



# Asylum at work. Humanitarian exploitation, racial capitalism and productive reconfigurations in the aftermath of the 2015 “refugee crisis”

**Francesco Marchi**

(University of Bologna)

## ABSTRACT

This contribution reflects on empirical findings gathered through an ethnographic project carried out in Bologna, the capital city of Emilia Romagna region, Northern Italy. By unveiling the “asylum-logistics” nexus at the Interporto Bologna, a critical intermodal centre within the European logistical infrastructure, I emphasise the role of asylum in reproducing surplus racialised labour, which is particularly befitting in meeting the “just-in-time” imperative characterizing contemporary neoliberal capitalism. Overall, this chapter excavates the role of asylum in favouring the racialization of labour.

## RIASSUNTO

Questo contributo riflette sui risultati empirici raccolti attraverso un progetto etnografico condotto a Bologna, capoluogo della regione Emilia Romagna, nel Nord Italia. Svelando il nesso “asilo-logistica” all’Interporto di Bologna, un centro intermodale fondamentale all’interno dell’infrastruttura logistica europea, sottolineo il ruolo dell’asilo nella riproduzione del surplus di manodopera razzializzata, che è particolarmente adatto per soddisfare la necessità del “just in time” imperativo che caratterizza il capitalismo neo-liberista contemporaneo. Nel complesso, questo capitolo indaga il ruolo dell’asilo nel favorire la razzializzazione del lavoro.

## 1. INTRODUCTION, CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

Imagine you are driving with your car in the northern outskirts of Bologna, the capital city of Emilian Romagna region, Northern Italy. The urban landscape, made by boulevards and prestigious facades, new transport infrastructures and modern buildings, progressively turns into a repetitive pattern of cultivated lands and outdated small villages. Some ten kilometres north of the city, when you are already accustomed to this rural landscape, you bump into a vast expanse made by hundreds of warehouses, perpetually crossed by trucks, vans and trains, which transport goods of any kind. You are at the Interporto Bologna, a critical intermodal centre which acquired strategic importance since the logistical rationality has transformed the paradigm of production (Cowen 2014). While you are driving across the Interporto, you notice a wired combination of elements. On one hand, the landscape seems to remind to a dystopian and aseptic future. Streets have no names, but numbers (A1, A2, etc.), series of glossy vehicles are parked outside warehouses, you know thousands of workers are working but few traces



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of human suffering are visible. On the other hand, you notice junks of old trucks, drivers who eat in run-down restaurants and workers who slowly reach the workplace with shabby bicycles or electric scooters. This combination of aseptic brightness and velocity, slowness and organised abandonment, is a glimpse of the constitutive heterogeneity of (racial) capitalism.

During my six months fieldwork, I slowly discovered that many workers, equipped with shabby bikes or electric scooters, crossing the aseptic streets of Interporto, were asylum seekers residing in some of the several reception centres scattered around the city of Bologna and Ferrara. Reception centres are no standard facilities. In Bologna, for instance, small former apartments, as well as former military barracks, like Centro Mattei, were converted into reception centres. As such, the quality of reception varies significantly from centre to centre, even if an extractive, punitive and disciplinary logic sits at the heart of asylum (Mellino 2019, Picozza 2021). Asylum seekers are entitled to work after sixty days they applied for asylum. While they are in the process, which might last several years, they are granted a temporary document, in jargon *cedolino*. The *cedolino* lasts from one to a maximum of six months, and it is renewed accordingly. As we will see below, the contingent legality of asylum is crucial in favouring the flexible capture of asylum labour, since job contracts cannot exceed the duration of *cedolino*.

Through in-depth interviews and participant observation I focused on asylum seekers' labour conditions at Interporto. Privileged observers (migrant activists, unionists, social workers, researchers) introduced me to the field and I slowly entered in contact with asylum seekers. Subsequently, I spent time with them during their chilling time before their night shifts, usually in a coffee place mainly attended by black people. I also interviewed privileged observers in order to acquire an organic picture on the complex nexus between asylum and labour in the area of Bologna. The category of asylum seeker includes a highly heterogeneous array of socio-cultural and ethnic groups. During my fieldwork I mostly met with sub-Saharan people (Gambia, Niger, Mali) who tended to self-identify with the term "blacks."

## 2. ASYLUM, LABOUR AND RACIAL CAPITALISM

In the wake of the 2015 "refugee crisis", critical studies on migration and critical humanitarian studies developed organic and substantive insights on the working of the humanitarian border (Walters 2011). In this regard, we can identify three main areas of inquiry. First, the humanitarian border has been extensively analysed in relation to the external boundaries of the European border regime (Albahari 2015; Cutitta 2018). Second, ethnographically informed studies focused on the socio-political antinomies of



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humanitarian practice. Following Michel Agier's (2010) characterization of the humanitarian in terms of a "care and control" domain, various contributions reflected on the "disturbing ambiguities of humanitarianism" (Agier 2011: 4). While the official and institutional discourse of asylum is centred around moral tropes – hospitality, reception, integration – research brought to light a constitutive underside made by confinement and social abandonment (Campesi 2015; Pinelli 2018), bureaucratized crafting of social identity (Sorgoni 2011), as well as racial hierarchies integral to asylum (Picozza 2021). Third, informed by the literature on the migration industry (Gammeltoft-Hansen, Nyberg Sørensen 2013), scholars focused on the systemic and interlacing connections between asylum and neoliberal political economy. The concept of humanitarian industrial complex (Dadusc, Mudu 2020), for instance, and an attention to the "neoliberal location of asylum" (Novak 2019) well epitomized a broader tendency aimed at bringing the political economy back in the analysis of asylum.

Within this third area of study, the role of asylum in shaping specific figures of labour (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) and in contributing to the racialisation of labour more broadly has been partly overlooked. By joining recent interventions on the topic (Frydenlund, Cullen Dunn 2022; Rajaram 2018, Rigo, Dines 2017), this contribution aims to reflect on empirical findings gathered through an ethnographic project carried out in the area of Bologna, the capital city of Emilia Romagna region, Northern Italy. In particular, by unveiling the "asylum-logistics nexus" at the Interporto Bologna, I aim to emphasise that one of the pivotal functions of asylum concerns the reproduction and management of surplus racialised labour, which is particularly befitting in meeting the "just-in-time" imperative characterizing contemporary neoliberal capitalism (Andriasevic 2021).

As such, I take as point of departure the concept of "humanitarian exploitation" proposed by Rigo and Dines (2017). Through this theoretical lens, the authors aim to emphasise that the humanitarian reconfiguration of migration, in which asylum became the pivotal technology for the management of the migrant population, needs to be carefully investigated in relation to productive processes. More specifically, Rigo and Dines stress that the humanitarian government produces "a peculiar *political economy* of management and exploitation of migrant workforce" (2017: 91, my translation; on this point see also Ramsay 2019). In this perspective, the figure of the asylum seeker, usually conceived in terms of biopolitical exclusion, assumes a decisive role within changing patterns of neoliberal political economy.

The analytical framework draws also from the literature on the relation between racial capitalism and surplus population. Scholars of racial capitalism contributed to a substantial decentring of an orthodox Marxist reading of capitalist development. By placing the plantation, racial slavery and colonial expansion at the heart of capitalist operations, they contributed to "stretch" – to paraphrasing Fanon famous dictum (1963:



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40) – some Eurocentric limits of so-called “white Marxism” (Mellino, Pomella 2020). This scholarship elaborated on the racially differentiated yet enmeshed labour regimes constituting global processes of accumulation. This means, for instance, that “from 1492 onwards, racialised, coerced, and less-than-free migratory labour was central to the rise and development of capitalist modernity” (Danewid 2021: 150; see also Quijano 2000). The shadow of the plantation (Aider 2017) haunts the working of contemporary capitalism, with race embodying a postcolonial infrastructure (Nemser 2017) which unevenly distributes access to resources, as well as rates of exploitability, disposability and mortality within the social body.

Thinking through the lens of racial capitalism enables focusing on the complex and mutating modes of reproduction and valorisation of surplus racialised populations, which are simultaneously signified as redundant, *in surplus*, in regard to the space of citizenship and confined at the margins of the human, yet essential and generative to capital accumulation (Bhattacharyya 2018, Mbembe 2017). In this perspective, if critical humanitarian scholars extensively theorised humanitarian government as a technology of management of “wasted lives” (Agier 2010, Bauman 2004), it remains of crucial importance to investigate how these lives at the margins are absorbed and valorised by capital.

Marx (1990) famously talked about relative surplus population, or reserve army labour, to emphasise how capital, through various strategies (e.g., technological restructuring), tends to craft pools of unemployed workers with the aim to weaken class unity and increase productivity. As suggested by some studies (see, among other, McIntre, Nast 2011), the Marxian’s framework requires to be partially re-elaborated. For instance, it is necessary to excavate the modalities through which race and gender hierarchically fragment the composition of the relative surplus population. In other words, not every unemployed worker in need for an occupation is equal in front of capital flexible accumulation. As we will see below, racial hierarchies structure the heterogenous pool of relative surplus population.

By proposing to read the humanitarian through the lens of racial capitalism and relative surplus population, I do not aim to develop a sort of all-encompassing and deterministic approach to the topic. In other words, my reading is complicit with those theories pointing at the fact that “many are dispossessed and displaced, but the route to absorption into capitalist formations remains unclear or, at least, unorthodox” (Bhattacharyya 2018: 177). Race and racial formations operate in order to fracture and decompose the human by reproducing a superfluous humanity which is afflicted and subjected to an array of racialising dynamics that go from the political economy of exploitation to processes of social and physical death and existential abandonment (Mbembe 2003, 2017, Patterson 1982). However, if the *subject of race* (Mbembe 2017) embodies these dynamics, it is nonetheless crucial to remind that they are not necessarily active and present at the same time for any negatively racialised subject.



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Different combinations and nuances between these various dynamics invite us to avoid any deterministic and simplistic reading of how race intertwines with the working of capital and the making of surplus populations. Therefore, by approaching the humanitarian realm through this analytical framework, I do not want to suggest that *every* asylum seeker is necessarily absorbed by capital. I rather propose to see this issue the other way around. Roughly put, in nowadays Europe various “low skilled” industries (agriculture, gastronomy, logistics, services) would be simply inoperative without the decisive contribution of reception systems in reproducing and managing specific figures of disposable and fungible labour which is exploited according to the need of what we might call “just-in-time racial capitalism”.

### 3. MIGRANT LABOUR AT INTERPORTO? ASYLUM AND THE RACIAL RESTRUCTURING OF LABOUR

Every day, in most cases every night, hundreds of asylum seekers leave their reception facility to reach some of the several warehouses of Interporto to work as porters. Located 20 kilometres from Bologna and 42 from Ferrara, the commute might take more than two hours. Asylum seekers rely on public transportation or reach Interporto by bike or scooter, for a journey that turned up to be lethal in some dramatic cases. Given the scarcity of public routes, asylum seekers arrive amply in advance and wait up to two hours at the end of their shift to catch the first public vehicle to return to their reception centre.

The modality of recruitment is not homogeneous, since there are not formal agreements between reception cooperatives and companies. In many cases, by word-of-mouth asylum seekers contact employment agencies to get their short-term contract signed through WhatsApp. In other cases, reception cooperatives entertain an unofficial connection with employment agencies, with social workers being *de facto* informal intermediaries. Contracts can last a single day up to a couple of weeks and can be renewed accordingly to the need of the company. I did my fieldwork during the Christmas holidays and I could notice how subcontractors modulated their employment behaviour. Given the predictable peak of production during the Christmas time, agencies employed a higher number of asylum seekers with “exceptionally long” contracts (one or two months). Being aware that after the vacation period many of them would not have been re-employed due to a physiological and significant production braking, they were involved into an internal competition. Who would have performed better might have had more chances to get a shorter contract afterwards. I was told that supervisors in the warehouse directly mentioned that the most devoted workers might have been re-employed, even if with shorter contracts.

The story of Ola wells epitomised the extreme flexibility and volatility characterizing contemporary logistics. Nigerian asylum seeker arrived in Italy in March 2020, Ola has



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been working for months as a porter, with an on-call subcontracted contract. Every late morning, he receives a WhatsApp message from the agency advising him if he needs to go to work the coming night or not. This is how things works for hundreds of asylum seekers working at Interporto, being every day of the week (7/7) ready to reach the warehouse overnight in case they get a morning message from the agency. Despite his contract declares only 4 hours for single shift, he is required by his supervisor to overstay 4 or 5 hours every night. Most of the extra hours are not paid. To my question if he can decide to leave after the official end of the shift, he bitterly replied: “I can’t refuse to do extra work, otherwise they call someone else.” His shift starts around 9 p.m. and ends at 4/5 a.m. Afterwards, Ola takes a regional train that goes to Bologna central station, then a bus to his reception centre, for a more than two hours commute. He told me that in the warehouse where he works the night shifts are mainly covered by asylum seekers that live in the area of Bologna and Ferrara, defined as “black migrants” who are from sub-Saharan countries (Mali, Nigeria, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Conakry, etc.).

Ola’s bitter yet pragmatic assertion about the fact that he “can’t refuse to do extra work, otherwise they call someone else” intriguingly reveals the role of reception in reproducing and managing a pool of a fungible and superfluous workforce. As anticipated above, Marx (1990) referred to this basin of temporary unemployed workers in terms of “relative surplus population.” However, as suggested by some theoretical works on race, capital and labour, it is necessary to develop an analytical framework able to acknowledge the racial heterogeneity of the “relative surplus population”. For instance, unemployed workers with a certain “racial status” might be able to obtain a certain working stability or job position over time, while others might remain at the bottom of the hierarchy.

In talking about his job, Ola told me that “black migrants” are subjected to racist control and discriminations by Italians and, in his own words, also by “Arab people”, some of them being part of the rank-and-file union *Si Cobas*. In some warehouses supervisors (in Ola’s words *bosses* or *capi*) exercise forms of control and pressure to those who work as porters, who are required to fill in giant trucks with parcels under constant supervision. If in many cases supervisors are Italians, also migrants from Northern Africa (Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia) with more stable working conditions occupy this position.

In order to dig deeper into this point raised by Ola, it is necessary to look back at the 2011–2014 period. During that time, widespread strikes in Northern Italy, from Bologna to Piacenza, from Milan to Verona, were carried out in the logistics sector, often organised and coordinated by migrants coming from Northern Africa in alliance with *Si cobas* (Cuppini et al. 2015, Roggero, Curcio 2017). Despite structural difficulties, this wave of struggle brought about significant improvements in the quality of labour for many of the workers employed in the factories at that time (Benvegnù et al. 2018). These migrant workers were in possession of different visa, such as working visa, study



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or family reunification permit, while only a marginal and negligible percentage had an asylum document.

Since around 2015, the labour composition at Inteporto has started to change rapidly. In concomitance with the “refugee crisis”, a new figure entered the productive organization of Interporto: the asylum seeker. Since then, employment agencies and logistics management have systematically relied on the reception system as a pool of contingent and racialised labour in order to fight back the strengthening of bargaining power Si Cobas migrant workers had gained in the previous wave of struggle. In some emblematic instances, asylum seekers were employed as subcontracted workers with a one-day contract in order to substitute Si Cobas migrants who were striking. An ethnographic view on the labour organisation at Interporto enables to come to terms with the centrality of race in fragmenting class composition, unity and solidarity, as well as in fostering new forms of capital’s flexible accumulation (Piro, Sacchetto 2021). Despite socio-geographical variations, the racial ordering of labour represents a constant and structural aspect within patterns of capitalist development (Roediger 1991, Quijano 2000).

The labour racialisation at Interporto, most notably, seems to suggest that the blackness/whiteness spectrum, among the most recurrent and historical manifestation of racial formations, develops beyond a simple and rigid binarism. Blackness and whiteness embody a spectrum which can include various “intermediate positions.” This spectrum, indeed, does not designate a monolithic and consistent partition; it implies an array of socio-cultural figures which are racialised along this black and white range. Thinking through the mobility and malleability of blackness, and conversely of whiteness, enables to acknowledge that specific social groups can be alternately classified as White and/or Blacks depending on historical contingencies and/or geographical settings (Merrill 2013). Moreover, it suggests that less-than-white populations can in turn reproduce an anti-black politics against other social groups. As showed, for instance, by Gross-Wyrtzen (2020), the Moroccan community, which occupies a less-than-white position within the (postcolonial) European imaginary, often reproduce a politics of anti-blackness against Sub-Saharan people who live in Morocco. And a similar tendency seems to be present at Interporto, where a series of factors (legal status, ethnicity, etc.) favoured the racial subjugation of black asylum seekers by Northern African Si Cobas workers, as well as by Italian workers.

Si Cobas migrants tend to blame “black” newcomers for the loss of bargaining power they have gone through over the last years. Other than signalling the limits of the Si Cobas union (Grappi 2021) in recomposing and relaunching the class struggle, this situation instantiates the racial strategy of capital, which always develop new and plastic ways for racially fragmenting labour. Even during the 2011-2014 wave of struggle, racial frictions were present among workers, with managerial figures trying to pit workers against one another and undermine the possibility of solidarity. As reported by Curcio,



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at that time the racial discourses were spoken out mainly in terms of nationality, as denounced by a migrant workers interviewed by the author:

In warehouses the “corporal” used to say to Moroccans that they are better than Tunisians, to Tunisians that they are better than Egyptians or Romanians. The objective is to split up workers, putting a group against the other: “if you behave well, I’ll pay you more; do not join the struggles”, etc. (Curcio 2018: 267).

Despite these frictions, migrant workers of/and Si Cobas were able to develop a certain degree of class unity and gain some important results (Cuppini et al. 2015, Curcio 2018, Curcio, Roggero 2018). During that period, racial discourses aimed at fragmenting workers solidarity have been the basis to relaunch the struggle led by the Si Cobas, with “ethnic networks serv[ing] as a strong-hold for building information and solidarity networks” (Benvegnù et al. 2018: 99). However, the horizontal and autonomous organization and tradition of Si Cobas, often praised for its capacity to involve those workers, mainly migrants, excluded by “traditional and white” unions (CGIL, CIS, UIL) (Benvegnù et al. 2018; Manicasteri 2014), entered a *structural impasse*. As noted by Grappi: the strength acquired by unionized workers [Si Cobas], largely hired with permanent contracts through cooperatives, is in fact in danger of turning into a force contrary to the collective interests of workers. In their daily management, these unionized and stable workers find themselves in charge of commanding on colleagues who are weaker contractually, because they are temporaries, and administratively, because they are asylum seekers [in most of the cases these weaknesses are combined]. If we add to this the fact that there is a clear color division, with temporary workers largely Sub-Saharan African and cooperative employees largely North African or Asian, we understand how companies are building a trap from which we need to get out (Grappi 2021, my translation).

Within this mutating scenario, the 2015 “refugee crisis” can be seen as a moment of a *productive reconfiguration through racial means*. Since then, management of the Interporto Bologna found in the reception system an ideal basin of contingent and racialised labour employed to restructure the overall labour organisation.

#### 4. CONCLUSIVE REMARK

Empirical data presented in this chapter suggest that the racialisation of labour in a moment of workers’ counteroffensive occurred through asylum. Due to a series of factors, such as legal precarity and what Stuart Hall’s called “black ethnicity” (2021), asylum seekers seem to embody the ideal workforce in a sector characterised by high degrees of volatility.



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Moreover, it is crucial to note that the category of “migrant labour”, commonly deployed to describe the centrality of non-native workers in the racial composition of labour, requires further specifications in order to grasp the labour heterogeneity at Interporto. In fact, this concept risks hiding the racial caesura that has fragmented and reconfigured migrant labour since around 2015. In light of the asylum-logistics nexus examined above, it is argued that concepts such as humanitarian exploitation (Rigo, Dines 2017) represent decisive theoretical tools for outlining the centrality of asylum in fostering specific regimes of exploitation and racialisation which affect processes of class (re)composition and labour organisation more broadly.

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