

## The ghetto within and beyond camp, prison, and settler colony: Genealogies of the contemporary Made-in-Italy encampment archipelago

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In this paper, I trace the multiple – simultaneously material, symbolic and affective - genealogies of what I define as contemporary Italy’s “*encampment archipelago*” (Peano 2021): a series of living places ranging from self-constructed shantytowns to institutional labour camps and asylum-seeker reception centres. These host migrants – predominantly from across West Africa, and less frequently from Northern and Eastern Africa, Eastern Europe and South Asia -, many of whom are employed in agriculture. While often represented as suspended in a timeless state of emergency, frozen in an eternal present or stuck in “backwardness” (like many of the districts they are part of), *Made-in-Italy* encampments are highly fluid, forever dynamic and multifaceted spaces with complex histories, with the same people often circulating between them. Their proliferation follows oscillatory rather than linear trajectories: self-constructed settlements made of wooden, plastic, asbestos and cardboard shacks and, increasingly, of brickwork and corrugated-iron structures (known as *ghettos* by their West African inhabitants), or abandoned and then re-occupied, derelict buildings (often with no facilities), may turn into or be replaced by institutionally managed container camps or tent cities, and vice-versa, in a never-ending process that entails violent, if always partial erasures.

At the same time, elements of one form often lurk in the other, questioning the purchase of an analytics of in/formality: not only are shantytowns often provided with a modicum of infrastructure by institutions and third-sector organisations, and labor camps easily turn into self-managed settlements by way of institutional abandonment and inhabitants’ reappropriation. What is more, from the military-humanitarian asylum complex to institutional labor camps - peddled as the “solution” to rid Italy’s agro-industrial enclaves of unsanitary, unruly *ghettos* -, carceral qualities lurk behind humanitarian and utilitarian façades, as made exceedingly clear to those destined for such spaces. Curfew hours; few if any chances to cook one’s food; a ban on external visitors and on tinkering with buildings according to their inhabitants’ needs, creativity and fancies; bureaucratic barriers based on immigration and work status; poor and ever-decaying infrastructure, and multiple forms of surveillance (all ultimately premised on institutional racism) are the cipher of camps, if often circumvented by way of extension (Simone et al.). In the same vein, the *ghettos* are nodes in an intricate, ephemeral network along multiple, fractured and ever-shifting, underground migration routes spanning from West Africa to the English Channel, tracing neither linear directions nor coherent trajectories (Peano 2021). More generally, they are a partial response to the segregationist, criminalising logics of immigration policies and street-level racism (which makes it hard, if not impossible, for many migrants to access the housing market) - from which a total escape is hardly possible.

Thus, encampments are irreducible to a single dimension or form: if all such dwellings play a role in channelling labor and/as migrant mobility for Italian agribusiness, they most

often lie not only *within*, but also *beyond* capture (cf. Simone 2022). They host a labor-camp function (Peano 2024), acting as a reservoir of cheap workforce; they are spaces of containment but also of abjection and abandonment, and simultaneously they also perform the role of autonomous infrastructures of reproduction and fugitivity, where these dimensions coexist in perpetual tension.

Furthermore, this superimposition and interpenetration between different ideal-typical spatial forms can be shown to bear deep genealogies, unfolding across the contemporary period. To analyse such dynamics, I focus primarily on two agro-industrial enclaves: the Plain of Gioia Tauro, located in the region of Calabria, at the southernmost tip of the Italian peninsula; and the Apulian Tavoliere, in the southeastern part of the country. Here lie some of the most important nodes in the archipelago of encampments scattered across Italian territory (and beyond), where centuries-long processes of capture and extension have left significant, if largely unacknowledged marks on the landscape. Taking cue from such marks, and starting from my own thirteen-year-long solidary engagement in today's encampments, I seek to further excavate the (anti)colonial matrix of contemporary struggles. By means of archival documents, and of oral and written historical sources, but also of their silences and occlusions, I show how contemporary encampments bear the (both violent and subversive) traces and reverberations of multiple pasts. Throughout the contemporary period, settler and penal colonies, together with prisoner-of-war and labour camps, were envisioned as means for the extraction and disciplining of farm labour in the interests of Italy's capitalist agribusiness, against the "unruly" urbanization of dispossessed, landless peasants or their flight by means of transnational migration. If based on putatively different logics, from the punitive to the rehabilitative, all such projects relied on racialized and criminalizing, spatial, legal and more broadly symbolic techniques of mobility containment that recur in the present. Today as in the past, the slum represented the biopolitical threat against which encampment projects reacted, while also being capitalized upon as the space for the social reproduction of labour. Finally, I show how the failures of current and past projects of containment are the rationales spurring further experiments undergirded by the same logics.

Springing from the ruins of projects of settler colonization, land reclamation, penal reform, and military concentration that unfolded throughout the contemporary era, today's encampments bear witness to the ongoing saliency of spatial techniques for the government of mobility, but also to their failures and to various forms of resistance and fugitivity. In its materiality, the spatial dimension immediately summons non-linear temporal recursions, as perceptible stratifications of containment forms are engraved on agribusiness enclaves' landscapes, where abandoned or repurposed ruins and rubble, as much as newly built spaces and places, reverberate (cf. Navaro et al. 2021) an always racialized violence. Here I am concerned with the active, ongoing making—and unmaking—of encampments, as processes that have played a central role in the development of "*Made in Italy*"-branded agrifood production, and which are inserted into the very construction of Italy itself as a physical and imagined national space that strongly identifies with its many (and constantly growing) flagship foods. I therefore re-frame such branding as a territorialized index of layered and fabricated, material, affective and symbolic mechanisms of racialization, exploitation and differential

inclusion, underscored by colonial logics and met by various forms of resistance, recalcitrance, flight, and refusal.

Since the late eighteenth century, a process of racialization, expulsion, criminalization, and capture of mobile populations and landless peasants set off across southern Italy (then the Kingdom of Naples, which would become part of the newly established Kingdom of Italy in 1861). An international discourse had emerged, as part of the development of “scientific racism,” that assigned Italy’s Mezzogiorno—the southern part of the country—the status of a hybrid, exotic, and savage land straddling the civilizational divide between Europe and Africa. The drive to de-feudalize land and increase productivity by means of rationalization, that had in private property its central tenet, underscored it. Enlightened scholars’ and policymakers’ incipient demonization of nomadic, transhumant pastoralism, which for centuries had been the principal economic activity of many parts of central and southern Italy, including Tavoliere, also fed into such representations, depicting shepherds as uncivilized brutes—the likes of “Hottentots” or “Tartars”—and the space itself as an inhospitable, desert wasteland. These quintessentially colonial tropes formed the ideological backbone to processes of expulsion and capture, and would remain at the center of propaganda into the Fascist era (1922–1943) and beyond—although racist ideology as a whole evolved across this period, if always crossed by different pseudo-scientific currents.

Thus, the stratifications of forms of capture that have resulted into today’s segregation techniques lie at the intersection of prison, camp, settler colony, and special economic zone. All these (ultimately impossible, ideal-typical) structures, at once material, affective, and symbolic, have been the weapons of a proactive and reactive war against extension that recurs throughout the ever-unfolding history of enclosure and primitive accumulation. In the becoming-capitalist of Italian agriculture, settler colony, prison, and camp (in different combinations) have been idealized and designed as antidotes against the horror projected onto slums-as-extensions by the powers that be. The urbanization and *campization* of those made into a landless, dispossessed class by metamorphosing systems of property, modes of production and forms of extraction and control reverberates across continents throughout the contemporary era, affecting patterns of mobility and un/settlement from Africa to Europe, the Middle East, and beyond. We do not face simple repetitions, but we’re up against eerie recursions of the attempt to channel, stifle, and bridle movement—to curtail extension. An analysis of the ways in which processes of enclosure have unfolded in the history of Italian agroculturalism returns, I believe, a pattern of spatial capture that relied on projects of settler colonialism streaked with carceral and military dimensions, which in turn resonate widely across time and space. Prison discipline and camp biopolitics are the necessary undersides upon which settler colonialism grafts itself as violent affirmation.