Of land and sea. "Interested solidarities" and the migration industry from below

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Abstract: Drawing on two ethnographic cases, at sea and on land, which concerned different countries (Tunisia and Italy) and bring together the results of different ethnographic research conducted on different fields, this article explores the nexus between solidarity and the migration industry "from below". In this framework, according to the authors, solidarity does not take shape in a moral/idealistic frame; rather, it is conceived within a materialistic approach, revealing its multiple and spurious forms, as well as its importance for the completion of a multiplicity of transactions and ex-changes through which migrants shape their daily routines. The article consists of two ethnographic case studies in which all authors were in-volved, albeit in different ways. By delving into the specificities of the different ethnographic fields, the authors come to define "interested solidarity" as a set of material practices that can be configured both as constitutive of a social bond and as a set of capacitive practices, which allow people to concretely exercise their rights, even in hostile contexts or crossed by violent racialisation dynamics.
Keywords: solidarities; social practices; migration industry; border; agriculture.

Di terra e di mare. "Solidarietà interessate" e industria delle migrazioni dal basso

Riassunto: Attingendo a due casi etnografici, in mare e a terra, che hanno riguardato diversi Paesi (Tunisia e Italia), e che mettono insieme i risultati di diverse ricerche etnografiche condotte su diversi campi, questo articolo esplora il nesso tra solidarietà e *migration industry* "dal basso". In questo quadro, secondo gli autori la solidarietà non prende forma in un frame mora-le/idealistico; piuttosto, viene affrontata con un approccio materialistico, rivelando le sue forme molteplici e spurie, nonché la sua importanza per il completamento di una molteplicità di transazioni e scambi attraverso i quali i migranti danno forma alle loro routine quotidiane.

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L’articolo si compone di due casi di studio etnografici in cui tutti gli autori sono stati coinvolti, anche se in modi diversi. Approfondendo le specificità dei diversi campi etnografici, gli autori giungono a definire la “solidarietà interessata” come un insieme di pratiche materiali che possono essere configurate sia come costitutive di un legame sociale sia come un insieme di pratiche capacitative, che consentono alle persone di esercitare concreta-mente i propri diritti, anche in contesti ostili o attraversati da violente dinamiche di razzializzazione.
Parole-chiave: solidarietà; pratiche sociali; industria della migrazione; confine; agricoltura.

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Introduction[1]

It is no secret that reality is always dirtier than the ideal. When it comes to the idea of solidarity, a concept with a relatively unexplained theoretical status, and probably because of this, widely popular (Bayertz, 1999), it is commonly understood to denote a social relationship based exclusively, or at least predominantly, on the Self’s will to help, support, and care for the Other or the Others as an expression of altruism. However, the picture looks more complex and intricate when it comes to the lived lives of human beings. Less idyllic. If we strictly assumed such a narrow, limited, and pure definition of solidarity, it would probably not be easy to find it anywhere. Solidarity rarely stands alone. Solidarity is more often intertwined with some material interest, actually existing in a *spurious* status.

Academic reflection understands solidarity in a dual dimension: descriptive or factual, and normative (Bayertz, 1999b; Laitinen and Pessi, 2014; Scholz, 2008). In brief, solidarity is both the *social glue* that holds a specific collectivity together and a moral injunction directed at its members, entailing “positive obligations to act” (Bayertz, 1999b: 4). Generally involving a sense of togetherness, solidarity is perceived as the antithesis of the private and

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selfish interest of the individual. In migration studies, solidarity is mainly conceived as humanitarian (Fassin, 2011) or political (Bachelet and Hagan, 2023; Fleischmann, 2020; Tazzioli and Walters, 2019) material support for migrants, whether from ordinary citizens, Civil Society Organisations, NGOs, or even institutions (Ambrosini, 2023; Giliberti and Potot, 2021). Conversely, forms of material support endogenous to the migrant communities are more often interpreted through the lens of the informal economy. Do these latter struggles not be considered true solidarity because they are frequently tainted by economic interests? Is it because money or moral debt is involved? Because they are not entirely disinterested?

In this article, we focus on the practices of underground cooperation that shape from within what can be described as a *migration industry* (Monzini *et al.*, 2004; Salt, 2000) *from below.* We will argue that these practices are imbued with solidarity in several cases. The protagonists will be Sub-Saharan People on the Move, stranded on the Tunisian coast along the Central Mediterranean Route to Europe, and immigrant workers selling their labour power in two Italian agricultural districts, Saluzzo and Foggia. The context factor is crucial and must be placed at the forefront as a fundamental premise of the article: the objective conditions within which people must meet their essential needs and pursue their specific goals are tremendously harsh, and sorrow is all over. Sub-Saharan migrants, both before and after their arrival in Europe, constantly have to deal with the violence resulting from the prohibition of mobility, the precariousness of their legal status, the threat of deportation, racialised labour markets, inaccessible living spaces, and absent or at best inefficient social services. All this is within a framework of systemic racism that encompasses both institutions and society in Italy as well as in Tunisia.

Amid this epochal mourning, we aim to show how solidarity can be decisive in structuring the migrants' informal economies related to precarious dwelling and unauthorised mobility. In his pivotal work on economic informality, Alejandro Portes (2010; 1995; Portes *et al.*, 1989) has demonstrated that *social embeddedness* (Granovetter, 1985) is particularly essential for performing transactions that cannot be guaranteed by a superior, formal authority like the State. According to his analysis, informal economic interactions and relations, especially those taking place within ethnic enclaves, are generally built on *enforceable trust* and *bounded solidarity* among group members. Even assuming a slightly different vision of solidarity[2], this is also our starting point: the social – a solidary social – as the foundation of the

2. While Portes emphasizes the *bounded* nature of intra-group ethnic solidarity, in our view, the social territory of solidarity is the always contingent outcome of a less rigid, potentially open and dynamic relational configuration.

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(informal) economy. Suppose we follow Gargi Bhattacharyya's (2008) reasoning on social reproduction and, therefore, intend the informal economy not merely as capitalist accumulation but, at least in certain cases, as a set of heterogeneous activities undertaken to sustain life. In that case, we must also look at which anthropological forms these activities may take beyond the totalising paradigm of *homo oeconomicus*. We want to state it clearly against any tendency toward economic reductionism. Based on our findings on the ground, we believe that there is much more than the pursuit of individual profit. The rationality at work in the dense web of small exchanges of money, goods, information, and favours is also imbued with support and care for the Other and complicity in the goal to be pursued.

Mutual aid (Kropotkin, 2022; Spade, 2020) can be a practical interpretive key to reading the migration industries from below. Migrants often choose cooperation as a concrete tactic for meeting everyday needs. As far as the case studies of this article are concerned, the condition of shared material and existential hardship, combined with the socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic proximity among Sub-Saharan people, generates a cooperative dynamic aimed at *making it together,* and a feeling of a community of interests is present. Solidarity is shaped not only as a gesture of selfless altruism but instead describes the contribution of the individual to a material interest that will have to be realised either on a collective level (*the good of my community, from which I also benefit*) or on an individual level but protracted in time (*today I help you, tomorrow you will help me*). In a way, it could be said that, under this light, solidarity is much more strategic and therefore *interested* than one may expect.

Drawing on the existence of the pursuit of material interest in mutual aid practices, we would like to go one step further and propose the concept of *interested solidarity*. As we shall see, the dynamics of cooperation shaping migration industries from below are often ambivalent. Perhaps too ambivalent to be contained under the paradigm of mutual aid. The realisation of material interest is often neither experienced on a collective level nor deferred temporally. However, it frequently assumes the form of an immediate exchange of favours and resources between individuals or of monetary exchange *tout court*. In other words, the potential interest is actualised in the here and now of the interaction. From a certain point of view, it could be inferred that mutual aid fades into pure and brute economic exchange, and the help offered becomes just another good to be marketised. Indeed, this cannot be entirely denied: the help needed is often treated as just another commodity to be bought and sold. However, is this enough to *entirely* obliterate the presence of solidarity within the informal economies of migrants?

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From this perspective, we mean to highlight how solidarity makes the conversion of social capital into economic capital possible (Bourdieu, 1987).

Suppose the theory of mutual aid illustrates how solidarity can coincide with the pursuit of material interest. In that case, the concept of *interested solidarity* aims to broaden the scope of such coincidence to the realm of economics. Social relations that take the form of economic transactions do not necessarily exclude the presence of solidarity. On the contrary, there is often a convergence between the two logics, which merge into a more complex rationality. In our opinion, this is particularly evident in the context of the informal migrant economies producing the routes of the contemporary *Underground Railroad* (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola, 2022). As some of us, following Mauss, have argued elsewhere (Bonnin *et al.*, 2024 forthcoming), the gift is always a bound form of exchange, as much as the exchange is more than a simple economic relation or transaction. This means there is not necessarily a contradiction between solidarity and material interest but rather a deep intermingling. The contradiction occurs only when one of the two terms prevails over the other, and therefore, the ambivalence of the relationship is exhausted. If and when the logic of the exchange becomes completely hegemonised by the accumulation of profit, then solidarity is no longer there. On the contrary, as long as a certain kind of moral economy (Thompson, 1971) holds, it can be said that solidarity not only coexists with material interest but even inhabits economic exchange from within and contributes to structure it in its apparent form.

The article consists of two ethnographic case studies in which all of us, in different ways, have been involved. The first concern was collective fieldwork on sea and land across Tunisia in October 2023. The research tried to embody a maritime point of observation, as we addressed the locations for ethnography through a sailing vessel, crisscrossing the Tunisian shores from Monastir towards Kerkennah islands and back. Our point of access has always been a port, namely a fishing one. This triggered specific encounters, *touching land through the sea*, and by this way, often relying on the social relations enacted by our nautical positioning. In April-May 2023, the device research of embarkment was successfully experimented with one of us, Luca Queirolo Palmas, volunteering as a sailor in a vessel monitoring the Sicilian Strait to support Safe and Rescue operations.

While in the text, we will use mostly the first plural person because the reflections we present are due to a joint elaboration, the ethnographic experiences on which this article is based are different, and when the fieldwork involves only one of us, the narration will be based on the use of the first singular person. The first case we consider, regarding Tunisia, involves the three of us in the MOBS research project. The second case, regarding

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Saluzzo and Foggia, has involved respectively, Ivan Bonnin (Saluzzo), who is a member of the MOBS research group, and Enrico Fravega, who has been working on migrants' informal settlements in the Foggia rural district since 2021, both as a member of the SOLROTUES team and, previously, of the HOASI research project[3].

In all cases considered, a methodological approach based on ethnography was used to examine social relations in different social contexts and settings. The research involved participant observation, which lasted for approximately six months for both cases, and semi-structured interviews. Field notes and photographs were taken to capture nonverbal cues, spatial arrangements, and immediate impressions.

2. A *brousse* industry. The social fabric of undocumented travels from the Tunisian coast of Sfax

In October 2023, while waiting for a flight, we strike up a digital conversation with Georges. With a boarding pass in hand, us; stuck in transit in an olive grove in central Tunisia, a few kilometres from the sea, him. We all had the same destination: Lampedusa. From his mobile phone, he sends a video shot in the camp where he lives: you can hear the sound of the wind, see the red earth, the scattered olive trees, and dozens of groups of black people lying on the ground on dirty blankets. This footage is a kind of presentation card, amplified by a series of audio messages about abandonment, suffering and basic needs. We know nothing about Georges, only that he is part of the group of Sub-Saharan people that Tunisian authorities displaced from the centre of Sfax, a few weeks earlier, and that he is waiting for 'the door of the sea to be opened' to take a boat and cross the Strait.

In the wake of the complex relationship between language and the world (Wittgenstein, 1921), our attention is often caught by the everyday words that our interlocutor adopts to designate the landscape of the migration industry from below that he inhabits. In following text messages – within a relationship we continue to sew, keeping on writing – he will often repeat that he lives and waits in the *brousse*, in the bush. The *brousse* is not only the living space granted by the authoritarian and racist turn of Saied's regime (Geisser, 2023) but also an appropriate metaphor through which to interpret the undocumented journey as a social construction: in the *brousse*,

3. HOASI (Home and Asylum Seekers in Italy) was a MIUR-FARE research project on housing trajectories and home experiences among asylum seekers in Italy, based at the University of Trento (P.I.: Prof. Paolo Boccagni).

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everything has to be built, shaped even temporarily, in order to find shelter and make life less bare.

If we take this standpoint, the exploration of the *migration industry from below* consists of putting at the core of our reflection the operose dimension enacted by illegalised travellers (Khosravi, 2010), the reversible and rhizomatic mix of positions, improvisation and unpredictability triggered by encounters, rather than interpreting all these human flows and practices in terms of rationality, predictability, and the linearity of a "business company" supplying of goods and services. It also means avoiding the search for the apex and subordinated characters of an integrated organisation – in a widespread and moral narrative, the "traffickers" and the "smugglers" – focusing, instead, on the practices, representations and forms of self-organisation of those who are travelling and of "facilitators" (Ambrosini, Hajer 2023), those who contribute to the material production of the journey.

From our standpoint, the particular commodity of undocumented travel is produced among the olive groves where we reach Georges. In order to reconstruct the traces of such a production process, we rely on his account, and those of other people stuck in transit in the Sfax area.[4] First, Georges has a reference that he calls *cokseur*[5]. The term is linked to the history of the relationship between rural spaces and cities in West Africa and the sale of cocoa; the *cokseur* was the person buying agricultural goods from small producers, gathering together and bringing them to the market. Today, by extension, in many urban situations, he becomes the subject of gathering passengers together to form the crews of buses and taxis in the stations (Seck, 2006). In the case described here, the *cokseur* builds up the travel group to face the sea together. He acts in a non-oligopolistic brokerage market, with many other facilitators and players competing with each other and with different reputations; yet, it is a market fully visible on social networks, in which word-of-mouth helps to nurture the social reputation of operators or to discredit them. The *cokseur* is the aggregator of social demand, a liminal subject placed in between the world of Black travellers and the one of *les Arabes*, as they are named, i.e. the Tunisian who own and provide the necessary goods to complete the sea crossing: boats and engines. In the accounts of people on the

4. There is obviously nothing romantic about sleeping under olive trees. On the contrary, this is a harsh humanitarian emergency situation with thousands of people without any kind of institutional support from the Tunisian state, with a significant number of women, children, and families. Those we have met, are in many cases sick, suffering, hungry, and traumatized by police violence; nonetheless, they are stubbornly determined to find ways and means to move forward. For a cartography of state violence inflicted on people on the move in Tunisia, see OMCT (2023).
5. Also written *coxeur*.

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move, the role of the *cokseur* is not perceived as problematic; what is considered the real problem is the false *cokseur*, who is a scammer taking advantage of a non-existent title and reputation for personal profit. The *cokseur* is often a migrant like others, who have temporarily given up the idea of departure, with more time on the spot, more social relationships with the locals and a specific habitus of entrepreneurship. As Bourdieu (1986) taught us, his activity consists in transforming social and symbolic capital into economic capital.

In opposition to the *cokseurs* and *les Arabes*, Georges defines himself as a *passager*[6]. When I asked him if he was referring to the precise moment of crossing by boat, he looked at me in amazement: "No, during the whole journey, we are *passagers"*. Thus, this word seems to evoke the normal relationship between supply and demand: one is a passenger because he/she is buying a transport service from some intermediary (the *cokseur,* in fact, a subject present along all the junctions of the routes). This emic definition adds a further layer to the other two recurrent words among those who wait to cross the sea: *soldiers*, which refers to the dimension of battle, violence and masculinity (Di Meo, 2022) in every border zone; *adventurers* (Shapendonk, 2017; Bredeloup, 2016) recalling the dimension of risk, entrepreneurship and curiosity.

The group aggregated by the *cokseur* is termed *convoi*, an expression to emphasise the departures' collective dimension. Beyond the aggregation from above, by the market side, it seems crucial to underline the self-consciousness of the *passagers*, their familiar feeling and acting in a hostile context. Georges tells us:

> Once you have paid – prices are now around 500 euros – with a transfer via Western Union from your country, you get access to the travel group: the convoi. We are about 40 passagers here; we live together under the olive trees. There is "a treasurer" and a security service to prevent intruders in the group who want to cross without paying; then everyone takes turns to prepare food; captains and compass men come from the people who have some experience in sea work (September 2023. Ethnographic diary excerpt).

The *convoi* is like an international brigade preparing for battle, sharing and caring for each other in daily life to be ready (and close-knit) for the difficulties of the passage. It is as if the boat and the crew were already acting under the olive trees, waiting to take to the sea. Even if "the departures are now blocked" evoking a kind of collective knowledge among Black people, Georges feels calm because he is already in the *convoi* and he is only waiting

6. In French, as the following terms: *convoi*, *lancement*, *organizateurs*.

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for the *lancement*, the right moment to attempt the crossing, as soon as “sea the door will open again”. It returns to our minds the first still-frame of the video Georges sent us, and now we can clearly see a crew in the making for each group camped under an olive tree.

The boats, for the moment, are still mysterious objects for those in the process of leaving; Georges only knows that he has paid for the passage. In this case, Riad, a well-informed resident, helps us understand the deal; the *passagers* only meet up with the iron boats on the day of departure, when they, together with the boat, are loaded onto a truck trying to reach the sea by running along rural trails. Riad allows us to interpret the significance of the barricades on the main roads, a persistent occurrence that Georges mentioned: “Sometimes the inhabitants and the *organizateurs* interrupt the traffic in this way and allow the trucks to pass over, to get closer to the coastline”. Indeed, we see many iron wrecks on the coast's beaches from Sfax to Chebba, piled up in small fishing ports or abandoned amidst the olive trees. These boats are fabricated in a few days, with quick and rough welding, within private rural properties, with minimal costs and no eyes on it. There is also a circulating story, almost mythological, that boats are buried near the sea and rise again on the day of the *boza* (anonymous, 2024): a grassroots term overlapping with and exceeding the meaning of the concepts of “voyage”, “victory”, and the repetition of multiple acts of border transgression.

Beyond the landscape of olive groves in the foreground, we must consider this rural space as a vast underground and dispersed forge of blacksmiths and welders, an informal logistics district with trucks and sheet metal suppliers. The Black *cokseur* keeps the relationship with the Tunisian *organizateurs* (the most common term, besides *les Arabes*, for those people labelled by institutions as traffickers and smugglers) who are in charge of coordinating the supply of materials, ironwork, the transport of people, and the equipping of engines, as well as talking to, and bribing, if necessary, the border authorities[7].

In Georges’ portrayal, while the police are hostile and violent, and the Maghreb is steeped in anti-black racism (he also refers to the previous stages of his trip in Algeria, Libya and Morocco, as well as to the experience of the hunting he suffered in Sfax in the previous months), the local population is moderately supportive: “we survive thanks to them, they give us food and drink”. Georges also reflects on these encounters' material and exchange dimension: 'They are in solidarity because we are an evident resource for them, we are their wealth'. Moreover, he starts talking about the increased prices

7. On the role of police, state, and smuggling in the Maghreb, see: Cheikh and Pluta (2023); Gallien (2024).

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for all kinds of goods sold to the *passagers* (from food to medicine), how an inflatable inner tube for the journey costs 30 dinars and a life jacket 300. It is an entire economy that revolves around the waithood of crossing the sea; while departures are now become highly racialised, for decades, El Hamra, Jbiniana, El Louza have been among the more prominent districts of unauthorised departures of Tunisians, as the waiter who is witnessing our conversation with Georges reminds us: "I will be taking soon a boat to Lampedusa". In general, along the entire coastal strip that runs from Chebba down to Sfax, a culture of travel and memory has settled down over the years, as well as a network of practices, institutions and knowledge supporting those types of transgressive mobilities; black travellers thus overlap with a context in which Tunisians themselves adopt practices of mobility in order to "burn" the borders[8]. This complex social landscape generates a situation of encounters and exchanges radically different from the many European internal borders where some (nationals) enjoy the right to mobility while others are structurally denied it. The space of solidarity, which is here infra-political and ordinary (Scott, 1990), as well as commodified and racialised, must be located within this type of social fabric and its history.

So far, we have seen several actors operating in this bottom-up reading of the social construction of the journey: clients/passengers in transit, black intermediaries and facilitators, Tunisian producers of the goods and services needed for the sea crossing, local communities and *harraga*, without forgetting in the background families' solidarities in the countries of origin or arrival as financial funders in the last resort.

Perhaps the most relevant actors in the fabricating of the social process of undocumented travel are the police: they act as border regime gatekeepers but also as potential de-bordering agents depending on the political climate of the moment. In this perspective, the suggestion of street-level bureaucracy (Lipski, 1980) helps us to frame the mobile, flexible and reversible dimension of their role, despite the presence of a substantial apparatus of controls and checkpoints that often transforms these territories into battlegrounds (Ambrosini, 2018), contentious fronts and spectacles in the war on migration.

Let us leave for the moment the olive groves, where Georges lives with thousands of other stranded people, and move towards Kerkennah, a ring of islands less than 100 nautical miles from Lampedusa and linked by historical ties with the other side of the Strait on the base of multiple exchange and activities: fishing, work, trade. From these islands, only Tunisians leave, either in a self-organised way using their nautical skills or by resorting to local *organisateurs*; the territory is not thoroughly racialised like the previous one,

8. Hence the popular term – *Harraga* – in use to define these subjects. See Vacchiano (2018).

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and the practice of *harraga* is part of the normality of the youthful experience of transgression and transition to adulthood. From these departure areas, the boats are wooden ones, and they are everywhere due to the presence of an extensive traditional fishing fleet; they do not have to be built but rather scrapped through a last trip to Lampedusa; moreover, wooden boats are safer and more stable than iron ones, also because of a more advantageous ratio between size and number of passengers. As a result, the costs incurred by those who pay the *organisateurs* are higher, and at the time of our research amounted to around 6,000 dinars; several people told us about a kind of travel insurance – with several attempts available – and payment once at destination. We talk about this topic with Mustafa, a sea craftsman, who laughingly tells us about a recent police operation:

> They made a real show; police descended in helicopters over their barracks… it was ridiculous. Then they arrested their friends with whom they had been doing business until yesterday, and now, for sure, their relatives are back to resume temporarily interrupted work. Everyone knows the bribe rates here: 6,000 for a small boat and 25,000 dinars for a big boat. It is easy to leave. Police and organisateurs have always been friends. Now everything is blocked, but soon business will resume. That is fine; I do not question it; round up your paltry wages, but at least leave me alone while I am working and do not stop me every few kilometres at your checkpoints asking me if I have Harraga on board (October 2023, Kerkennah Islands, ethnographic diary excerpt).

Mustafa thus unveils another dimension of porosity in the travel industry from below: no-border agents can also be the thousands of police, sea and land, surveilling the border. Corruption is the device that makes departures possible, fluid, and continuous beyond the lights of the show. Then, when political determination from above decides to turn off the tap – as is now the case – the movement is radically reduced, and corruption becomes a dead language between police and *organisateurs*. Returning to the recurring expression among people on the move – "the door of the sea is now closed" – we now understand who holds the handle; the case of the Tunisian border is no different from what happens at the Evros, in the passage from Turkey to the Greek islands, in the Ceuta and Melilla fences, on the beaches from Mauritania, Senegal and Western Sahara to the Canaries Islands. Thus, the states are the leading organisations operating within the undocumented travel industry (Anderson, 2014), in all their complexity as non-homogeneous apparatuses. They have the power to open and close the market of departures, alternating between policies of closure and hidden policies of *laissez-passer*

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(Ciabarri, 2020), seeking to maximise the income linked to their geographical position[9].

Six months before our experience in the *brousse* of pending departures, as sailor and researcher, one of us embarked on Nadir, a sailing vessel operating in the Strait of Sicily, to monitor and compel the authorities to their job of Safe and Rescue. Suppose Georges crosses the sea and avoids Tunisian Cost Guards' push-backs, reaching the free zone of international waters. In that case, he will most likely come across some special escorts and real "conductors" to take up the language of the underground railway (Queirolo Palmas and Rahola, 2022). During our guard shifts on board, the main resource to identify the "cases" – the boats defying the border regime – has been the Tunisian fishermen, as in the following excerpt of the field diary of those days, referring to a situation of distress:

> The radio is a world, a square, and Channel 16 is our, and their, salvation. Here is the typical structure of conversation between Tunisian fishing boats and the Coast Guard/ Radio Lampedusa. Question: "What colour is the boat?" Usually, the answer is: "Iron, do you know what colour the iron is?" (there is always a touch of irony and claim in the fishermen's answers). "What is your name?" "Hammar, Hammar, in Italian Mariano". It is a continuous insistence on the Italian side to identify the identity of the fishing vessel and the person activating the search and rescue procedure. The voice of the Coast Guard is calm and professional; no concern leaks out: they are responding to a routine, to something recurring and not exceptional. Then, the position is communicated through latitude and longitude points. Requests for help always end with a ritual phrase: "We are reporting it, stay on standby and possibly render aid", or "wait for rescue, stay in the area, we are without patrol boats, you just have to wait". There are 20 rescues in progress, and the institutions are overwhelmed by the number of departures. The fishermen, on the other hand, push on the register of drama to activate authorities: children and pregnant women, or a woman giving birth, are the cards to play in communication. The beginning of every radio interaction is also recurring: "There is a clandestine

9. In the last months Saied's government has been negotiating an agreement with Meloni's government (Italy), which is also acting as an intermediary for the EU interest in terms of outsourcing border controls and pre-empting illegal departures. The Tunisian authorities' migration management follows this logic of negotiation, alternating between moments of opening and closing of the Central Mediterranean Corridor. Migration management by Tunisian authorities follows two main axes: firstly, blocking sea crossing attempts by Tunisians and sub-Saharans directly on the coast or through pushbacks in Tunisian waters; secondly, deporting sub-Saharans in desert no man's land close to the Libyan or the Algerian border. According to the Tunisian social rights organisation FTDES (see: https://ftdes.net/statistiques-migration-2023/), in 2023 there were around 50,000 interceptions at sea by the Coast Guard (Tunisian authorities inflate this figure to over 80,000 people).

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boat", a sentence with which the fishermen put a dividing line between themselves and the (mostly) Sub-Saharian travellers. When asked to wait, they emphasise their need to work: "We have to fish; this is our job; your job is to save (April 2023, an undetermined location near the Kerkennah Islands, ethnographic diary excerpt).

After every rescue that we manage to activate after exhausting and endless communications with the Lampedusa Coast Guard or the MRCC (Maritime Rescue Coordination Center) in Rome[10], the authorities, if they get the distress case before the fishermen, disrupt the electrical device of engines, sometimes throwing them directly into the sea, and usually leave the boat adrift[11]. However, before the authorities show up, during the three-week Nadir rotation[12] in which we take part, the everyday sea scene is the following: if there are iron boats, there are Tunisian fishing boats around; if there are no iron boats, there are no fishing boats. The fishermen, according to our experience as sailors and the testimonies gathered from the people we welcomed on board Nadir after a shipwreck, show the direction to Lampedusa to the boats doing the unauthorised crossing, call Italian authorities for help, sometimes tow the boats to bring them closer to national waters. When the boat is empty because its passengers have abandoned it, Tunisian fishing vessels rush, sometimes clashing over who has the right to get the engine and the fuel cans[13]. As actors who can go without visas and passports outside Tunisian territory, deep-sea fishing boats are fully integrated into the migration industry from below. Their trophies are the engines – on the second-hand market, they can cost around 15,000 DTN – which become part of a circular economy: they are sold to be used again in the organisation of the *convoi*[14].

Paraphrasing Durkheim (1997), in such a setting where the traditional categories of humanitarianism or political claims do not operate (Giliberti and Potot, 2021) – neither actors are contesting the border regime nor institutions providing under their mandate essential needs to the people on the

10. Elsewhere (Anderlini and Fravega, 2023), we have developed the concept of sea-level bureaucracy, to account for the wide discretionary powers of institutions in the management of distress situations at sea.
11. On the issue of environmental harms related to boat handling at the border, see: Soliman (2023).
12. Some sea NGO, as Nadir, use "rotation" or "shifts" in order to avoid the colonial taste of the word "mission".
13. During our rotation, we collected only one testimony of a woman who accused the Tunisian fishermen of stealing the engine, intercepting the iron boat while still on motion, jeopardizing by this way the possibility of continuing the journey and the same safety of people.
14. Some in the civil fleet world ironically refer to them as "engine-fishermen", as it can be more profitable to engage in this type of catch rather than fishing.

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move – solidarity springs from, and at the same time enables a kind of labour division in the social fabric of the journey; thus, it refers not to an ethical ground, built over common bonds and belongings, but to a chain of contingent actions and practices, which can mutually reinforce each other, entering into solidarity, precisely because they are interested. However, unlike any Durkheim's resonance, this organic dimension of solidarity is not "a-conflictual": on the one hand, because it develops in a scenario marked by institutional violence of all kinds that reduce passengers, the racialised ones, to "bare life" and extort national citizen hindering their freedom of movement and further lowering their social condition; on the other hand, because solidarity reflects relations of power, hierarchy, and oppression given the asymmetry of positions and resources available along the chain of production of journeys. For all Sub-Saharan blacks and Tunisians *harragas*, and obviously with a different scale given by the juridical capital they carry, the State and its armed arm – the sea and land police – are the enemy with whom, depending on the moment, one can play the language of confrontation or that of circumvention and persuasion, through the currency of corruption.

2. Dwelling on *spurious* solidarities in two Italian racialised agricultural districts

As we crossed the extensive olive groves reaching up Chebba from the outskirts of Sfax (Tunisia), which currently [November 2023] hosts several thousand people of Sub-Saharan origin, waiting to take the sea, some other images echoed in our eyes, as well as in our memories. Seeing so many young Black people camped in the olive groves reminded some of us of the rural landscape of the province of Foggia. Here, dozens of informal settlements – scattered across a countryside where olive trees are pretty common – are configured both as a dwelling space within a highly exclusionary urban context for racialised workers and as a reservoir of cheap labour force for a vast agricultural district. For some of us, instead, these images bring to mind the public park in the centre of Saluzzo (province of Cuneo), where hundreds of Sub-Saharan labourers gather under the trees during the summer and autumn seasons: some as a place of socialisation, others because they cannot find a proper dwelling place in the housings offered by the orchard owners or institutional accommodation schemes. As if a less densely populated landscape could favour the placement of an arbitrary *colour line* (Du Bois, 2015), we reflect on the persistence of a dynamic of racialisation and segregation of the Black population in the rural space, as well as on the nexuses between the border regime and the dynamics of migrant daily labourers exploitation

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(Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Pradella and Cillo, 2021; Walia, 2014), within and beyond the framework of a progressive "refugeeization" of the agricultural labour force (Della Puppa and Piovesan, 2023; Dines and Rigo, 2015; Della Puppa, 2012).

In this sense, it is interesting to discover that Tunisian women and Sub-Saharan male workers have managed the olive harvest in the countryside north of Sfax for many years. A dynamic showing the solid link between agricultural labour and migratory processes (Caruso, 2022) highlighting the dynamics of progressive segregation and racialisation of agricultural work (Avallone, 2017; Curcio and Mellino, 2012; Fravega and Queirolo Palmas, 2022). A scenario is developing within a logic of differential inclusion and construction of a subaltern subject that previously happened to involve women and now Sub-Saharan migrants.

Accordingly, drawing on two different research experiences, we elaborated concurrent reflections on interested solidarities in these contexts. However, some preliminary remarks regarding both Saluzzo and Foggia are required.

Ivan Bonnin has been conducting an ongoing ethnographic study on the condition of migrant workers of Sub-Saharan origin in the fruit district of Saluzzo, where they constitute the majority of the seasonal workforce – and, not surprisingly, are also the most exploited and discriminated against. The fieldwork has been carried out in several stages from February 2023 to the present [November 2023], and the research has focused on the forms of grassroots resistance and solidarity within this highly racialised sector of the agricultural workforce.

Enrico Fravega has been conducting his research in the district of Foggia, dealing with the social and material practices shaping the so-called ghettos. There, he had the chance to focus on solidarity and how it makes the production of ordinary and extraordinary daily acts possible.

2.1. Saluzzo

There is a place at the foothills of the Alps, in the deep northwest of Italy, where the spectre of migrants' informal encampments agitates the institutions, the fear of labour shortages worries the employers, and the perceived racial and cultural otherness Black workers unsettles the local population. It is the Saluzzo fruit district, the third largest in Italy. Here, fruit production relies on the labour-power of approximately 10,000 short-term contract agricultural workers, more than a third of whom are migrants, asylum seekers

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and refugees of Sub-Saharan origin[15]. In Marxian terms, these mobile labourers structurally occupy the lowest-paid and most physically demanding positions and are subject to a higher rate of exploitation than other workers. This exploitation systematically exceeds legal limits, generally assuming the form of so-called *grey labour*[16].

In recent years, in the affluent rural area under scrutiny, that is, Saluzzo and its surroundings, the main issue that has emerged in public discourse has been the precarious, to put it mildly, housing conditions of Sub-Saharan agricultural workers (Brovia and Piro, 2020). How do we manage these homeless yet so essential temporary workers? In response to the proliferation of informal settlements in public spaces and the spontaneous creation of *ghettos* similar to those historically present in southern Italy, local institutions initiated various housing schemes (Buttino, 2022) and pressured enterprises to host seasonal workers *in Cascina* (accommodation in the workplace). As of today [November 2023], however, even though most are housed, some workers still sleep in the streets, especially before the peak moments of the harvest season. Nevertheless, the housing conditions of Sub-Saharan labourers generally remain precarious and problematic. They cannot be fully understood without considering the broader context of racialised exploitation of labour and migrants' subordination.

While it was very clear from the early stages of my fieldwork who was doing the classic humanitarian work to help the most vulnerable – above all, the Catholic charity organisation *Caritas*– on the contrary, it was not easy to detect other forms of more grassroots solidarity. As I would have found out later, I had to remove the usual interpretative lenses leading me to focus on trade unions, associations, and other formal actors as the primary agents of solidarity and instead look at the tumultuous manufacture of relationships unfolding beneath the radar of mainstream social sciences. I have tried to do this with ethnographic sensibility by focusing on everyday interactions beyond their apparent contents and carefully listening to what the subjects said about their ordinary social life (Scott, 2014; Dunn, 1978). As a result, I have discovered a whole *social underworld* populated by intensities and affections of various kinds, among which, I would say, the quality of solidarity is, if not prominent, undoubtedly present.

Over time, as I met more and more Sub-Saharan workers in Saluzzo, I realised that grassroots solidarity operates in unpretentious ways, often going

15. The data were privately provided by *Centro per l'Impiego - Saluzzo* (the Employment Center of Saluzzo), whom I thank for their cooperation.
16. *Gray labor* refers to work that exists in a legal gray area, often characterized by informal employment practices that do not fully comply with labor laws and regulations. In the Italian context, it is a widespread practice in the agricultural sector and beyond.

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undetected. It was Abdoul, a Ghanaian worker who has already done several harvesting seasons in Saluzzo, who first opened my eyes.

> There are Italians who help us, and for sure, that is important to us. Do you know Caritas? Well, Caritas is so important to us, especially when we just arrived in Saluzzo. We get food and clothes there. However, we must first count on ourselves because we, the Blacks, the Africans, are the ones experiencing this harsh situation, not anyone else. Of course, Africans help and support each other. You do not have to imagine anything sensational, but little things, advice, small favours (ethnographic diary excerpt).

A first consideration regarding Abdoul's words is the clear separation he makes between 'us', the Africans, the Blacks, and 'them', the Italians. A perceived separation that is not only cultural but, as it emerges, is primarily based upon and reinforced by the persistent material problem of the Du Boisian *colour line*. This is not the peculiar view of a single individual but a recurring attitude within the Sub-Saharan community living in Saluzzo and elsewhere in Italy and Europe, especially in places where the social life of racialised groups is not mixed, as is particularly the case in farming areas. Following the seminal work of Balibar and Wallerstein (1991), we can interpret the collective self-assumption of a separate ethnic identity as a form of resistance to racism and a dynamic of counter-racialization. However, how does this ethnic and community-based major partition of the social relate to solidarity?

What seems to emerge from Abdoul's words, and from the many similar conversations I have had with racialised workers in the Saluzzo fruit district, are two sociologically different kinds of solidarity: one endogenous to the Black community of workers and the other exogenous to it. In the context under examination, exogenous solidarity is exercised by collective actors with territorial solid roots and a more or less pronounced, but always present, degree of formalisation, whether they are institutional or civil society entities such as social services, cooperatives, associations, or trade unions. Despite considerable differences in their actual practices of solidarity, the common relational feature of these actors is asymmetry with the subjects they help. With few exceptions, there is a substantial distance in terms of class, race, and general social positioning between those providing help and those receiving it. This means a relatively strong dichotomy between the helpers and the helped is constantly reproduced. On the contrary, endogenous solidarity among Black workers flows through a circuit more akin to a social relationship among equals. Of course, this does not mean there are no differences or imbalances within the Sub-Saharan community. However, the social

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distance between its members is undoubtedly less significant than in the previous case.

The most immediate and pressing problems Black workers face in Saluzzo are practical issues, usually related to material subsistence (and bureaucracy). It is about finding decent work, a place to live, and having something to eat. While the need for food can be quickly addressed thanks to the canteen service provided daily by Caritas, work and accommodation are more complex issues that can absorb much existential energy. In this regard, the solutions provided by exogenous solidarity actors are mainly insufficient to enable everyone to find a satisfactory situation. In this regard, the solutions provided by exogenous solidarity actors are mainly insufficient to enable everyone to find a satisfactory situation. Therefore, in a hostile environment where it is difficult for Black people to rent a house and where finding a decent job is also challenging, Sub-Saharan workers must provide for themselves. In this space of institutional and civil society ineffectiveness – an exogenous solidarity failure? – a dense network of interactions and relationships rhizomatically grows beneath the surface of the visible.

> I found this apartment by luck. It was thanks to a friend from Burkina Faso, who was already living and working in Saluzzo, who recommended me to his landlord, who had more houses. I am very grateful to him; thanks to him, I found a stable arrangement which allowed me to make my way with more serenity. Then I also did the same thing but with work. After a few attempts, I found a good job here in Revello, and since, after a while, the owner needed more labour, I offered to find it for him. So, I called some friends who lived in ghettos in Southern Italy and brought them here. I also made recommendations (August 2023, Saluzzo, ethnographic diary excerpt).

This was Musta's experience, but recommending someone is a widespread solidarity practice among Sub-Saharan workers in Saluzzo. It may seem like a simple, harmless gesture. However, it should be considered that a dimension of personal risk is always involved. Generally, the risk consists of ruining one's reputation with the landlord or boss, thereby losing the associated material resources. This is not a trivial matter when life situations are as precariously entangled with interpersonal interactions as they are for Sub-Saharan workers in Saluzzo. "If I recommend someone who is going to misbehave, or if I host someone in my house and the landlord finds out about it", goes on Musta, "I risk losing my house. Furthermore, that would be a real tragedy because how will I find a new house?!" Thus, the seemingly simple gesture of a recommendation can has dire consequences. Musta, his friend before him, and countless ordinary Sub-Saharan workers who

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recommend each other are solidary subjects willing to take more or less calculated risks to help their friends.

Helping or recommending a friend almost flawlessly fits the paradigm of mutual aid (Kropotkin, 2022; Spade, 2020). Musta was helped, and then he helped others: the reciprocity was linear. However, in other situations, an element of more immediate personal interest often complicates the picture, blurring the line between the domain of purely altruistic solidarity and that of the informal economy. For example, we encountered the following spurious circumstances in the context of accommodation.

A man whom we will call Hamid manages to rent a large house. During the harvest seasons, Hamid accommodates some of his fellow Sub-Saharan friends and acquaintances who can initially stay there for free until they find work. Eventually, they start paying rent to Hamid, who even manages to make a small profit from it. Hamid transitions from being a free host to a small businessman. From the bright domain of solidarity, his story slips into the more shadowy realm of the informal economy. How should this situation be interpreted?

If we focus on Hamid's intentions, we might suspect that he hosts his guests for free in a merely instrumental way. In effect, we cannot exclude that his real and only goal could be profit. However, in sociological terms, we cannot definitively state what actually revolves in an individual's mind; we need to accept a degree of fluidity that only actions will disambiguate. Moreover, Hamid does not claim that he acts solely for profit, nor do his tenants, who are grateful to him and find it legitimate to pay him rent once they are settled. While it is true that sometimes, even the oppressed end up being grateful to their oppressors because they have not developed a dialectical consciousness, we also believe it is methodologically crucial to pay attention to the interpretations of the very protagonists of social complexity. In Hamid's story, there is unequivocally the realisation of a personal material interest, but is there only that, or is there something more, as Hamid and his friends suggest?

We hypothesise that in the social relationship between Hamid and his guests, centred on the resource of the house; there is a mixture of aspects that cannot be wholly untangled and, to a certain extent, even sustain each other. It can be assumed that Hamid helps his friends and acquaintances because he can also realise a personal material interest. In effect, solidarity coexists with monetary gain. After all, even in the logic of mutual aid, self-interest is somewhat included: today, I help you, and tomorrow, you help me – it is a kind of investment, too. By this, I do not mean to suggest that every economic transaction taking place in the Sub-Saharan community in Saluzzo and, more generally, in migrants' *industries from below* is always a relationship imbued

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with solidarity. That would be completely naive. When the personal interest realised is much greater than the help provided, this latter should be interpreted in a merely instrumental way, which is often the case. However, when there is a balance between the two, as seems to be the case in Hamid's story, it can be reasonably claimed that both solidarity and material interest inhabit and structure the social relation from within. The presence of one does not exclude the presence of the other.

A similar dynamic of coexistence between personal interest and solidarity can be observed in job searching. Sub-Saharan workers find employment in the Saluzzo fruit district primarily through recommendations from friends or acquaintances. Sometimes, this can lead to *caporalato* (Perrotta and Raeymaekers, 2022)· However, more often, these social links appear less structured and not as profit-oriented as in a gangmaster system. The social infrastructure (Perrotta and Sacchetto, 2014) facilitating the intermediation between the labour force and employers in the Saluzzo fruit district is quite loose, and solidarity is not entirely absent from the picture.

According to several of my informants, there are Sub-Saharan people who generally help friends and acquaintances find jobs not so much for the consequential material benefits, which in most cases are very small and more significant in terms of social prestige, but simply because they want to help and "be someone good in the community." Even if sometimes there may be personal rewards for the provided service. From what I have understood, the moral judgment within the Sub-Saharan workers' community is based on the proportionality between the amount of work done, the risk taken, and the quality of the job performed. For example, one worker told me in an interview: "It is one thing to get something in return for the help provided, like some little gifts, some favours, or even some one-off money. It is quite another to plunder a worker's salary systematically." The ethical limit beyond which material interest entirely obliterates solidarity can only be established within a concrete situation.

2.2. *Foggia*

The territory of the province of Foggia is primarily made up of a vast plain used for agriculture, where a significant number of migrants' informal settlements are scattered here and there. Here, migrants are employed as daily labourers, providing the workforce for one of the most important agricultural districts in Italy (Anderlini and Fravega, 2023; Caruso and Corrado, 2021; Corrado *et al.*, 2016; Ippolito *et al.*, 2021), finding shelter, company, food, and a great variety of services and goods. In other words, in a variety

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of large-scale shacks, abandoned farmhouses, and provisional self-constructed shelters, the migrant agricultural workforce can find a place for social reproduction, nourishing social relationships, and enjoying a place they can call "home" (Fravega, 2023; Fravega and Boccagni, 2024). Nevertheless, these settlements define a living condition, the furthest thing one can imagine from the ideal one.

Our first access to this fieldwork was onboard a mobile clinic run by an NGO, providing essential health assessment services to migrants living in dwellings scattered across the Foggian countryside. Together with a group of volunteers, composed of medics, nurses, care workers and cultural mediators, we had the chance to travel across Contrada Cicerone, Torretta Antonacci (where is the famous "Gran Ghetto di Rignano"), Borgo Mezzanone, Ghetto dei Bulgari and other similar places for several days. At that time, my conception of solidarity was quite candid, basically framing a relation of support between uneven subjects: those who could help and those who needed help — namely, the relationship between the NGO personnel and the service beneficiaries. However, access to these places and the time spent there radically changed my views, contributing to addressing our reflection on the relevance of horizontal and black solidarities (More, 2009).

Firstly, I realised that what we used to think of as solidarity was just an (emergency) service run by NGOs on account of an absent institution. Moreover, despite the fact the staff was one of the most passionate I have ever met, as well as the fact they were deeply involved in what they did, it seemed to me quite complicated to frame this activity as solidarity, as their work was used to cover the lack of a decent public health service effectively accessible to migrants. It is worth noting that the organisation which welcomed me, CUAMM, was initially founded to deliver emergency medical aid in Africa; then, it was enrolled by the Apulian regional government to provide more or less the same service in the Foggian countryside. It is not necessary to evoke Said, Fanon, or other post-colonial authors to recognise the (neo)colonial gaze of the institution on this issue.

Secondly, when we accessed the most prominent migrants' informal settlement in the Foggia district, called *La Pista*[17], or *Mexico*[18], what astonished us more was not the unseemly condition of a "city"[19] where there is no garbage collection service, no sewage system, no drinking and current water

17. "La Pista", literally "the airstrip", brings this name because the informal settlement has grown on State land, which two decades ago was a base of the Italian air force.
18. Mexico, from Mexico City, one of the most populated cities in the world, owes its name to the fact here one can find anything.
19. In summer, for tomato harvesting, Borgo Mezzanone migrants' informal settlements can reach more than 5,000 inhabitants.

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system, and there are only some pirate precarious connections to the electric power grid. Neither was the "metropolitan" aspect of a place where one could find dozens of bars and takeaway restaurants, brothels, an innumerable amount of craftsman's workshops, minimarts, and shops dealing all kinds of goods, as well about five or six places of worship, among churches and mosques. Instead, what struck me the most was the complex network of social bonds shaping the daily life of a multitude of people, almost entirely from Sub-Saharan countries, living and working side by side, out of any formal rule. Yet in an organised way. How could it be possible? Replies to this question got me later, during my daily frequentation of these places, when I had the chance to focus on how thousands of people carried out their daily routines.

In the case of Foggia, solidarity affects social and material practices, providing the necessary support for everyday life. We propose to elaborate on the following social situation: a) the provision of water for sanitation and b) the dwelling construction procedure.

For what concerns the first case, given that *La Pista*, as well as almost all other migrants' informal settlements in the Foggia provincial district, are disconnected from the water mains, providing water is crucial to the community's survival. The largest settlements, like *La Pista, Gran Ghetto* di Rignano, and some others, were provided with giant water tanks, filled weekly, where people living there could access water (when and until it was available). Some other settlements, generally of lesser dimensions, did not have the same opportunity. So, the people inhabiting these places must move even for long distances (up to 5/10 km.) to get water for sanitation (Fravega, 2023).

At the same time, small blue tanks – of about 20 litres capacity – could be seen quite everywhere, representing a visual marker of what could be considered a "lively infrastructure" (Amin, 2014) or, in other terms, representing the material part of an extensive network of relations and reciprocal obligations through which water is collected, gathered, and distributed. Indeed, infrastructures are implicated in the human experience of the urban space shaping, in their operation, the social behaviour and the affective dispositions of the people who employ (and build!) them (Amin, 2014; Tonkiss, 2013). Accordingly, what the blue tanks hide is much more interesting than what they show; that is, the complex, informal and invisible set of social capital mobilised to give access to a good that the UN considers a fundamental right[20]. To cope with this situation, where daily routine activities – such as washing oneself after an exhausting working day in tomato fields (in summer) or olive

20. Resolution 64/292, adopted on 28th July 2010 (URL: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/687002?ln=en).

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tree cultivations (in winter) – cannot be taken for granted, a collective and cooperative effort of self-organisation is required. A Senegalese man dwelling in an isolated farmhouse explains:

> We have no water here, and seventeen people live here. The nearest big tank is seven kilometres away; when we reach it, it is often empty. We need someone who goes there with the car and brings the tanks also for the others living here (July 2021, Foggia, ethnographic diary excerpt).

Only if one provides more water than is necessary for oneself can water be effectively accessible to everyone. Hence, a cooperation scheme is required. As Fallou said, to get water, you need a car to get to the big tank and tanks to collect water. Nevertheless, having a car is uncommon, so you must know and involve someone with one. However, bringing water from the big tank to the dwelling is often not enough. Because water must be kept, safeguarded, and then distributed, each of these acts may need the involvement of other people. While there is no fixed scheme, water is accessed through a series of acts requiring combined effort and a relentless process of arrangement and negotiation (Lancione and McFarlane, 2016). A process involving, in some cases, economic transactions or payments in kind to compensate for the time spent by people involved in the process (e.g., time spent collecting or bringing water).

Looking at this complex process, it is worth mentioning that it could not be accomplished without a sequence of mutual aid acts through which personal social capital is "put in service" of a wider group, being oriented by a principle of "self-help." Accordingly, we can say the wish to solve a personal problem is possible only under the assumption that the problem is common.

Now, let us consider the second case: the dwelling procedures. If one is interested in architecture, walking through the dirty roads and the alleys, shaping the geography of *La Pista,* is a real experience. Here, all kinds of spontaneous architecture and construction materials can be found. Makeshift shelters are built with pallets, spare windows and plastic tarps, to make some examples. There, you can also find old container housing modules adapted to host dozens of people, wooden shacks, small buildings with patios made of gasbeton bricks, and much more. However, *La Pista's* urban landscape is continuously changing, and here and there, it is possible to see new fenced-in wastelands, perimeter definitions of buildings that have yet to be built or whose foundations have barely been constructed, and buildings left half-finished.

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Nevertheless, construction here is not free; it is run under a collective tacit agreement. In other words, one cannot just appropriately build his house on an extension of the land.

Accordingly, one of my informants from Mali explained to me the possibility of building a house or a shop:

> It depends on the nationality. Whether you are a member of a highly represented group or not. If not, you must approach another community, but it is more difficult. First, you have to contact the representatives of your community and tell them what piece of land you would like to take. Then, they hear from the representatives of the other communities, and if no one can claim rights to that piece of land, then you can take it. (…) Construction, anyway, can last for years because people need time and money to collect or buy all the construction materials (December 2021, Foggia, ethnographic diary excerpt).

While this process can be read at first glance as a dynamic of mere appropriation of a common good (showing, even in a deprived context, the pervasiveness of capitalist logic), upon closer inspection, it can be interpreted somehow differently.

Firstly, building something in a condition of severe social and urban exclusion, like the one shown by migrants' informal settlements, can be considered a political act through which a neglected population claim a sort of "right to the city" (Harvey, 2003; 2017) in a hostile environment. That is an aspiration to acquire dignity through the exercise of collective power in the urbanisation process, which, in a case in point, happens to take place in segregational circumstances.

Like in Saluzzo, for black people, the possibility to access adequate housing (let us say, also, through a regular location contract) in the Foggia district is almost impossible. Indeed, the genealogy of the development of *La Pista* – a place which, under various forms and after many evictions, existed for about a decade – forces us to dwell on the growing relevance of a racialised rural space (Anderlini and Fravega, 2023; Fravega and Queirolo Palmas, 2022) as the outcome of a process of interweaving of dynamics of social exclusion and spatial segregation with processes of economic exploitation. Furthermore, these settlements, operating a "frontierisation" of the agricultural space, subject migrants to a radical "otherisation" dynamic.

Secondly, in a context of racial oppression and exploitation, the flourishing of rural migrants' informal settlements can be considered as a reclamation of one's public presence, as opposed to a mainstream politics of indifference (Herzfeld, 1992), abandonment (Stopani, 2017) and silence

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(Boulukos, 2006). Under this condition, following a Sartrian perspective, Fugo explains:

> conflict between individuals is momentarily suspended because of the look of the Third that generates an external unification of individuals and thus temporarily freezes antagonistic and conflictual relations. The essential condition for one consciousness to be united with another is for both individuals to be subjected to the objectifying look of the Third (Fugo, 2019: 23).

Where the Third, in the case in point, is represented by white, local society, and culture. And this is the driving force of the raising of a variety of forms of "black solidarity" (More, 2009).

Turning to communities to claim a right to construction, or a "right to housing", implies the recognition of a collective dimension of living in informal settlements and putting community forms of solidarity and social organisation in place. Within this perspective, private construction is everything but a private affair. Rather, it can be conceived as a constitutive act, qualifying communities as sources of solidarity and individuals as bearers of rights.

Conclusive remarks

In this contribution, we aimed to show how the *migration industry from below* is permeated/constituted by a multiplicity of acts of "spurious solidarity". Through various examples drawn from our fieldwork experiences, we meant to highlight that the principle of solidarity informs a variety of material practices through which migrants' daily routines and acts of self-organisation are shaped in many different racialised contexts.

Nonetheless, the concept of solidarity must be desecrated. That means removing it from the frame through which it is commonly interpreted. In other words, we must consider that the boundaries between forms of mutual aid and the informal economy are uncertain and evanescent, outlining two overlapping spheres.

Within this perspective, solidarity can be a rather material concept that is not in direct opposition to the market idea. On the contrary, it can be considered an ingredient, a resource, a necessity, a counterpoint, or a resultant of manifold forms of exchange.

Furthermore, whether there is no radical alternative between disinterested and self-interested action (following Bourdieu) is also because every economic transaction is rooted within and enacted by a set of social relations.

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As Marx and Polanyi maintained, the commodity to purchase – be it a sea passage towards Europe, access to water in Foggia, or a shelter in Saluzzo – is nothing but the result of social life and its contingent features, framed by the state of the powers relations that mark it.

Accordingly, we wonder where interested solidarity ends, and exploitation starts. When we visited the olive groves where blacks fleeing the racist violence and pogroms shooking Sfax have found refuge (Brotherton, Dimes, Lovato 2023), we were confronted with the ambiguity of the population's willingness to host thousands of people from Sub-Saharan on their lands. Because if, on the one hand, this could be seen as an act of solidarity, on the other, it could be read as an act dictated by interest. Precisely, the permanence of these people allows residents to enjoy the effects of disproportionate growth of the migration economy (e.g., the multiplication of customers of commercial initiatives and offers). Furthermore, it must be said that through solidarity, people can gain social status and obtain positions of relative privilege to convert their social capital into economic capital or vice versa. Because of that, in the province of Foggia, if a migrant daily labourer lives in an isolated farmhouse and has a car, through hid availability to help bring water (or to meet other mobility requests), through a mutual aid act, he has the chance to improve his position in his community and, maybe, to access some kind of compensation. According to Bourdieu (1987), we are facing the principle of the permanent convertibility of capitals.

Nevertheless, it must be said interested solidarity and self-help practices at the core of our work – be it the solidarity of "*passagers*" of the same *convoi* in Sfax or by agricultural labourers in Saluzzo or Foggia – is due to the need to protect themselves and organise to face a hostile and harsh environment where processes of racialisation and exploitation run wild. Here, solidarity functions as a "currency" through which collective responses to a range of individual needs take shape. Along this vein, we see *interested solidarity* as a set of material practices that can be configured both as constitutive of a social bond through which one can give meaning and continuity to one's actions in harsh contexts and as a set of capacitative practices, enabling people to exercise their rights concretely.

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