmela, the supervisor, explained to us, we were expected to work in lines, packing several types of vegetables (cherry tomatoes, aubergines and courgettes) into small plastic boxes, then inserting them in larger cardboard boxes. The packing process was organized so as to take into account both appearance and volume. Depending on the type of

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crop, we were expected to *do the cushion, use the hanky, do the pressed one, work the 20 and the 23 separately* and so on: expressions and tasks that were as nonsensical for the novice worker as they are for the reader. Obviously, no job is easy to perform at the beginning, and even those tasks that are deemed 'unskilled' require a degree of proficiency (Ehrenreich, 2001; Holmes, 2013). So, in the eyes of our workmates, we probably looked very clumsy and uncomfortable in our new roles. That was why Carmela, our team leader, and the other workers, laughed at us mockingly and started to become verbally aggressive.

During the course of the morning shift, Franca, a 31-year-old Italian employee, arrived at the packinghouse. She was one of the numerous female workers who were forced to balance the heavy burden of family life with more than one job. In fact, as employment in the packinghouse was so sporadic and poorly paid (on average €4 per hour[11]), it was not sufficient as a single source of income to cover everyday costs. Being employed in a packinghouse means being compelled to work on-call and for a number of hours that is usually not known in advance. In the majority of these small firms, in fact, shifts are usually not pre-planned: the amount of labour depends on the orders that the company receives on a daily basis and on the quantity of produce arriving from local growers. This just-in-time system of production transfers the social costs of eating fresh food onto workers (Gertel and Sippel, 2014). Workers live at the mercy of a phone call that asks them to be on the job in 20 minutes; a call that they might not receive for several days. In order to cope with her precarious working situation, Franca was doing night shifts for another local company in addition to her day shifts with Just Tomatoes. That morning, however, she had felt too tired to get up an early hour, and had phoned in sick so that she could stay at home and rest. However, her colleagues had warned her of our presence on the packing line and so she suddenly showed up. As she entered she started screaming:

Franca: I'm off work for just one day, and you lot immediately replace me with these two girls?
Carmela: No, calm down, they're only here to learn. They're from "school"!
F.: School?! *Io pure c'ho le scuol*e [I've been to school too!]

(Valeria's fieldnotes, Donnalucata, 19 March 2013)

Franca was highly concerned about the prospect of being called to work less frequently or being laid off altogether. High turnover is the principal fear for a packinghouse (and greenhouse) employee. The risk of being called up less than other workers employed on different contracts, as we were, often generated competitive tensions. In this case, the labourers' aggressive reaction to our presence epitomizes the high sense of insecurity faced by workers who are seriously concerned about losing their jobs. The conflict that is produced by a particularly precarious day-labour system, is also, in this case, dispersed; in other words the potential for *hierarchical* conflicts between workers and management is in effect replaced by *lateral* conflicts between workers. Precariousness does not only affect foreign farmworkers, but also the weakest fringes of the Italian workforce (in this

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case women). As shown, precariousness actually becomes an explicit reason for conflict inside workplaces.

18.5 'Who is a true Muslim?': a case of religious conflict in the Fresh Crops greenhouse

Horizontal conflicts were also a key element during our work with Mr Pippo, a tomato producer who we had met through a local young agronomist. The team of workers consisted of three Italians, one Tunisian, a couple of Albanians and a team leader, who was also Italian. The owner, who was aware of our intention to carry out research on the local agricultural system, was happy to give us work, especially as we were not going to be paid in return. We worked in Pippo's greenhouses for two weeks, during which period we were able to learn to harvest, prune and handle tomato seedlings.

As we were both inexperienced, we were put to work alongside other farmworkers. At the end of the first week, we were able to identify the characteristics of each worker regarding speed, accuracy and carefulness, and over the course of the day we decided who to stay with depending on our willingness to work more or less quickly. The Tunisian labourer and the couple of Albanians were the fastest workers. However, the Tunisian did not pay much attention to the quality of his work and attached little importance to the products themselves, whereas the two Albanians were unanimously considered the 'quickest and cleanest' of the team.

Apart from speed, the Tunisian worker and the two Albanians shared another thing in common: they were all Muslims, and this was a recurring theme in their conversations. There were some evident differences in the ways they expressed their faith. For example, the Albanian couple did not refrain from eating pork. During lunch, they would eat their ham sandwiches with us under a tree, while Gigi, the Tunisian farmworker, preferred to eat leftovers sitting on his own in the back of his car. During the lunch break, there was no sign of harsh feelings between the three Muslim farmworkers. On the contrary, during the working hours, the different eating habits of the three workers became a topic of banter. But while he worked at his tomato row, Gigi openly insulted the other members of the team and asked them: 'Who is the true Muslim here?' The Albanian couple took no offence at Gigi's provocations. The husband, Dimitri, who picked his tomatoes at high speed with a winning technique, replied: 'Who are we? We are number one'. We contend that, similar to the other examples above, here workers use religion as a means for managing competition in the context of a productive system that forces workers to side against each other.

As a number of studies have shown, religion can sometimes be a source of conflict in the workplace, with the workers using religious practices as forms of resistance against employers. A notable example is Aihwa Ong's study of spirit possession among female factory workers in Malaysia (Ong, 1987). Similarly, in one case observed during our fieldwork, fasting during the month of Ramadan turned out to be an act of defiance aimed at the employer. The abstinence from

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food and beverages on the part of Khaled, a Tunisian worker, greatly concerned his employer who, seeing him become weaker and weaker, encouraged him to drink and eat during working hours. However, the worker refused to give up fasting, and thus assured himself a lower volume of work and less physical fatigue. This ongoing 'arm wrestling match' between worker and employer, over the possibility of observing religious rites, offered us an opportunity to reflect on the potential role of religion as a source of resistance. However, the workers here do not use religion to exert pressure on the employer; rather, once again, its use reflects a horizontal conflict. In other words, the workers handle the competition that is encouraged by employers and compounded by the men's precarious situation by projecting it into a religious dimension.

Gigi appeared to maintain that his Islamic faith was more genuine and 'true' than that of his Albanian colleagues on the basis that he originated from an Arabic-speaking country and not an eastern European country. However, subsequent information obtained through other farmworkers led us to surmise that behind his claim to a more genuine and rooted faith, was a desire to compromise the relationship between the two Albanian farmworkers and the employer. Gigi played the role of a 'spy' within the team: in exchange for information he received favours and better treatment from the greenhouse's owner. Despite the fact that the three workers in question were the fastest members of the team, Gigi tried in every way to create discomfort for the other two. Each day he would offend his two colleagues in the hope they would get so fed up that they would end up abandoning the job. In reality, what usually happened was that the Albanians would accelerate their rate of work, rather than fall into the 'trap' set by Gigi.

We contend that the exacerbation of religious beliefs is, in this case, deceptive and is deployed instrumentally as a farce that aims to mask the 'real' source of the conflict between the three workers. Competition was accentuated by the fact that labourers wanted to work on this farm rather than others because it offered them the chance to obtain a semi-regular contract that allowed them, in turn, to access agricultural unemployment benefits. In addition, the greenhouse was run by a farmer who was generally considered to be honest and not that tough, who was helped by a reliable team leader. The chance of finding all these requisites in other companies was extremely remote. For this reason, the Albanian workers were careful to avoid any sort of conflict, frightened as they were by the idea of losing their job on Pippo's farm.

In the above case, religion can be viewed as a cause for conflict. Nonetheless, in order to fully understand the workplace conflicts that we observed, it is important to take into account the underlying mechanisms that engender a shift in the causes of conflict and the effects that this shift generates. The roots of the conflict, in fact, are to be found in the job precariousness of this sector, which compel workers to side against each other and find pretexts to increase competition in the workplace. The consequences of this are far from harmless; on the contrary, they contribute to the production of a social consensus (Burawoy, 1979, 1985). The competition between workers provokes an acceleration of the pace of work and provides the company with optimal productivity and better worker performance.

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In other words, although he is never directly involved, the result ultimately satisfies the employer's production targets.

18.6 Conclusions

What was hidden behind these acts of competition staged by workers? What were the reasons that drove workers to line up against each other? Why did solidarity succumb to internecine rivalry and conflict?

We found answers to these questions during our ethnographic research in one of the largest and richest agricultural areas of Italy. In the province of Ragusa, the development of greenhouse farming has helped to reduce the critical threshold of seasonal work, allowing local farmers to extend the entire production process over the year, which, in turn, has had an overall positive impact on the local economy. Nevertheless, this intensive agriculture area continues to produce high levels of job insecurity and irregularity.

In this chapter we showed that if, at a first glance, workplace conflicts can be interpreted as dependent on nationality, religious habits or different hiring conditions, at a deeper level these conflicts reside in the structural nature of a production system that constantly threatens worker stability. Precariousness is, in ultimate analysis, the down side of the conflict: it permeates workplaces and erodes relationships between workers; the opposite to what one would expect in a context where greenhouse farming has achieved production stability.

Precariousness not only corrodes and corrupts work relations by encouraging competition, it accelerates the pace of work and increases the productivity of each worker. This occurs because speed and productivity are the yardsticks for assessing the farmworkers' performance, for determining labour costs, for negotiating 'fair' wages and, above all, for reconfirming the presence of day labourers in the workplace.

Notes

1 Although the chapter overall is the result of collaborative research and analysis, Sections 18.1, 18.5 and 18.6 were written by Giuliana Sanò, while Sections 18.2–18.4 were written by Valeria Piro. The authors wish to thank Nicoletta Sciarrone, Pietro Saitta and the editors of the volume for their valuable comments and advice.
2 According to recent INEA data (INEA, 2013), the value of fresh and processed fruit and vegetables in Sicily stands at €309 million; 43 per cent of this figure is attributable to vegetables (70 per cent of which are tomatoes) whose production is concentrated above all in the province of Ragusa. In terms of the production of added value, the agricultural sector of Ragusa contributes 8.55 per cent of the provincial Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the highest rate in the whole of southern Italy, and surpassing the Italian average rate of 1.89 per cent by 7 percentage points. Data collected by Istituto Tagliacarne and processed by Toscano (2013).
3 Regarding the fruit and vegetable sector, the majority of market produce in 2012 was destined for the fresh market (94.1 per cent of approximately €291 million), of which, 40.7 per cent to retail chains and supermarkets without intermediaries, 46.1 per cent to the wholesale market and 7.3 per cent to other types of retail markets. These data refer

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exclusively to produce marketed through producer organizations (POs) registered in eastern Sicily, 12 of which are in the Province of Syracuse, 11 in the province of Ragusa and 10 in the Province of Catania (INEA, 2013).

4 From an interview with L.F., working at *Vittoria Mercati*, a company in charge of the management of the local fruit and vegetable market, 70 per cent of the products from Vittoria are distributed to national markets, and 30 per cent to other European countries.

5 These data have been provided by Giuseppe Scifo, secretary of the Vittoria branch of FLAI-CGIL (Federation of the Agro-Industrial Workers within the General Confederation of Italian Workers; the FLAI is the main trade union of agricultural workers in Italy).

6 According to data from the last agricultural census, out of more than 12,500 farmers in the province of Ragusa, 51 are non-EU nationals and 13 are foreign EU nationals (Istat, 2010).

7 The names of the farms, as well as those of the individuals, have been changed to preserve anonymity.

8 Regarding the constraints, advantages and ethical concerns for conducting covert participant observation see, in particular, Bryman (2004), Christians (2005), Marzano (2012).

9 These figures refer to the year 2013, when the research was conducted. For the same period the Contract for agricultural workers and floral workers in the Province of Ragusa provided a daily salary of € 54.10 for 6.5 hours of work. During 2015, salaries continued to suffer a decline. During our research, however, we did not notice any salary differentiation based on gender, as frequently occurs in similar sorts of workplaces.

10 It should be underlined that access to these workplaces was not always straightforward. If the informal environment and lack of controls in the greenhouses often facilitated our access, the greater frequency of inspections in the packinghouses presented major limits.

11 This sum represents about half of the official union rate for this sector in the Province of Ragusa (€8.30 per hour).

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