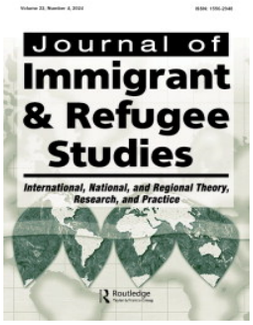

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/wimm20

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To cite this article: Maurizio Ambrosini (04 Nov 2024): Immigrant Work and the Production of Italian Agrifood: The Variants of Subordinate Integration, Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, DOI: 10.1080/15562948.2024.2424164

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2024.2424164

Published online: 04 Nov 2024.

JOURNAL OF IMMIGRANT & REFUGEE STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2024.2424164

Immigrant Work and the Production of Italian Agrifood: The Variants of Subordinate Integration

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ABSTRACT

The agri-food industry in Southern Europe and elsewhere is typically seen as a place of harsh exploitation of immigrant workers. This article aims to give a more comprehensive picture of immigrant work in the Italian agri-food system. Based on nine case studies of local production systems, it elaborates on the concept of "subordinate integration," showing its different variants. In addition, it discusses the relationship between subordinate integration at work and different forms of social insertion on the territory, mainly focusing on the housing question. In conclusion, the social regulation of work in agriculture and the role of trade unions is highlighted.

KEYWORDS

Immigrant labor; subordinate integration; exploitation; Italy; agrifood; social regulation; trade unions

Introduction. Argument, objectives and structure of the article

Most international studies on immigrant work in agriculture have focused on the problem of exploitation, i.e. unjust working relationships, far below contractual standards, often accompanied by forms of illegal intermediation and sometimes violence, highlighting "the social cost of eating fresh" (Gertel & Sippel, 2017; but see also Rye & O' Reilly, 2020; for the leading case of California: Martin, 2020; for Canada: Cohen & Hjalmarson, 2020). This is particularly true in Italy and other Mediterranean European countries (Corrado et al., 2016, 2018; Morice & Potot, 2010; Nori & Farinella, 2020; Ortiz-Miranda et al., 2013), but also other European regions are affected (Augère-Granier, 2021; Górny & Kaczmarczyk, 2018; Krifors, 2021; Rye & Scott, 2018; Tollefsen et al., 2020). Non-formalized hiring, wages, hours, and working conditions that do not comply with the rules, lack of social protection, and precarious living arrangements have been repeatedly detected and reported.

In the countryside of southern Italy, the temporary employment of thousands of immigrant laborers, often without a residence permit or with precarious legal statuses (for example, asylum seekers), has also generated the formation of informal housing settlements without services, similar to the slums of developing countries, and called "ghettos" (Brovia & Piro, 2021; Melossi, 2021).

These employment conditions clash with the international success of Italian food and with the image of excellence that companies in the sector and public institutions exhibit (Howard & Forin, 2019). Expo Milano 2015, dedicated precisely to food, was a great celebration of this glittering and successful image. All advertising communication on Italian food strives to convey a bucolic representation linked to ancient traditions, respect for nature, and knowledge handed down from generation to generation. Immigrant workers never appear. The narrative of excellence

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hides the protagonists of the work in the fields and related factories, and the conditions in which they work and live.

However, the agrifood sector is internally differentiated by products, company size, technological innovation levels, and labor regulation's impact. Even the narrative of exploitation does not capture the variety of conditions of employment of immigrant labor in the sector. As Perrotta (2016) notes regarding the cultivation of tomatoes for the industry, in Northern Italy, hand picking has practically disappeared for about 30 years, while in the South, an important percentage of tomatoes, probably around 50%, are still collected by hand. Italy is also profoundly differentiated internally, as it includes regions that are among the poorest and richest in the European Union.

From this perspective, this article aims to propose a more complex image of the relationship between the Italian agrifood sector and immigrant work. I will do this by resorting to the concept of "subordinate integration," introduced some years ago to describe the features of integration of immigrant workers into the labor market of Southern Europe (Ambrosini, 2013). The concept of integration, with reference to immigrants, is subject to different interpretations, contested and even rejected. I refer here to the meaning proposed by Penninx (2007, p. 10): "The process of becoming an accepted part of society". In the Italian case, but probably not only, this acceptance is substantially limited to their inclusion in the lower positions of the labor market. At the political level, in social relations, in the urban context, in access to qualified work, acceptance and a more advanced inclusion remain problematic. The difficulties and long waiting times for access to citizenship are the clearest example of this. Different forms of institutional discrimination, for example in matters of social housing, economic aid for the poor (in Italy, "citizenship income"), local welfare measures, crystallize subordinate integration: even when immigrants are formally authorized to stay, they do not enjoy the same rights as national citizens (Ambrosini et al., 2024).

Immigrants are relatively accepted to compensate for the lack of native workers, but on the condition that they do not make demands and do not aspire to more qualified positions, much less to full citizenship. They are inserted into deeply segmented labor markets, in which they occupy the least desirable, precarious, tiring, low-paid, often partially or completely irregular positions, leaving the best jobs to national workers (Triandafyllidou & Ambrosini, 2011). Kitty Calavita (2005), in a quite similar sense, has talked of the "economy of Otherness", while Tollefsen et al. (2020) have widened the scope, highlighting the "subordinate inclusion" of Thai workers in the Swedish forest berry industry.

Analyses of statistical data confirm that in Southern Europe, immigrants find work quite easily, do not have much higher levels of unemployment than national workers, but remain largely relegated to manual, often precarious, jobs with low social prestige (Fellini & Guetto, 2019; Panichella et al., 2021). The "three D jobs" formula (Abella et al., 1995) is largely prevalent. Immigrants are accepted because they take on the least attractive jobs without raising protests or making demands for improvement. Their marginal position makes them consider themselves satisfied most of the time with the jobs they find, especially when they become regular and stable. The fact that the Italian economy has so far required low-skilled immigration or has, in any case, employed it in low-skilled activities has consolidated this conception of immigrant work. For over 30 years, the Italian economic system has imported arms (i.e. workers to employ in menial occupations), while exporting (also) brains (i.e. educated workers). The agrifood system is an iconic expression of this model of the relationship between the receiving economy and foreign workers (Corrado et al., 2024).

In this article, however, I propose to take a step forward. In the Italian agrifood sector, while remaining within the framework of subordinate integration, different configurations of employment relationships are possible. Some confirm the serious problem of exploitation, while others indicate that immigrant work can give rise to more dignified and protected forms of employment, whether seasonal or relatively stable. I will delve deeper into the conditions under which this result occurs, who the beneficiaries are, and what problems remain open.

The same immigrant workforce in agriculture is changing and has become more diversified over time. In some instances, it presents greater autonomy and ability to choose, including returning home or heading to other countries. In others, immigrant workers show a persistent and perhaps even greater weakness, especially when they do not have a residence permit, and remain entangled in exploitative relationships without finding alternatives.

Compared to this great variability in employment methods, the social regulation of work in the sector presents different degrees of contractual coverage, depending on the level of development of the territories, the types of activities, and local political traditions. The social actors, in turn, mainly trade unions, pro-immigrant associations, religious institutions, and social movements, have been working for years to combat exploitation, promote processes of emergence of immigrant work, offer dignified housing solutions, guarantee basic services (e.g. healthcare) (Intersos, 2019).

These questions will be explored in depth based on the results of nine local case studies on agricultural and agro-industrial production areas conducted in eight Italian regions between May and October 2023.

The article is structured as follows. In the second section, I will present the salient statistical data on the role of immigrants in Italian agriculture. In the third, I will illustrate the method and contexts in which the research was carried out. In the fourth and fifth sections, I will give an account of the main results, referring to work relationships (The Diversity of Employment Models: The Forms of Subordinate Integration section) and their social implications, especially housing (The Social Implications of Subordinate Integration section). In the last section, I will conclude, delving into the issue of the social regulation of work in the agri-food industry.

Immigrants in Italian agriculture

ISTAT, The Italian National Statistical institute, estimates immigrants who work regularly in Italy to be around 2.4 million, more than 10% of those employed (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche sociali 2023). In agriculture their contribution is much more significant than this average value: foreigners employed in the sector are almost 362,000 at the end of 2022 and cover 31.7% of the registered working days (Magrini, 2023). Indeed, the institutional data are distorted due to the concomitant impact of unregistered work and fictitious registrations of Italian workers aimed at accessing some social benefits: unemployment benefits, social security contributions, and maternity coverage (Caruso, 2022). However, the data offer an orientation to grasp the extent of the contribution of immigrant workers to Italian agriculture and the problems they have to face.

It should be noted that, compared to what most of the research of recent years reveals about the role of refugees in the sector (Dines & Rigo, 2015), the leading national origins recorded in the institutional data are still, in order: Romania, Morocco, India, Albania, Senegal. Refugee nationalities do not appear in the top positions, and in general, sub-Saharan Africa is under-represented. It is very probable that if undeclared participation in agricultural work could be adequately detected, the African components would rise in importance, as various local researchers have indicated. However, the data inspire caution in identifying field workers with Africans and emphasizing the contribution of recently arrived refugees to the agricultural labor market. If anything, official statistics identify trends: Romanian workers are decreasing sharply, from almost 120,000 in 2016 to 78,000 in 2022. Moroccans, Indians, and Albanians are growing by a few thousand units: + 7,009, + 7,421, and +5,902, respectively. The Tunisians are substantially stable (going from 12,671 to 14,071). At the same time, the growth of the Senegalese is more marked, in relative terms, almost doubled: from 9,526 to 16,229 (+6,703), and that of the Nigerians is very strong, going from 2,786 to 11,894 (+9,108), just as Malians (from 3,654 to 8,123) and Gambians (from 1,493 to 7,107) also increased (Magrini, 2023). The statistical sources, therefore, certify a growth in the employment of sub-Saharan immigrants in the sector. However, they do not confirm the thesis of a replacement of the components that have been established for the longest time.

As mentioned, we must then try to measure the unregistered component of immigrant work in agriculture. In 2021, according to the Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto (2022), the number of irregular workers in the fields can be estimated at around 230,000, victims of illegal intermediaries and entrepreneurs, with a significant growth compared to the 180,000 estimated in 2020 (year however characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic and confinement measures). Among them, there are also 55,000 women. Italian citizens also appear, but the Report confirms the link of the phenomenon with the exploitation of the weaker components of the immigrant population.

The problem is concentrated above all in the regions of Southern Italy (Apulia, Sicily, Lucania, Campania, Calabria), with the addition of Latium, with rates that exceed 40% of the overall employment in the sector. However, it is also present in the Center-North, with percentages between 20 and 30%. Almost two-fifths of the hours actually worked annually by agricultural workers are irregular: in figures, over 300 million hours out of a total of 820 million (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2022).

The Report also describes the evolution of labor exploitation beyond traditional gangmastering or intermediation disguised as a system of transporting workers to the fields. Forms of illicit procurement and sub-contracting emerge, orchestrated by "white collar" workers, through fictitious companies, shell companies registered in the name of frontmen, or false cooperatives.

Exploitation expands in various sectors, but agriculture remains the sector most at risk. In the 5-year period 2017–2021, out of a total of 438 cases of judicial proceedings and investigations for labor exploitation, 212 (over 48%) concerned the agricultural sector alone. Also, from this point of view, the regions of the South are the most affected, but exploitation has also grown in the Center-North: in 2017, out of 14 proceedings, 12 concerned the Southern regions. In 2018, there were 23 out of 43; in 2019, 31 out of 55; and in 2021, 28 out of 49. These data are affected by the reactivity of the contexts, or vice versa, their habituation to exploitation, and, consequently, by the willingness to report and combat the phenomenon. The judicial proceedings reflect the component of this social plague that has come to light, but they do not exhaust it. Their territorial distribution crosses the effective diffusion of the problem with repressive action. However, a general figure can be assumed: serious exploitation is more widespread in the South of Italy but is also found in the Center-North (Osservatorio Placido Rizzotto, 2022).

Research strategy, method, and contexts

Agrifood is a typical case in which human labor must be organized and managed locally: the possibility of outsourcing is limited, especially when employers aim to highlight the excellence of local production. The economic and social conditions of work, the seasonality and precariousness of employment, the distance in many cases from urban centers, the low social reputation of agricultural workers, mean that the sector suffers from substantial labor shortages and therefore attracts immigrant workers in many developed countries. Piore already spoke about it in his famous book *Birds of Passage* (Piore, 1979). What can change are the conditions of employment of immigrant workers, the fairness of treatment, respect for labor contracts and fundamental rights. The research aimed to investigate these differences.

The research was carried out by a research team set up at the Confronti Study Center of Rome, commissioned by the FAI-CISL trade union (Centro studi Confronti 2024). It adopted the case study strategy (Priya, 2021) and applied it to local agrifood systems. This can be defined as an in-depth analysis, constructed reflectively, crossing different knowledge sources (Creswell, 2014): statistical data, institutional documents, statements from social actors, previous research, interviews with key informants. In particular, a total of about 70 narrative interviews were collected in the local contexts under study, to which informal interviews and field visits should be added. The interviewees are trade union workers, public officials, entrepreneurs and representatives of employers' associations, exponents of immigrant associations and local civil society, immigrant and Italian workers. Local trade union operators acted as intermediaries with the

local actors and provided the preliminary information to approach the characteristics of the local agro-industrial systems.

Case studies imply a recursive interaction between the researcher and the context studied, in which initial hypotheses are tested, redefined, and refined based on the data collected and dialogue with local interlocutors until arriving at a coherent presentation, not only descriptive but also interpretative of the main features of the contexts under study. This method, therefore, involves the identification and appreciation of the peculiar aspects of each case considered: what makes it exemplary and, at the same time, representative of trends also found in other territorial systems.

The nine local areas studied and their respective agrifood systems were chosen to cover various productions and territorial socio-economic structures. However, they are not exhaustive of the great variety of the Italian agri-food sector. In particular, the research aimed to cover different Italian regions, from Trentino to Sicily, and different types of production, from seasonal fruit harvesting to livestock farming, from animal slaughter to dairy production, from tomato harvesting to greenhouse work. Consequently, the project aimed to study different forms of immigrants' insertion into the agrifood industry, as well as different ways of receiving and accommodating them in the territory.

I list them below:

- The Saluzzo area (province of Cuneo, Piedmont, Northern Italy), represents one of the most important Italian areas for fruit production and attracts seasonal labor for the harvesting campaigns, as well as more stable workers, including specialized ones and settled in the area;
- The area of the lower Bergamo plain (Lombardy, Northern Italy) specialized in dairy production and milk processing (particularly in the production of Grana Padano cheese), in which the role of Sikh Indians in livestock farming was investigated;
- The province of Trento (Northern Italy), and in particular the Val di Non, specialized in the production of apples, with extensive use of seasonal immigrant labor for harvesting operations, for years mainly coming from Eastern European countries integrated into the EU, based on an orderly system of temporary settlement, and now affected by a crisis in traditional recruitment channels;
- The Veneto region (Northern Italy), with a focus on the asparagus production area between Lower Padua and Polesine and on the wine-growing area of Valpolicella, in the province of Verona: in both, the immigrant workforce covers almost the entire workforce required, with a significant incidence of the female component;
- The Modena province (Central Italy), where our study has focused the attention on meat processing, which offers stable employment opportunities and some space for professional improvement, but where the work of immigrants remains largely relegated to invisibility;
- The Romagna area (province of Forlì, Central Italy, and more precisely the Bidente valley) in which the study analyzed another sector of the food industry, the poultry sector, also investigating the forms and possibilities of integration of immigrants in the territorial context, i.e. in repopulation of the Apennine valleys;
- The Domitian coast, around the town of Castel Volturno (province of Caserta, Southern Italy), a symbolic place of the "normalization of labor exploitation" of immigrant laborers engaged in the various crops in the area, as well as their confinement in degraded housing solutions;
- The Capitanata area (province of Foggia, Southern Italy), another symbolic place for the employment of immigrant agricultural workers engaged above all in tomato harvesting campaigns, often hired in conditions deviating from contractual standards, combined with the social isolation caused by aggregation in informal housing settlements, the so-called "ghettos";

- The Vittoria-Ragusa area (Sicily, Southern Italy), another local context well known for the structural use of immigrant labor in the so-called "transformed belt" of greenhouse cultivation, with more stable forms of employment and now permanent settlements, but with persistent forms of illegal and "grey" work, social isolation, difficulty in accessing schools and services for reunited families, including sexual exploitation of the female population (Cortese & Palidda, 2018).

The diversity of employment models: the forms of subordinate integration

It can be stated, echoing Sayad (1991), that immigration functions as a mirror of the receiving society, its development path, and its delays and contradictions. This is perhaps even more true considering the Italian agrifood sector.

The case studies show that its functioning and the methods of managing immigrant labor reveal in some territories the pockets of backwardness and socio-economic fragility of local productions (Capitanata, Castel Volturno, partly Vittoria-Ragusa). In others, however, they indicate the competitive capacity of productions and territories that have been able to establish themselves for the quality of the products, technological investments, and the image of excellence associated with the brands (Trentino, Modena, Romagna, Veneto areas studied). These differences can be interpreted as different forms of subordinate integration: in all the territorial contexts studied, immigrants are employed as workers, assigned to strenuous jobs, in most cases in temporary forms. However, other dimensions of employment relationships are markedly different, starting from the regularity of hiring.

The first and most extreme form of subordinate integration consists in *exploitation*: the use of unregulated, underpaid, illegally intermediated immigrant labor, managed in authoritarian and sometimes violent ways, poorly housed in precarious and hygienically deplorable accommodations (Abbatecola et al., 2022). It attracts immigrants in conditions of legal and social fragility: people without a residence permit, asylum seekers, newcomers, and people who have lost their jobs and returned to work in the fields in the absence of alternatives. They are usually employed for a few weeks and then forced to move elsewhere following the seasonality of the ripening of agricultural products. This situation is, in fact, tolerated by weak or absent public institutions, which end up accepting it as a lesser evil. Not infrequently, local and national authorities, even in cases of serious accidents and loss of human lives, intervene to minimize the extent of illegal practices, refusing to recognize the structural role of gangmastering and the exploitation of workers in the functioning of various local agricultural economies (Perrotta & Raeymaekers, 2023). Recruitment abroad and the employment of workers, which in other national agrifood systems is managed by complex systems of transnational intermediation (Krifors, 2021), in the Italian case is regulated in a largely informal manner, through ethnic networks, word of mouth and often gangmastering, or indirectly, not rarely in recent years by employing immigrants who arrived through the asylum channel.

Only by highlighting the widespread tolerance toward the exploitation of immigrant workers can we explain the reconstruction of the slums after periodic destruction (Peano, 2021), and even the fact that projects of intervention are multiplying, and damage reduction measures are being implemented, such as the installation of toilets and medical facilities, without being able to tackle the problem at its roots. The exploitation of immigrants is the most emblematic indicator of the degradation of the territories and of the public institutions responsible for their government. Fragile agriculture can only stay afloat by compressing wages, rights, and ancillary costs of maintaining the workforce (i.e. above all, housing) (Perrotta & Raeymaekers, 2023). Here, subordinate integration takes on the traits of wild capitalism, even when it feeds the supply chains of modern large-scale retail trade. If anything, it is striking that this method of managing employment relationships is not only relegated to marginal areas of Southern Italy but can also be found in significant aspects in developed regions, such as in the Saluzzo area in Piedmont,

as our study shows. Another relevant case has been identified in the rich viticulture of Tuscany (Berti, 2024; Guidi & Berti, 2023).

Subordinate integration in this configuration means lack of regular employment contracts, long working hours, precarious employment, push toward daily hiring, illicit intermediation by the so-called *caporali* (gangmasters), absence of essential services and protections, starting from controls on hygiene and safety in the workplace. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that the sector makes extensive use of immigrants in an irregular condition and, in recent years, has seen the entry of refugees and asylum seekers, especially Africans, including rejected asylum seekers (Raeymaekers, 2024). The growth of the African component is linked to landings and asylum admissions over the last 10 years: socially fragile due to the lack of well-established networks, with often weak or missing legal titles, pressured by the need to send remittances to families, frequently also pushed to work informally by the constraints of the reception system (Guidi & Berti, 2023), African workers have occupied the lowest rung of the stratification of work in agrifood in various territories. "Black", i.e. undeclared, work is mixed with forms of partial formalization, i.e. with the registration of part of the working days, for workers with documents: what researchers have called "grey work" (Avallone, 2017) or "dark grey work" (Oliveri, 2015). Grey work is also widespread in the Vittoria-Ragusa area, where greenhouse work extends throughout the year, but the workers, if they are not completely irregular, are only regulated for a sufficient number of days to obtain unemployment benefits and other social benefits. Furthermore, a hierarchization has consolidated, in which Tunisian immigrants, who have settled in the area since the 1970s, enjoy better wages and a greater number of registered working days than Romanians, who arrived more recently (Avola, 2022).

A system like that of the *kalifoo ground*, as it is defined in Castel Volturno, emblematically illustrates the commodification of labor: the term *kalifoo* comes from Libya and identifies the "day slave". *Kalifoo grounds* are the road roundabouts where laborers gather early in the morning, waiting for someone to call them for the day's work: a scene similar to that which can be observed in many developing countries. A social worker from the area explained: "Here exploitation is the norm. Where is the difference? That the Italian has a vision and above all an almost positive consequence: I don't pay taxes. On the foreign population, however, this hinges on a huge problem that is given by the regularity of stay in the territory. In the sense that if they don't have a contract, they don't renew their residence permit. If they don't have a residence permit, they can't have a contract" (Omenetto, 2024, p. 390).

The usefulness, even the indispensability, of immigrant work is not associated here with a package of rights, reversing a historical trend of reformist capitalism. Exploitation is the typical consequence of a form of marginal capitalism, which manages to survive and withstand the challenges of an increasingly aggressive market by exploiting the weakness of immigrant labor.

Fruit picking in Trentino instead represents a decent form of temporary but largely regular employment of immigrant workers: a socially regulated variant of subordinate integration. Here, the establishment of consortia that bring together producer cooperatives, the introduction of certified brands, and technological and productive innovation have created supply chains that manage to sell local products at a profitable price, maintaining a bargaining power toward large-scale distribution and protecting producers from downward competition. In this model of capitalism, although not free from problems, including some forms of illicit intermediation, there is a place for immigrant work managed mainly in compliance with the rules, with wages compliant with contracts, in dignified conditions inside and outside the workplace. Likewise, in Veneto, the strength of brands and productions helps to place products in market segments able to reward quality, even to the detriment of price, and therefore to contain the pressure to save on labor costs.

This second version of subordinate integration can be defined as *regulated seasonality*: it consists of the use of pendular immigration, which maintains roots and interests in the country of origin, moving only in correspondence with peaks in demand, i.e. the harvest period. Responsible employers and active public institutions ensure acceptable housing conditions and

access to essential services. This model, however, is now challenged, as already mentioned, due to the contraction of the supply basins in the countries of origin. Furthermore, here subordination translates into the difficulty of professional improvement: immigrants are necessary but within the scope of executive tasks. If there is professional and possibly social mobility, this is achieved by moving to other sectors or returning home to make use of the experience acquired.

A third form of subordinate integration concerns *confinement in relatively stable but socially unpleasant occupations*, deserted by the Italian workforce. Also, in this case, employment is generally protected, and wage treatments respect collective bargaining, despite the tendencies already mentioned toward the differentiation of statutes and rights through the use of cooperatives and subcontracting. Subordination refers to the entry into socially devalued occupations, which are increasingly devolved to immigrant workers. When a job begins to be represented as a job for immigrants, the exit of the remaining Italian workers accelerates, and their return to those jobs has never occurred until now, not even in periods of recession. The slaughter industry in the Modena and Romagna areas and the livestock sector in Bergamo province represent this form of integration.

In Bergamo, cattle farms largely employ immigrant labor, mostly Sikhs from Punjab (Azzeruoli 2016) and now increasingly also Pakistanis, in regular forms in most cases, but employers try to keep them at the lowest possible level in terms of visibility and recognition. As a trade unionist interviewed stated: "Look, as a unionist I would honestly say that they are all in order: what I see is this; but I also tell you that it couldn't be otherwise. In the agricultural sector there will be irregularities, but here practically everything is in order; there are also checks here. It's a different type of work [it is stable work throughout the year, editor's note]. In the Bergamo agricultural sector, the dairy companies are now all on the same line: they want everything to work and for everyone to be in order…" (Molli, 2024, p. 305).

The lack of propensity to appreciate the skills of immigrants is inherent in the model: the idea of the employment of immigrants as an obliged solution, a necessary evil, prevails. Some upward opportunities are accessible in the organizational hierarchy of the stables, but always with responsibility for other immigrants, not for Italian workers. For the same reasons, the spaces and opportunities for extra-work integration are reduced to a minimum. Concentration in the countryside is the most functional solution: it allows the use of immigrants' work but avoids social mixing. Economic advantages -preventing the request for recognition from translating into a demand for better treatments -are combined with marketing policies, those that propose production excellence anchored to local traditions. Adherence to political visions that use immigration but deny it legitimacy and value also contributes to all of this.

A fourth and final expression of subordinate integration refers to *minority forms of qualified employment* with sufficient levels of continuity, capable of offering opportunities for improvement and professional advancement. Here, processes of stabilization, stratification, and hierarchization of different components of the immigrant population are taking place. In some territories, such as the Piedmont hills, immigrants from Eastern Europe have made progress, becoming specialized operators involved in operations such as pruning, and also owners of businesses operating in the sector, while the new arrivals, especially African sub-Saharans, have entered the lower levels of the supply chains, such as the wine-growing and fruit-growing operations. In the case of the Saluzzo area, we observe an ethnic stratification of recruitment practices, in which employers and local society, on the whole, express a preference for workers of European origin, hiring African seasonal workers only when they have no alternatives. They are reserved for the least qualified jobs, lower wages, and poorer housing conditions.

Also in the poultry industry of Romagna, some immigrant workers have managed to rise in professional level. An Italian worker interviewed stated: "Today there are also foreigners who manage complex machinery and are hyper-specialized and irreplaceable figures, just as there are Moroccans who become foremen and control the supply chains, and they are the ones who become the most company-minded of all!" (Carnevale, 2024, p. 363).

According to a recurring trend, when immigrants manage to achieve improvements on a socio-economic level, the perception of their foreign origin attenuates, also thanks to the acquisition of citizenship. The label of "immigrants" is mainly associated with the weakest and most marginal groups of foreign workers, while it tends to fade with access to qualified positions, to the point of losing relevance in the case of skilled migrants. As Anderson (2017) notes, immigration is "problematic mobility."

The social implications of subordinate integration

The different forms of subordinate integration at work are reflected in the social and, above all, housing level. Even local contexts in which the use of foreign workers has become structural for decades now still present phenomena of marginalization and social isolation. Even worse, not rarely does the violation of rights in the workplace extend into life outside of work. The case of Vittoria-Ragusa is emblematic. Many immigrants (especially Romanians) who have reunited their families over time live in poor farmhouses in the middle of the fields or in shacks without water or services. They almost never move from their places of settlement and interact almost only with employers, who benefit from the workers' proximity to the workplace and from the surveillance tasks they implicitly take on. These precarious accommodations hinder access to public services and social rights, such as registration in the National Health Service and education for their children, generating another form of exploitation of immigrants: speculation on private transport to reach cities and towns in order to shop or to access services.

The overlap between job precariousness and housing precariousness reaches its peak in the informal settlements that dot various agricultural areas of Southern Italy, including those of Castel Volturno and Capitanata studied in our research: shantytowns that have arisen around disused public buildings, abandoned farmhouses, and degraded buildings (Peano, 2021). In Puglia, a 2022 survey recorded 35 such situations, of which 24 were in the province of Foggia (IDOS., 2022). These settlements, in the case of Puglia, host a population ranging between 8-12,500 people during the harvesting campaigns in the summer months and 1,500-2,000 who reside there all year round. Informal settlements, therefore, respond to a dual need. In most cases, they act as transit stations of circulatory networks of agricultural workers who move between different areas, following the rhythms of the harvesting campaigns (Ciniero, 2018; Fravega & Queirolo Palmas, 2022). In other cases, however, they represent a relatively stable housing solution, in a sort of adaptation to marginality, which also allows for the creation of forms of self-organization in the institutional desert, with the ambiguous and even illegal implications that they may entail. These mix with social practices that can be seen as "new forms of being together" and new opportunities for interaction and sociability (ibid., p. 223). This includes the informal economic activities that flourish in the settlements and which allow laborers to supplement their wages, from renting beds to preparing food, providing barber services, repairing vehicles and transporting people. Subordinate integration here means serious housing exclusion but also the opportunity to develop forms of self-organization on the margins of local society.

In the case of Castel Volturno, the downward spiral established emerges between institutional abandonment, degradation of the territory, and personal drifts of the immigrants settled there, with disillusionment, the loss of hope, and the normalization of exploitation.

"Degradation degrades you," as a social worker interviewed in Castel Volturno declared (Omenetto, 2024, p. 402). In Puglia, the Tre Titoli ghetto was described by a priest, responsible of the local Caritas, as a final landing place, a place where sick immigrants come to die and desperate ones take their own lives: "After a life of misery, spent working in the most exhausting ways, these people return to Tre Titoli. Many come to Tre Titoli to die, often suffering from cancer, others to take their own lives. This year we have had at least three or four suicides" (Vitullo, 2024, p. 416).

However, even informal settlements make up a composite geography and present different levels of housing and social hardship. The Ragusa case paints a picture of housing poverty,

which does not give rise to conspicuous spatial concentrations but is consumed in dispersion across the territory and in social isolation. Here, the employers can profit from the contiguity between workplaces and places where immigrants live, while the workers are not visible to the outside world and, therefore, do not generate perceptions of invasion or occupation of the territory. In Puglia, the so-called ghettos present different forms of internal organization, quality of housing, and provision of informal services (see Caruso, 2022): for example, electricity obtained by illegally connecting to the electricity grid. The settlement of Borgo Mezzanone, in Puglia, is depicted as a real city, with its neighborhoods and their picturesque names, which refer to the inhabitants' places of origin or the trade carried out there. For immigrants with limited resources, living in slums can also be a choice to save on housing costs and possibly earn something thanks to informal activities, to the point of becoming a lifestyle. A part of the immigrant laborers adapts to the harshest forms of subordinate integration.

Abandonment by institutions inevitably favors their replacement by migratory networks organized by national groups, with leaders, law enforcement services, rules, and sanctions (Peano, 2021). Violence, the monopoly of some actors, such as autonomous unions allied with ethnic networks, and the exclusion of others with brutal means, as in the case of the beating of a union representative at the Rignano site, can also come into play. The representative of an immigrants' association declared: "The ghetto of Rignano is particularly inaccessible because it is based on a tribal management, where three ethnic groups in particular are predominant: Ghanaian, Ivorian and Nigerian" (Vitullo, 2024, p. 415).

Fluidity and ecological succession of the composition of the inhabitants, with new groups arriving and settling and others being marginalized or leaving, is another dimension of housing informality. The flows of refugees leaving the reception system are identified as the main protagonists of the growth, rebirth, and reproduction of informal settlements: a process almost independent of their legal status, so much so that it involves recognized refugees, asylum seekers still waiting for a response, denied applicants or who for other reasons have lost the right to reside legally.

Even moving to the North and in the presence of more stable employment contracts, the difficulty in accessing the housing market and finding acceptable accommodation hinders social inclusion processes. Subordinate integration in these cases combines relative fairness in contractual treatments with lasting discrimination at an urban and social level. Hierarchies based on origin and skin color also emerge, which see workers of African origin particularly penalized. As mentioned above, in Saluzzo some components have settled better and can count on the support of networks of compatriots, who are able to offer beds and more overall social support: immigrants from Eastern Europe, and to a certain extent also Maghrebians and Chinese. These social support networks are not available to the more recently arrived and more stigmatized sub-Saharan workers, who face great difficulties in housing arrangements. Various projects and initiatives, both public and promoted by civil society actors, with funding from different sources, have for several years now been trying to tackle a situation of serious housing hardship, which has led to informal encampments and evictions even in one of the richest areas of Northern Italy. Investments in the construction of reception facilities have only partially remedied a structural and recurring emergency. Here, the peculiarity and, at the same time, the most critical aspect of the housing question derives from the fact that the laborers cannot find abandoned spaces to occupy in the countryside. They, therefore, did not build informal settlements. To sleep and satisfy essential needs, they, therefore, return to the city every day, camping in a park (see Uleri and Al. 2023) and provoking protests and institutional reactions with repeated interventions by the security authorities. Emblematically, the immigrants needed as workers for the agricultural economy of the area become unwelcome guests in the city. The worker required during the day turns into an element of degradation and a threat to urban decorum at night. Companies that structurally employ seasonal immigrant workers, year after year and for various collection campaigns, pass on the costs of reception to society, public institutions, and especially the immigrants themselves.

In the case of Sikh Indians employed in livestock activities, work most often offers the additional benefit of housing and the possibility of family reunification, but at the cost of social isolation in the farmhouses, large rural buildings that are now semi-abandoned, and in small rural towns, where immigrants sometimes even manage to buy low-cost houses. This fact, in turn, favors intra-community sociality but poor integration into local society and relations with the Italian population. The Sikhs employed in the stables speak Italian with more difficulty than their compatriots employed in the manufacturing industry and logistics. Women, who generally arrived following their husbands, have only recently begun to enter the labor market, coming out from widespread situations of confinement in the domestic space.

The element of social isolation is also found in the Modena meat industry, but to a lesser extent, since the work takes place in organized contexts, although generally located in extra-urban territories. Ethnicization is, therefore, not as strong. In other words, immigrants of different origins and Italians work together. However, problems of stratification and separation remain in the workplace, where the newcomers, typically Africans, are generally penalized. There is also a lack of integration in social contexts outside of work and, above all, difficulties in finding housing, with consequent phenomena of overcrowding and discomfort, especially once again for African workers.

A positive example also, in this case, is offered by Trentino, although within the limits of a dignified reception for seasonal workers. Thanks also to a provincial collective agreement that obliges employers to provide accommodation for workers in heated rooms equipped with toilets, companies host workers in their own spaces or rent suitable homes, organize transport services to places of work, or benefit from the hospitality offered by compatriots who are now permanently settled. Employers and local public institutions bear the social costs of this form of subordinate integration. As the chapter on the Trentino case explains, "Today it is a widespread and consolidated practice for employers to allocate part of their homes to seasonal staff accommodation, or, alternatively, to rent apartments or houses for their staff. It is also common for farmers to organize minibuses for the journey from their homes to the countryside, or to provide their workers with a private vehicle" (Piovesan, 2024, p. 226).

Even in Veneto, the most structured and socially responsible companies provide for the housing needs of seasonal workers, renting housing modules or lodgings.

The Romagna experience also presents predominantly positive results, in which many immigrant workers have managed to find independent and relatively stable living arrangements, reuniting families: a territory socially infrastructured by the historical presence of a dense cooperative network has shown the capacity of integrating a large and diverse population of immigrant workers, in agricultural activities and above all in the poultry industry. This offers employment for almost the entire year, accompanied by social safety nets for the remaining period. Immigrants are largely employed in the lower positions of organizational hierarchies but are now also able to access positions of greater responsibility. On the territory, the depopulation of the internal areas (the valleys of the Romagna Apennines) translates into settlement opportunities for immigrants in the small, hilly towns. The economic dynamism of the area is combined with the commitment of the institutions, the participation of the unions, and the vitality of the social fabric: this combination also allows immigrants to become part of the local society. Here the subordinate integration seems to evolve toward a stable and legitimized settlement of immigrants, even if the mixing with the local population is not yet achieved.

Conclusions. Envisioning a better social regulation of agrifood industry

Agrifood historically represents a sector that attracts immigrant labor. As in the past, peak demand at harvest time requires a large influx of workers for short periods, in the typical form of seasonal immigration. However, this use of immigrants generates problems of precariousness, contractual irregularities, and substandard treatments, as many studies conducted in various countries have demonstrated.

Overall, agricultural work can be defined as an exemplary case of subordinate integration: immigrants are required as low-skilled workers assigned to strenuous operations in often harsh environmental conditions. They fill gaps in the lower ranks of the organizational hierarchy, compensating for local workers' unwillingness to work under those conditions. If they are irregular from a legal point of view, they are even more easily exploitable: they offer the highest degree of flexibility and adaptability required by less scrupulous employers.

However, subordinate integration in agriculture can take on different connotations, with different degrees of contractual protection and respect for workers' rights. In our research, we identified four. The first is the well-known one of *exploitation*: the extreme form of subordination in which workers' rights are trampled on in various ways. Although some forms of mobilization and protest have occurred over the years, the main response of workers is to seek employment elsewhere, thanks also to more favorable market conditions today. The second version of subordinate immigration can instead be defined as *regulated seasonality*, in which temporary employment is managed in compliance with workers' rights. Largely fueled for about 20 years by Eastern European workers in possession of European citizenship, it too today has to deal with a reduction in traditional recruitment pools and turn to workers from third countries. The third form of subordinate integration consists of *confinement* in rather stable, protected, correctly paid, but ethnicized, socially devalued occupations, generally relegated to the margins of local societies. The last possibility concerns *minority forms of qualified employment*, with inclusion in good quality jobs and with the possibility of professional improvement. It can be added that, as of June 2023, 20,175 agricultural businesses with foreign owners were registered in Italy, with a progress of 28% in the last 5 years: a fraction of immigrant agricultural workers escape the borders of subordinate immigration and undertake an attempt at social mobility through self-employment.

The typology of forms of subordinate integration illustrated here represents a stimulus to refine research on the forms of employment of immigrants in the agrifood industry also at an international level: if up to now the attention of researchers has been attracted mainly by serious exploitation, it is desirable to develop a broader analysis of the different ways of integrating immigrant workers into the sector.

Subordinate integration in agrifood has social implications that are revealed above all in the housing sector. Also, in this case, it is possible to distinguish different ways of articulating work and housing arrangements. Work exploitation is linked in many cases to serious forms of *housing insecurity*. Failure to respect rights at work has repercussions on complementary treatments and, above all, on reception conditions: saving on labor costs also implies refusing to take on the social needs of immigrant workers. However, the informal settlements of migrant workers form a diversified geography with different levels of housing solutions and services. Self-governed by migratory networks, they develop informal economies, sometimes even illegal, and controversial combinations of autonomy and abuse toward other immigrants, often including women.

The second case is that of *social isolation*, in which the answer to the housing problem is found in peripheral rural contexts, which crystallizes the separation from the native population. Although here, too, immigrants manage to develop forms of self-organization, for example, by building places of worship that function as aggregation centers (Ambrosini et al., 2021), a gap is consolidated between a reluctant economic acceptance and a persistent social and political closure toward them.

The third solution is that of a *dignified reception for seasonal workers*. Also, in this case, immigration is accepted as a necessary element for the functioning of the agricultural economy of the territories, social integration is not foreseen but not even required, and the pact is transparent: the immigrants arrive with a fixed-term employment contract, they stop for the foreseen period, then return home. If anything, the problem consists of the model's stability due to the lack of available labor supply and, therefore, the need to adapt it to the needs of other workers, such as those coming from the asylum channel.

The fourth variant is instead characterized by *stability and integration into the territory*, favored by regular employment contracts and the depopulation of many hilly and mountainous areas. It is, above all, European immigrants who benefit from it, both for longer periods of residence, for EU citizenship, for having obtained Italian citizenship, and also for greater social acceptance. In this way, processes of stratification of the immigrant population employed in the agrifood industry are produced in some territories, with the formation of a sort of mostly white and European working aristocracy and a precarious workforce increasingly made up of African workers who have arrived in recent years. Again, this contribution aims to stimulate a comparison with other countries, in order to understand whether similar forms of stratification are developing elsewhere, how they work, and what criteria of differentiation they adopt. In particular, racial prejudice and discrimination, especially against immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, who are consistently put at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder within the agrifood sector, would deserve a larger comparative analysis across different countries, on both sides of the Atlantic.

A final series of considerations concerns social regulation and the role of the social partners. Respect for the rules and protection of workers' rights are more advanced where agrifood is better organized, with the formation of consortia between producers capable of obtaining better conditions in negotiations with commercial distribution and the processing industry, and technologically more advanced. In turn, enforcement of the rule of law, trade union action and negotiation between the social partners slow down the downward competition at the expense of workers, urging companies to pursue other competitive strategies based on product quality, investment in brands, innovation in production processes, and cultivation techniques. Advanced agriculture, effective social regulation, institutional support and dignified treatment of agricultural workers go hand in hand and reinforce each other.

However, in Italy, the protagonism of immigrant agricultural workers in trade unions and in social struggles is still rather marginal. Although some immigrants have obtained local and even national positions in major unions, and others participate in the protest actions of small independent unions, overall, the relationship of migrant workers with trade unions is rather utilitarian: workers, when possible, seek protection and assistance from trade unions, but rarely take active roles. Reciprocally, the unions represent and protect them but do not offer great career opportunities in their organizational structures. Immigrants more easily find space as operators in services dedicated to other immigrants, which, above all, provide bureaucratic assistance in the many procedures to which they are subjected (De Luca et al., 2018).

The functioning of social regulation, the role of unions in the sector, the spaces of protagonism for immigrant workers, represent a third area of comparison between the Italian case and that of other countries. It would be desirable to understand where, how, and under what conditions, the social protection of immigrant workers in the agrifood industry is more effective, inclusive, open to the initiative of the immigrants themselves.

The discovery of immigrants as essential food supply workers during the Covid 19 pandemic (Corrado et al., 2024) does not appear to have triggered a greater push for collective action so far. The taking of initiative by immigrants to achieve better working conditions in a crucial and emblematic sector such as the agrifood industry is a page that is still largely waiting to be written.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This article was funded by Centro studi Confronti, Roma and Italian Ministry of University and Research (MIUR) (PRIN 2020).

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