Making Home(s) in Displacement

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Introduction

Since the end of the 20th Century, significant demographic studies have highlighted the critical role of European cities in the management of the increased flow of immigration from Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East (Cohen & Layton-Henry, 1993; Skelcher, Sullivan, & Jeffares, 2013). The forecast of these studies primarily concerned urban centres that are part of conurbations or international areas of development, such as cities which are otherwise on the road to economic decline, like Foggia. These cities would not have been able to absorb the additional workforce or sustain the costs, thereby making their role one of future transit to other, richer areas rather than one of settlement (Sassen, 1994; Caponio, Scholten, & Zapata-Barrero, 2019). In recent years the application of the Dublin III Agreement and the restriction of immigration policy in Italy have forced many migrants to enter an underworld of illegality and live on the edge of the city, thus foregoing opportunities for integration. In most cases these forced migrants do not have their own funds to use to sustain themselves or facilitate their own means of integration (Ammirati, 2015).

Furthermore, in the last twenty years the Italian government has consistently failed to establish a multi-year plan for migrants’ integration into the urban fabric, in contrast to other European countries (Balbo & Manconi, 1990; Macioti & Pugliese, 1996). Consequently, only individuals waiting for their requests for asylum to be decided are allowed access to and to reside in a CARA, but Italian legislation forbids them to have any sort of occupation. Non-asylum seekers are forced to find a place to stay and any kind of job, even an illegal one. Caporalato and mafia can prosper in this situation because migrants, who
have nothing but their “bare lives” (Agamben, 1995), which is to say no rights to legal or political representation, are easily sequestered in under-paid work in local farms and often end up being detained by employers (Rizzuti, 2019). This situation of exploitation impacts on the local labour market too, as landlords prefer a migrant workforce that is cheap and easily exploitable. It is a vicious circle which provokes tensions with the local Italian community who feel cheated of regular and safe employment. The numerous ghettos that accumulate around urban centres with an agricultural vocation, as in the case of Foggia, increase the degradation of the site and provoke racist and violent reactions against those migrants (Bellizzi, 2019).

This chapter endeavours to explain the ‘homing’ experience of the Borgo Mezzanone shantytown through interviews with twelve temporary inhabitants about their living conditions and their effort to transform a precarious and illegal housing location into an environment that somehow resembles home. Considering the danger and risks at play for an Italian person, especially a woman, in travelling to this location, it was possible to have only a series of unstructured interviews with a handful of young people, twelve in total, who were associated at the time with a friend of the interviewer, a young boy from the Ivory Coast. He is an asylum seeker first encountered during research in Riace, a small Italian town that has since become famous because of its integration politics. The demographic of the interviewees consisted of men between the ages of 19 and 31, who come predominantly from the Ivory Coast (10), but also from Burkina Faso (2).

Context

Southern Italy has never managed to bridge the economic and social gap between the rich and poor compared to the regions of Central and Northern Italy. Indeed, from the time of National Unification (1861) to the present, this gap has only widened (Novacco, 1992). The disparity was fuelled both by poor political choices, such as the failure to invest in infrastructure, and by the post-Fordist revolution that rewarded investments in the third sector and crushed the more fragile economies, such as those still predominantly agricultural but not sufficiently mechanised (Sassen, 1999). For these reasons, the region has become a laboratory of weaving relationships among indigenous criminal systems, imported mafias, exploitation of human beings, the economy and politics. In the area of Foggia, the capital of a province of 627,000 inhabitants, the practices of caporalato (i.e. a form of illegal intermediation and exploitation of migrant workers in the agricultural sector) and prostitution are widespread and
well-known by the national and local media (Leogrande, 2016). This situation of degradation gave rise to ghettos similar to those in Libya, which typically have a brothel and a central square suitable for drug dealing (Sagnet & Palmisano, 2015).

Borgo Mezzanone is only 15km away from Foggia, although it is part of the municipality of Manfredonia which is 45km away. The village was founded in 1934 by the fascist regime which reclaimed the area to reduce the flow of emigrants predominantly from Africa and the Middle East to Northern Europe and the Americas (D’Alessandro, 2002). Being located in one of the few plains in the Italian peninsula, Foggia has from the beginning been an agricultural site. For this reason, even today the area is renowned for its agricultural production, especially tomatoes. Half of the Italian tomatoes produced come from this area (Daniele & Malanima, 2011). The production process can be conducted legally, through temporary employment agencies or internet sites, or clandestinely, which benefits from the caporali recruiting labour on behalf of landowners. This latter approach produces about 15 per cent of the workforce, who originate from other countries and may or may not have a regular residence permit (Barbaro, 2018). Recent Italian legislation has tried to challenge this phenomenon, recognising it as a crime punishable by severe prison sentences (Di Marzio, 2017). It should be noted nonetheless that in Southern Italy the mafia’s reach and control are powerful and have been intertwined for almost two centuries with the economic and political spheres of life, rendering the exercise of law onerous (Ciconte, 2008). Since many migrants cannot be hired on the basis of regular employment contracts, the local mafias present themselves as their only source of employment. This vicious circle fuels illegality and prevents the real integration of asylum seekers and refugees into the Italian social fabric (Liberti & Ciconte, 2016).

Before entering Borgo Mezzanone, it is important to understand what is meant by caporalato. The caporalato is an Italian word which indicates an informal system of organisation of temporary agricultural work, consisting of labourers inserted into groups of ‘work’ teams of variable size. The caporale is a man who can distinguish himself by the ability to find the cheapest labour for landowners and agricultural companies. He is an illegal labour force broker and the workforce manager of the local farmers (Omizzo, 2018). The caporale is the middleman who engages the farmhands on behalf of the owner and sets their remuneration, part of which he keeps for himself. Wages paid to workers or ‘days’ are considerably lower than those in the regulatory tariff and often do not include social security contributions (Arena, 2012). The contractual hourly pay for casual agricultural workers in Italy was set by law at €6.50 to €9.65, but in the area of Borgo Mezzanone the hourly pay is typically around €3.50 (INPS, 2017).
The Italian legal framework has responded to this phenomenon only in the last few years with the progressive ban on caporalato as a criminal practice in the exploitation of labour. In 2011, Italian law nr.148 introduced into the penal code the new crime of caporalato as the illicit brokering and exploitation of labour. The penalties provided for the caporali are imprisonment from between five and eight years as well as a fine of between €1,000 and €2,000 for each worker involved (Di Marzio, 2017). The government has since announced the use of regulatory measures to punish companies that employ labour through the system of caporalato which can result in the confiscation of their assets (Porcelluzzi, 2012). Despite this, in Borgo Mezzanone the reality of caporalato is a common one due to the presence of numerous young people, also Italians, but especially those who come from sub-Saharan Africa and who have left a reception centre and have subsequently not found the means lawfully to enter the Italian workforce. Some of them are without residence permits by reason of problems related to Italian legislation (Giuliani, 2015). According to the data collected by the CGIL, one of the most relevant Italian Unions, the business of agromafie – mafias working in the agricultural field – has been shown to involve at least 100,000 workers and to make a profit of €48 billion a year (Agromafie, 2018). However, recent decrees, such as that of October 2018 which bans residence permits for humanitarian reasons, have resulted in a large increase in the number of unpermitted residents (Facchini, 2018) and prevented migrants from accessing structures that, although themselves not very efficient, today represent the only form of reception (InfoMigrants, 2018).

**Italian and foreign mafias in Borgo Mezzanone**

Borgo Mezzanone is considered one of the most complicated situations of migration, illegality, agriculture and government complicity to be found in Italy. On the outskirts of Foggia, the northernmost city of Puglia, a situation of widespread illegality has been created. This is due to the strong demand for labour, employed in the lush surrounding countryside and which benefits from the workers’ vulnerability. It is estimated that there are circa 6,000 residents in the area, although an official count is not available (Fig. 1.). The place was built around a pre-existing CARA, guarded day and night by police (Sabetti, 2019). This reception centre, however, has some breaches in its fence on the north and west sides of the perimeter. Via these gaps the residents of the village enter and leave as they please. Therefore, the area under military control – the CARA – has no control of the informal settlement which holds most of the irregular workers of Borgo Mezzanone (Fig. 2.). The people interviewed, coming from
the Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso, hint that the breaches, which are large and well known to the military, are used to allow people from the CARA to bring in drugs and prostitutes.

**Figure 1.** The location of Borgo Mezzanone and the local CARA; image extracted from Google Earth by author.

**Figure 2.** Bird’s-eye view of the CARA and the informal settlement of casual workers that surrounds it; image extracted from Google Earth by author.
In 2016, the Italian journalist, Alfonso Gatti (2016), was introduced into the CARA as a fake refugee. In this way he had the chance to analyse the centre’s management. During his week-long stay, he did not see any military leave the square where the guards stay, either to visit or control movements within the barracks where 6,000 migrants are housed. He denounced the inadequate standards of living, the hygiene and food conditions of the refugees, and the mafia connivance of the cooperatives which fail to provide for minimum needs, despite the fact that they receive a contribution of €22 per day for each refugee hosted. This amount, multiplied by the number of guests and the days on which they are required to wait for the Commission’s response, reaches the figure of €14,000 per day and €15 million over three years.

Here the Gargano mafia brings in drugs (mainly, Albanian marijuana, cocaine, Turkish heroin and methamphetamine) by car, thanks to a dense network of pushers of different nationalities. The drugs reach the English-speaking part of the ghetto, dominated by the largest Central African criminal brotherhood, called the Black Axe, which works with the ‘ndrangheta and the Mexican Sinaloa cartel (Palmisano, 2018). The fact that what happens within the settlement, however criminal, has never been reported by the news media can begin to indicate the ability of these criminal groups to cooperate with each other.

In the shantytown

My personal experience of the Borgo Mezzanone started by my being forbidden to enter the CARA. Instead, the military directed us towards a passage to the north of the centre, where a very damaged road passes through the fields. This path follows a track that endangers the safe passage of cars by huge potholes. Before reaching the shantytown, one sees piles of rubbish, mostly glass, on the edge of the path. However, in all this chaos there is a particular order because garbage is divided according to the recycling criteria and not widespread. This provides evidence that the residents of the shantytown care about the cleanliness of their living quarters, as well as demonstrating how much of the waste produced nearby is reused rather than discarded. Most Africans arrive here on foot or by bicycle (Mangano, 2018). There are a number of cars, all of which are without wheels and have been used as sources for recycled materials; car seats have become sofas, the tyres are used to fix precarious house roofs, while other smaller elements are used to fix walls, curtains or other materials used in the construction of houses (Fig. 3.).

The shantytown is located on the disused runway of a military airport. As can be seen from the satellite picture, the buildings are constructed primarily along the main street, the old runway. The former airport buildings have become the mosque and the church, whereas the other masonry buildings are a
mystery; none of the interviewees wanted to give information about their use. Constructions are everywhere and are numerous. The squares are frequented by multi-ethnic groups, but an informal law limits the interaction of people from different countries. In this way, genotypical, linguistic and dialectical differences create invisible walls between various people who have been forced to live in and share the multicultural space.

Figure 3. Close-up of streets in the informal settlement; image extracted from Google Earth by author.

Figure 4. Façade of the bar made entirely of recycled materials, located in the informal settlement; photo by author.
Figure 5. The interior of one of the two restaurants; photo taken by author.
Since 2016 the shantytown has expanded due to the arrival of the Nigerian mafia which came via Naples and now occupies half of the track (Zancan, 2017). It has opened a bar (Fig. 4.), two restaurants (Fig. 5.), not to mention a nightclub, which often makes sleeping at night difficult (Fig. 6.). The other half of the track is run by Afghans arriving from Bari, who have set up a shop for various goods as well as a mosque. The area for Nigerians is forbidden to Francophone Africans, so much so that those who dare to approach it risk their lives.

**A normal day**

All the interviewees were French speakers, and they were interviewed using the interviewer’s Ivorian friend as a translator. He is a boy who can speak about ten African languages and dialects, so the interviewees were able to express themselves freely in their native language. For the researcher, however, it was not easy to make sense of what the translator reported because he was only in his second year in Italy. It is possible that many nuances were lost in translation, but the whole group confirmed the general sense. Some of them refused to answer some questions about the organisation of their work and salary. One of them explained that when he decided to leave his city in the Ivory Coast, he
certainly did not think he would end up in a place like Borgo Mezzanone. Usually, the friends closest to the Ivorian boy who acted as translator allowed me to ask more detailed and direct questions; in other cases, it was not possible to collect enough material. It should always be remembered that the conditions of the interview involved a situation of general discomfort, both for the interviewees, caught in a dimension of extreme fragility and discomfort, and for the interviewer, a white woman in an illegal camp inhabited by 6,000 Africans.

All the interviewees live in the shantytown, and not inside the CARA itself. All of them work in agriculture, except the boy, who works in a small restaurant inside the camp. He is in charge of preparing lunch for the few men who are not called on by the corporals in the morning, while in the evening many people are served in his small place. The prices are very cheap (a plate of white rice and stew costs two euros), but the quality of the food is very low, it is almost inedible; the interviewer almost choked on a piece of meat made mostly of cartilage. The restaurateur, however, specified that the meat is purchased from a supplier in Naples to make sure that it is good halal food.

All the others reported on the condition of work under the caporali system; in the morning the machines and vans of the caporali arrive from the west. Before then, at four in the morning, the labourers line up to fill their water bottles, because the Italian employers no longer provide water. Refugees leave through the four gates, and Nigerian caporali vans and ramshackle cars are waiting for them on the runway. The Nigerians take €5 per person by way of commission. Then the labourers are left along the edge of the road that leads to Foggia, where they are loaded into the Italian caporali. If one wants to avoid the cost of passage from the Nigerians, one must leave on foot or by bicycle. In the shantytown, one of the interviewees claims to keep his bicycle beside his bed for fear that it will be stolen. Anyone who loses their bicycle is then forced to pay €35 a week to the Nigerian caporali, which is in effect the cost of two days’ work. The labourers who live inside the CARA are paid less than those who live in the slums because the caporali deduct the cost of food and housing which is covered by the prefecture. Because of this, they receive a total of €15 a day, while people who live in the shantytown receive €25 per day (Gatti, 2016).

Many of them return only by ten in the evening, queue for a shower, wash a few dirty clothes, eat something and, by midnight, they sleep regardless of the noise from the nightclub which is run by Nigerian pimps and through which they can prostitute women. After three hours’ sleep they get up and leave for a new day, climbing over the CARA wall. In other European countries, especially in the North, during the same reception period refugees are required to follow language courses; otherwise, they are rejected. Inside the CARA, no one has engaged with an Italian course (Palmisano, 2017). So, after months of exploita-
tion, when they are transferred to other regions of Italy, it is as though they have not already been in the country for some time.

**Housing and dignity**

The situation both inside and outside the CARA is precarious, and people live without a waste collection, water and sewerage system. The lighting system is illegal because it is stolen from the road network. There was a parliamentary inquiry to ascertain faults and failings in the management of the centre, but nothing has led to any concrete results (Senato della Repubblica, 2016). Despite all this, those who live there have tried to recreate an environment that can somehow be described as a home. The reuse of car interiors, the creation of some restaurants, the opening of a church and a mosque, and the development of a recreational area can all be seen as signs of the need for migrants to feel somehow ‘at home’ (Sennett, 2018). If the weather is dry, it is possible to note that among the dwellings there are clay paths, though these are destined to disintegrate during the rainy season. The search for aesthetic details, such as the reuse of Christmas decorations or any object for the beautification of the premises, testifies to the need to rebuild their dignity as human beings (Carrier, 2018). The interviewees permitted some questions and answers, especially concerning religious practices; many have confirmed that working under the control of the corporals makes it difficult to obtain the opportunity to pray five times a day, as required by the Islamic faith. Since there is a mosque in the camp (all those interviewed are Muslim), many of them catch up on their lost prayers in the evening by praying several times in a row. This practice is widespread in the camp.

The interiors of the houses visited have some functional elements adapted to everyday life, such as car seats or advertising tarpaulins that can become external or internal walls of the houses. However, there are also many objects recovered from waste that become furniture to beautify the interior. Some are Christmas or Easter decorations, but in many cases it is a resignification of the object itself that, in this context, becomes an embellishment. This practice testifies to the desire to make the makeshift house feel more like a home, to produce a sense of ownership and belonging, at least temporarily. Despite their openness to talk about something as intimate as religious practice, they did not allow the interviewer to photograph the interiors or exteriors of their homes. The same prohibition of photography applies to the rest of the camp. A possible explanation of this behaviour could be concern about the use of such pictures by the media and other sources of authority in Italy; it is certainly conceivable
that the residents felt a need to protect something which provided emergency relief, and therefore a temporary respite in precarious circumstances, lest the Italian police should seek to tear it down.

Another explanation may be related to the fact that residents perceive the shantytown as a stage on a long journey. From their hometowns they planned to reach relatives or friends in Northern Europe. Borgo Mezzanone would therefore represent an intermediate stage that, for some of them however, risks becoming the ultimate destination. The refusal to permit the photographing of the spaces built with recycled materials could therefore conceal a sort of self-deception regarding their present, which they consider to be a brief passage, not to be remembered and for which they do not want to be remembered.

One angle of migration theory is working on the conceptualisation of a new kind of ‘transit mobilities’ operating in the Mediterranean region. In academia, the formulation of ‘secondary migration’ is a step on the path to the migrants’ final goal – that is, usually not a country in Southern Europe but in the North (Brekke & Brochmann, 2014). This concept is not adequate to describe the phenomenon of housing in Borgo Mezzanone. This place is full of neighbourhood waste, and on a symbolic level for Italian residents it is full of human ‘garbage’. Western civilisation is characterised by excess, redundancy, waste and garbage disposal, so much so that today this last point is one of the most critical challenges for the permanence of a sustainable world. At the same time, the wealthiest part of the planet does not want to share its lifestyle, but needs the exploitation of migrants to maintain it (Bauman, 2004). In the meantime, countries cut off from the benefits of globalisation are dominated by other dynamics, such as the free pursuit of profit and total indifference to the environment (Sassen, 2014). So, one of the macro-economic consequences in those areas is the expulsion of migrants. When they arrive in South Europe, their rights are cancelled by their incorporation into the borders of cities in decline, as in the case of Foggia.

**Waste and humanity**

In the collective imagination waste is the disturbing counterpart of civilisation. It is the dark side that is disposed of far from sight, incinerated or hidden in ditches that are usually built or dug near degraded suburbs, dormitories for the lower classes (Bauman, 2005). In psychoanalysis, waste would be the removal of consciousness which, consciously, avoids questioning the fate of the production waste that serves to maintain the consumerist machine, even more, voracious in the age of globalisation (Baudrillard, 1976).
Instead, if one thinks of the shantytown of Borgo Mezzanone, the waste that pervades its streets and makes up much of its infrastructure is the predominant element, almost omnipresent. On a symbolic level, it appears that the construction of the shantytown concerns precisely those subjects that have been rejected by the city as human waste (Jamal, 2004). Take, by comparison, the Kibera Slum of Nairobi, which is one of the largest shantytowns in the world: here, the rooms are made of precarious materials and are built close to masonry buildings such that the eye can see a continuity of single-storey building roofs. The waste is located on the edge, where there are waterways or where there is some distance between two dwellings. Kibera acts as a miniature city (with 700,000 inhabitants) which is not allowed to get rid of its waste (140 tons per day) because there is no space for the disposal or burning of refuse (Bodewes, 2005). Garbage is everywhere; the social scale has reached the end of its path of class exclusion.

There are differences, however, with Borgo Mezzanone. Although less crowded than the famous and overpopulated slums of the great modern metropolises, shantytowns like Borgo Mezzanone do not function as the overflow and improvised outskirts of some cities, but rather they welcome those immigrants who have not been granted documents to legalise their presence in the country. In this respect, the French version of Borgo Mezzanone is famously Calais, not by chance stigmatised as a jungle – as if civilisation had stopped at its gates to make a wild and dangerous nature triumph (Agier, 2019). However, why has the Jungle of Calais become famous in the media and in academic studies, while only a little research has focussed on Borgo Mezzanone? It is not easy to try to answer this, but certainly in Puglia there are phenomena that not only differentiate between the two realities but make significant the fact that the Italian one is mostly ignored. In Borgo Mezzanone, in fact, the mafias operate in synergy with the phenomenon of the caporalato. The mafias are not merely criminal associations, which can also be found in the illegal smuggling of migrants from Calais to the United Kingdom. The Italian mafias always operate in close contact with the political level, locally but also nationally. At this point, it is clear that the media and journalists, even when they deal with realities such as those of Borgo Mezzanone, impart a moment of brief visibility, but then everything goes opaquely out of the spotlight.

The lack of attention paid to this place then becomes a sort of legitimation of the illegality; what is not reported daily and firmly can be handled in another way, far from legality and the control of the police which, it should be remembered, exists a few metres from this shantytown. Borgo Mezzanone has thus become a garbage dump that nobody cares about, not the Italian inhabitants of the area, nor the general public, nor the national media. There is an evident
association between a lack of social acceptance and the world of the landfill: centrifugal force drives out all marginality towards the urban periphery, where the city’s drains and marginalised humanity are found. This provides evidence for Michel Foucault’s analysis of social marginalisation as a crucial moment or the effects of normalisation (Foucault, 1961).

Like Calais, Borgo Mezzanone is “a prototype city in the making” (Wainwright, 2016). It demonstrates the refusal to survive the physical and ideological assault they suffered in the recent times of political and economical crisis. None of the interviewees considers this place the final goal of their journey, but even if only in passing each of them intends to survive this critical situation by implementing innovative housing strategies. In this way, they are trying to answer the sense of loss of identity because they are driven from their lands and rejected by their host country (Bohmer & Shuman, 2008).

They are forced to live the condition of the so-called “double absence”: the lack of original identity due to the elapsed space-time distance, and the difficulty of accessing a new condition of citizenship (Sayad, 2002). The reuse of Italian waste testifies to the resilience and the obstinacy of those migrants. Despite the absence of the rule of law and the presence of different mafias, they are looking for habitual normality that can give them back a sense of dignity. This recreated town can appear only as a ‘fake’ image of the city they come from or the one they would like to create. The result is an effort to rebuild the spacing and timing of a normal life, in spite of everything.

References


