Investigating informal labor

The case of migrant farmworkers in south-eastern Sicily

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Objectives of this presentation

To look at how informality is daily performed by people living and working in it, focusing especially on the case of *migrant laborers*.

To highlight the *strategic relationships* that individual maintain with the State.

To investigate the configurations of informality generated by the *interplay* between the *State*, the *market* and the *informal workers*.
Defining informality

Two (ideal-typical) positions to frame informality:

1) As an act of *creativity*
2) As a form of *exploitation*

Aim of the presentation: to explore the *constitutive ambiguities* and the apparently *contradictory manners* through which individuals are able to keep together this two poles, switching among different repertories and practices
Defining informality

Informal activities appear to be unregulated by the institution of the society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated.

The content of informality could vary consistently (informality as a matter of definition of reality).

It becomes crucial to investigate when, where and how some groups of interest define who and what is “informal.”
Informality and the State

1. Informality *versus* the State
   a) The State is too pervasive: rigid and inefficient regulations need to be bypassed
   b) The State is “absent”: informality has a cushioning effect

2. Informality is *functional* to the State

Aim of the presentation: to investigate how informality is produced *by* the State and *within the State frame*

To highlight the *strategic relationships* that individuals maintain with the State, seen as the *authority providing* useful *resources*, but also as the apparatus that, due to its lack of transparency and efficiency, guarantees fundamental social right in a totally discretionary way
About the fieldwork

Employment of qualitative methodologies

• ethnographic observation (January- July 2013);
• participant observation (2 months);
• shadowing;
• 100 in-depth interviews and informal conversation;
The “transformed littoral strip”
The “plastic sea”
Entering inside a greenhouse
The “transformed littoral strip”

- High concentration of greenhouses (more than 3000 firms)
- High fragmentation of the productive structure
- High presence of foreign workers, mostly coming from Tunisia and Romania
- Emergence of phenomena of competition between the two “groups”
- Non-seasonality of the agricultural system
The agricultural unemployment benefits

An unemployed farmworker could receive a benefit whether s/he is registered at the nominative lists at the territorial INPS’ office since at least two years, and could certify the payment of 102 days of social security contributions over the last two years.

References to the LAW N. 247/2007 Art. 1, cc.55/57 and to INSP’S MESSAGES N. 8253/2009 and N. 365/2000
The agricultural unemployment benefits: the case of the entrepreneurs

«Now I’m going to tell you the way in which the system works in agriculture: within the agricultural sector it exists a job contract on the bases of which we “pay a certain amount of days”. In our case, in our packinghouse, for example, we register 51, 78 or 102 days. These are different thresholds. Usually, for instance, you work for a month, but we pay your contribution just for 8 or 9 days. As soon as you reach 51 days’ threshold in one year, and you collect 51 more days in the following year, you get the well-known agricultural unemployment subsidy. Firms usually do like this, it is convenient both for the employer and the employee. You can ask around, go wherever you want, in all the companies it works like this. In an entire year, you usually work for 320/330 days, you are paid for 330 days, but you have just 102 daily contributions, because if you exceed this threshold, you do not get any unemployment benefit. Here, usually, it works like this»

Santa Croce Camerina, 06/17/2013. Colloquium with G. D.S., male, 33 years old, job counselor
The agricultural unemployment benefits: the case of “fake farmworkers”

«A: Everyone complains here for the deep crisis of the agricultural sector. But, even if they complain, they are the first one who commit irregularities. Here every firm is abusive.

Q: What do you mean for being abusive?

A: Oh, it’s obvious: here everyone who has an agricultural firm registers it in his wife’s name to be able to write down his own name on the INPS’ list and get the unemployment benefit»

Vittoria, 05/11/2013. P., in his 60ies, tomatoes and oil producer
The agricultural unemployment benefits: the case of migrant workers

«L: for 51 days you have to pay 400 Euros, for 102 days the prize is 800 Euros and for 180 days you have to pay 1500/1600 Euros. It’s for everyone the same prize in here. I had not enough money this year. I bought just 20 days necessary to renew my residence permit»

[Vittoria, 06/04/2013. Tunisian guy who came in Sicily in order to “buy” job contract together with some day, but that he is currently residing in Padova]

«S: after 7 years of being irregular in Italy, in October I applied for “sanatoria” [i.e. collective regularization].

F: I helped him to find a contract because in the place where he works the owner doesn’t want to hire him regularly. We were lucky since we found 10 days for 255 €, that is the actual cost that the owner had to pay to INPS»

[Vittoria, 06/01/2013, S. Tunisian man in his 40ies; F., Vittorian guy, 37 years old]
The agricultural unemployment benefits: the case of migrant workers

«S: the phenomenon of the “fake farmworkers” among Tunisian laborers is actually problematic. But if they do not have any other feasible alternative to earn some money, what do they do? To make an example, let’s take into consideration Tunisian old men: they could not be employed anymore inside greenhouses as daily workers. Here there are a lot of younger and more active guys! And so, what do they have to do for a living? How do they live here? How could they send some money back home? So they continue to pay contributions on their own, waiting till reaching the age to get retired and in the meanwhile getting public subsidies. We cannot speak about the phenomenon of “fake farmworkers” without taking into consideration their subjective motivations».

ittoria, 06/01/2013, S., Tunisian man, 46 years old who works in the most active trade union of the area
“Astuteness” or “fraud”?

During the morning shift at the packinghouse, me, D. and P. are working on the same line. D., the man working behind me, is our Italian foreman, usually very talkative with us. He generally appreciates to give me a lot of details regarding the dynamics of the workplace, since I’m the “new one” here. Due to his higher position, he does not care at all to be heard while talking about the other workers part of the team. So, he starts saying with his laud voice: “Fortunately we are almost in July. July is a nice month for foreigners, since they take a lot of money, thanks to the agricultural unemployment subsidy and the family allowances”. P., the Albanian man who is working in front of me, replies quickly to his sarcastic statement, saying: “What do you mean? You are also going to receive the same amount of money as I do!”

Extract from field-notes, Santa Croce Camerina, 06/17/2013