



Europe's Boat Migrants, Italy's Oranges and New Expressions of Slavery. Ethnographical Insights from Calabria

By Gilles Reckinger

My book *Bittere Orangen. Ein neues Gesicht der Sklaverei in Europa* [*Bitter Oranges. A new face of slavery in Europe*] (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 2018) addresses some desiderata in recent sociological and anthropological research about boat migration to Southern Italy by ethnographically following the migrants after they are brought from Lampedusa to the Italian mainland, and by trying to understand how the control of migration movements at national and EU levels are intertwined with precarious labour markets.

Thousands of immigrants arrive by boat to Italy every year, greatly overstressing the available provision of housing facilities and state support. More and more immigrants, including asylum seekers as well as refugees or those still in limbo, are left to their own devices. To survive, they have no other choice than to seek seasonal day-to-day labour on fruit and vegetable plantations in Southern Italy.



Bitter Oranges. A new Face of Slavery in Europe. © Gilles Reckinger, Magdalene Krumbeck



Harvest worker on fruit plantation in Southern Italy. Picture © Gilles Reckinger

With more nation-states closing their borders as the Schengen area falls apart, it has become impossible for many migrants to leave Italy, exposing them to severe exploitation and forcing them into slavery-like working conditions.

The harvest workers are hired on a daily basis, usually without legal contracts. On average, a daily wage for 12–14 hours of work amounts to a maximum of 25 euros. Competition is intense and most African harvest workers only find work a few days a month, resulting in monthly incomes ranging from 100 to 300 euros.

The Italian government is aware of the situation. In the past, it has only set up a few tent camps and, more recently, built some houses for the migrants, responding to this structural situation with a logic of mere reaction to what is wrongly conceived to be a sudden emergency, while it is really a consequence of the current European border regime and its structurally racist architecture.

As no proper housing is available for most migrants, they are forced to live in makeshift camps made of plastic and cardboard. In terms of hygiene, conditions are disastrous.



Precarious housing conditions. Picture © Gilles Reckinger



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In my book, I ethnographically follow the everyday lives of the harvest workers in Calabria and elsewhere in Italy. I also analyze how their vulnerability is shaped by the specific conditions they are being brought into by European political decisions.

My book reminds readers that a treatment of this topic according to a logic of disaster management is counterproductive, because, while trying to combat symptoms, it distracts from the urgent need to find European, inclusive solutions that take into account Europe's human-rights heritage.