Landscape of Exception as Spatial and Social Interaction Between High-Quality Agricultural Production and Immigrant Labour Exploitation

Vincenzo Todaro and Francesco Lo Piccolo

Abstract This Chapter analyses the spatial and social interaction phenomena between high-quality agricultural production and immigrant labour exploitation that produce the landscape of exception, a particular declination of the Agambenian (2005) “state of exception” concept. The landscape of exception construction mechanism is generated within South-Eastern Sicily through the productive system of greenhouses, finalised to the vegetables production. Greenhouses, in particular, represent an effective tool for spatial manipulation over the landscape and social control of migrant workers. In relation to these considerations, this work reflects on ethical challenges and dilemmas of planning, highlighting (both explicit and latent) conflicts and power inequalities in the landscapes of exception, where issues of social justice, environmental sustainability and suspension of norms are strictly intertwined.

1 Global North, Rural Regions and Immigration

In the northern hemisphere’s rural regions, the non-specialised immigrant manual labour, mostly employed illegally and to excess, is an essential component for agricultural production systems. It provides a response to the demand for labour from the agricultural world that is now neglected by local populations (Ambrosini 2001; Cicerchia and Pallara 2009; Centro studi e Ricerche IDOS 2016; CoReRAS 2017). Therefore, even in the globalised rural world “immigrants’ poor work is seen to be

1According to the ISMEA-SVIMEZ Report (2016), 70% of high-quality agricultural produce is concentrated in Southern Italy, and in particular in Campania, Calabria, Apulia and Sicily.

V. Todaro (✉) · F. Lo Piccolo
University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy
e-mail: vincenzo.todaro@unipa.it
F. Lo Piccolo
e-mail: francesco.lopiccolo@unipa.it

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closely connected to and structurally necessary for rich work” (Ambrosini 2005, 60); it has become a key component of the neo-liberal rural economy.

However, the profile of excellence that often characterises some high-quality agricultural productions does not correspond in any way to the living and working conditions of the immigrants employed in the agricultural sector.

This condition continues to be a serious critical factor in some geographically marginal and often fragile areas, also from an administrative-institutional point of view, where laws and regulations regarding employment and territorial management and planning are suspended by a perverse union between economic power and political power.

In these cases, economic power, the main source of income and development, manages to control the political sphere, freezing and not applying the regulations that are the basis of territorial and worker protection (especially immigrants), but which could damage it.

Moving away from theoretical considerations about the relations between forms of power and planning (Lo Piccolo and Halawani 2014; Lo Piccolo and Todaro 2015, 2018; Lo Piccolo 2016; Lo Piccolo et al. 2017a, 2017b; Todaro 2017), this Chapter intends to reflect on the matters concerning the relations between (economic) power and the transformation of the landscape. These relations define a landscape of exception intended as the spatial application of that “state of exception” that, according to Agamben (2005), is the outcome of the suspension—albeit legalised—of rights and regulations valid for everyone.

In particular, the document intends to analyse the cause-effect ratio between agricultural sector development, transformation of the landscape and immigrant workforce exploitation in the Province of Ragusa, highlighting how the configuration (and planning) of the landscape can create types of exploitation and social exclusion.

2 Migratory Flows and Local Economy

Towards the end of the 1970s, a concurrence of factors, mainly traceable to the progressive adoption of restrictive immigration policies in Northern European countries, directed a large part of migratory flows traditionally heading to Northern Europe towards Southern Europe instead.

In this context, due to the concurrence of specific conditions, including a certain level of legislative and institutional tolerance of immigration, high levels of informality in entering the job market and the presence of a constant demand for labour in the primary sector and personal services (Caruso and Corrado 2012), there was a consolidation of what is commonly known as the “Mediterranean migration model” (Baldwin-Edwards and Arango 1999; King 2000). This model can be traced in particular, to the intensive agricultural production development system involving mono-functional specialisation.

Data and considerations of this section do not take into account the effects connected to the Covid-19 crisis.
Similarly to what is happening in California with the exploitation of Mexican labour in the American agricultural sector (Martin 1985, 2002), Berlan (2001) refers to that “Californian model”, the success of which is permitted by the immigrant population, due to its non-regulated, flexible, excessive and ethnically fragmented nature (Corrado 2012).

These conditions, which are now common to all Euro-Mediterranean countries (De Zulueta 2003; Baganha and Fonseca 2004), in particular to Greece (Kasimis et al. 2003; Kasimis and Papadopoulos 2005; Lambrianidis and Sykas 2009; Kasimis 2010), Spain (Hoggart and Mendoza 1999; Mendoza 2001; García Torrente 2002) and Italy (Reyneri 2007), define the profile of the area where working illegality and exploitation, as well as deprivation of the guarantee of rights, are indicative of a distorted economic development where foreign workers are both victims and instruments (Ambrosini 2015).

In Italy, although the final destinations of migratory paths are still mostly Northern regions rather than Southern, in the last thirty years, Sicily has changed from being a place of emigration to a place of reception for immigrants. It has, in fact, become the entrance gate to Europe, especially for flows coming from North Africa.

Since the 1970s, the island has therefore been one of the first regions in the South of Italy to be involved in international migratory flows, while natives are leaving the area, to emigrate abroad or to move to the industrial areas of the North.

Some of the most significant foreign immigrant worker settlements in Italy are on Sicily’s coasts, and in particular close to the coasts of North Africa, such as Mazara del Vallo (in the Province of Trapani) and other intensive agriculture areas in the Provinces of Trapani and Ragusa, which host initial migratory flows, mostly Tunisian males (Zanfrini 1993; Pugliese 2006) (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Foreign residents in the Sicilian provinces on January 1 (Image by Vincenzo Todaro; data taken from ISTAT Census)
Compared to the first foreign presences in the 1970s, the new millennium has seen a diversification of migratory flows (Vertovec 2007) (Figs. 2–3). Generally, the following can be found:

- A migratory flow in transit (staying in the Southern regions while waiting to travel to the Centre and North);
- A second flow of legal and illegal workers who move from one district, usually agricultural, to another, following production cycles;
- A further flow of “retrogression migration” (Caruso and Corrado 2012) or reverse mobility compared to the traditional South/Centre-North direction, that sees a growing number of immigrants who were once employed in the manufacturing and constructions sectors in the North and Centre of the country moving to low-qualification service sectors (in cities) and to agriculture (in rural contexts) in the South (Colucci and Gallo 2015).

Other recent, significant changes to the initial migratory model have also been recorded in relation to the working sector. Although the agricultural sector has traditionally intercepted most of the immigrant labour offer, it is now becoming one of the various sectors of employment, and not the only one.

In fact, other equally unstable, temporary jobs, such as home caregiver, house cleaning, tourist-hotel positions and building work are also increasingly present.

Fig. 2 First aid and reception centre in Pozzallo (Ragusa) (Photo by Medici Senza Frontiere)
Another new element was introduced with the consolidation of flows from Eastern Europe, following the expansion of the EU in 2007. This brought about further change, in particular in the agricultural sector: in those contexts where agricultural production is characterised by intense labour exploitation, European Union workers are preferred to non-EU workers (Ambrosini 2015), in order to avoid the crime of aiding and abetting illegal immigration. This is also non-specialised, low-cost labour, mostly illegal and to excess (thus badly paid and not protected) that gives rise to critical issues in terms of social, economic and healthcare matters. Lastly, the crisis in the agricultural sector, that in Sicily continues to be the first absorption sector for immigration, produces negative effects, especially on lowering of foreign workers wages and work demand that comes almost exclusively from low-level working environments (Centro studi e Ricerche IDOS 2016).

3 The Case of South-Eastern Sicily

With regard to the national agricultural policy framework, South-Eastern Sicily (Fig. 4) has traditionally occupied a prime role (ISMEA-SVIMEZ 2016), with its agricultural sector being significantly transformed in recent decades thanks to entrepreneurial ability and production, with significant international export figures (Asmundo et al. 2011).
A significant input to the agricultural sector has been provided by the greenhouse production of flowers, fruit and vegetables, in addition to the already-renowned, high-quality wine production (Fig. 5).\(^3\)

In particular, the Hyblaean vegetable district, concentrated along the “transformed strip” (Fig. 6) of the Province of Ragusa (including the towns of Vittoria, Acate, Ispica, Scicli, Pozzallo, Comiso and Santa Croce Camerina) is the heart of an economic system with about 9000 companies with about 26,000 workers, that manage just over 9000 hectares of Utilised Agricultural Area (UAA), 2/3 of which is dedicated to greenhouse fruit and vegetable cultivation (Infocamere 2017).

The introduction of greenhouses in South-Eastern Sicily dates back to the end of the 1950s, when some farmers decided to convert their fruit and vegetable production from open-field production to greenhouse production.

The rapid success of greenhouse agriculture is linked to the tripling of annual production figures compared to open-field production. In a short time, this has led to the spread of this production system around the area, wherever possible, but above all where there were unused areas considered to be non-productive, especially along the coast.

\(^3\)One of the main, high-quality productions is that of wine, including IGP (Indicazione Geografica Protetta) and DOC (Denominazione di Origine Controllata) wines. The leading wine is Cerasuolo di Vittoria, which holds an important place in the Ragusa Province economy.
Fig. 5  The tomato production into greenhouses of the Ragusa coast (Photo by Vincenzo Todaro)
The first spatial effect was the disappearance of the sand dune system (*macconi*), in particular along the stretch of coast between Marina di Acate (Acate) and Punta Secca (Santa Croce Camerina), where over time, the natural modelling phenomenon had created a landscape of high naturalistic value, interspersed with humid sunken areas and characteristic dune vegetation (Campione 1994).
In fact, it was necessary to level the ground to build the greenhouses, flattening the dunes which were thus reduced to small fragments amidst the expanse of greenhouse plastic (Figs. 7–8). The final effect is a huge transparent surface (due to the reflection of light on the flat surface of the plastic) that extends evenly and continuously along the entire area up to the sea, levelling out the natural depressions and mounds in the ground (Campione 1994).

In this way, the entire local economy has been consolidated around greenhouse production over recent decades, initially as family-run businesses, then later as industrial enterprises, at least for large companies.

The new territorial layout created by the greenhouses forms a landscape of exception that, referring to the “state of exception” by Agamben (2005), intended as the result of a suspension of rights and regulations, is a possible spatial variation of this phenomenon.

In international literature on the “state of exception”, the condition of exception is mainly linked to the relationship between strong powers and weak powers, in particular in cases that are much publicised in the media, such as situations of war (Armitage 2002; Ek 2006; Gregory 2006), for example. In our case, the condition of exception witnessed through the suspension of environmental and urban-planning...
regulations and laws is more silent and seemingly invisible, taking place in an apparently marginal context through precise spatial configuration (space of exception), that of the greenhouse landscape.

In this sense, the nearest references would be the ones relating to the spatial consequences of the “state of exception” (Baptista 2013; Gray and Porter 2014; Lo Piccolo and Halawani 2014; Lo Piccolo and Todaro 2015, 2018). Specifically, the space of exception of the greenhouse landscape in the province of Ragusa manifests itself in two ways: spatial and social. The former through the suspension of regulations and forecasts contained in plans, while the latter via the suspension of immigrant workers’ rights.

4 Landscape of Exception: The Spatial and Social Dimension

The spatial dimension of the landscape of exception is shown through the suspension laws and forecasts contained in the plans. With regard to plans, the province of Ragusa is the part of Sicily with the most plans, for both urban-territorial planning (Provincial Territorial Plan, Hyblaean Land Strategic Plan, municipal urban-planning plans), and for environmental and landscape protection (“Pino D’Aleppo” Reserve Organisation Plan, “Vallata del Fiume Ippari” European Union Site of Importance Management Plan, Landscape Plan).
The strategic content of these plans, regarding the greenhouse issue, shows full awareness of the impact created on the environment and landscape by the greenhouses and, regarding the varying purposes of these tools, they agree on the need for them to be relocated and for the “transformed strip” to be completely reconverted and recovered.4

By comparing the forecasts contained in these plans and the territorial reality, however, some doubts arise about the efficacy of the plans. The main issue concerns the great inconsistency between the plans’ forecasts and the real situation in loco.

The reasons behind this condition can be understood through the suspension (and not application) of the forecasts contained in the said plans. In fact, although the plans provide for the dismantling of the greenhouses, their implementation is postponed in time to avoid any considerable economic damage that such action may cause.5

According to these considerations, the economic power that a greenhouse production system has can place heavy pressure on political and administrative power. The latter should exercise their rightful forms of control over implementation of the plans, but, in this case, suspends their application, deferring them.

With regard to the spatial point of view, the greenhouse landscape has substituted the traditional coastal dune landscape, while from a social point of view the greenhouses have produced a thorough transformation of the social landscape of the area (Todaro 2015, 2016, 2017).

This has given rise to a “differentiated rurality” (Corrado 2012), the result of the change in the ethnic and economic composition of the local community, but at the same time a structural part of the greenhouse agricultural production development model (Berlan 2008; Colloca and Corrado 2013). In regard to this interpretation, the social weakness of immigrants is an essential part of this landscape of exception.

In relation to the “transformed strip” of the province of Ragusa, in fact, non-official statistics (Caritas Migrantes 2011; I N E A 2013) show a significant concentration of foreign workers6 employed in the greenhouses who help to triple the annual production of fruit and vegetables.

However, there is an extremely complex reality behind this economic success, that sees immigrants living in severely distressing working and living conditions (Medici Senza Frontiere 2007).

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4In particular, the Landscape Plan (2007), drafted by the Ragusa Cultural and Environmental Heritage Department, studies the greenhouse issue using a specific tool, the “Macconi” Environment Project. This project divides the greenhouse area into three zones (red zone on the beach, recovery zone within 150 metres of the sea, background recovery zone) for which it specifies the methods for reconverting and environmentally recovering it.

5To have an idea of the economic value of the greenhouse productions, 1 hectare of cultivated vegetable growing surface area in a greenhouse can correspond to the production of more than 70 hectares of arable land, although the management cost of a greenhouse farm is three times that of a crop-growing farm (ISTAT 2016).

6According to ISTAT figures (“Population and dwelling census”) for the decade 2001–2011, the foreign population in Sicily more than doubled in that time, from 49,399 to 125,015 units. The top five foreign nationalities in Sicily—Romanian, Tunisian, Moroccan, Sri Lankan and Albanian—represent over 50% of the entire foreign presence. In relation to the 2011 figure, the Province of Ragusa has the highest number of foreign presences compared to the resident population.
If we observe the living conditions found in these rural areas, we can see an extremely serious situation: the immigrants often live in small abandoned, precarious buildings found near the fields or greenhouses, and therefore a long distance from towns and facilities (Osti 2010) (Fig. 9).

Work in the greenhouses, the number of hours worked, the distance from the towns and the lack of transport that makes them autonomous are clear limits to the individual and collective freedom.

Other critical factors regard the lack of legal employment contracts that immigrants working in the greenhouses often endure. In this case, it is partly black-market work and partly grey work (not all declared).

The former, according to some cautious estimations of Caritas Migrantes (2011), affects 10% (and in some periods of the year, 20%) of the total of legally employed workers.

On the other hand, INEA (2013) estimates the overall number of immigrant agricultural workers to be 15,000–20,000 units and of these, estimates that 50–60% are illegally employed.

So-called “grey work”, on the other hand, is where there is a legal employment contract (that allows the non-EU immigrant to obtains his permit of stay in Italy), by which the immigrant declares that he works approximately 102 days per year (the minimum to be able to accrue entitlement to unemployment benefit for the months in
which he does not officially work), while actually he works the entire year (Figs. 10, 11 and 12).

In addition to this, another two phenomena denounce the serious conditions of immigrant greenhouse workers. The first regards damage to health (in particular dermatitis, gastroenteritis, respiratory problems, inflammation of the eyes) caused by continuous exposure over time to chemical products (pesticides and phytosanitary products) used in greenhouse productions to protect the produce, in particular from some kinds of fungus (INEA 2013).

Greenhouse products is, in fact, the agricultural field with the highest use of phytosanitary products. The province of Ragusa is the leading province in Sicily, and one of the leading provinces in Italy, for use of phytosanitary products in agriculture. In this area, in the ten-year period 2003–2013, said use increased significantly, with peaks in 2008 (8,407,301 tonnes) and in 2010 (8,263,907 tonnes) (INEA 2013).

Lastly, the latest serious phenomenon concerns the sexual exploitation of female immigrants. As reported by operators in the field (Caritas, Medecins sans Frontières), this is a widespread phenomenon that involves female immigrant workers (mostly Romanian women), who are blackmailed by the greenhouse owners in order to keep their jobs. In this sense, the abnormal increase in the rate of abortions found in local provincial healthcare facilities from 2004 significantly affects immigrant female workers from Eastern Europe (Scucces Ferraro 2006).

In connection with this specific phenomenon, the structural characteristics of the greenhouse landscape guarantee invisibility (Le Blanc 2009), thus allowing the
Fig. 11 Migrant workers awaiting recruitment at the beginning of the working day in the district of Cassibile (Syracuse) (Photo by Vincenzo Todaro)

Fig. 12 Presence and labour exploitation of children in the greenhouses (Vittoria) (Photo by Vincenzo Todaro)
illegal workers to be unseen from the outside and also hiding the various forms of abuse and exploitation that they fall victim to.

Considering the extent and gravity of these phenomena that cause various types of exploitation to be carried out on the immigrants, however, the institutional players and official policies (including the ones contained in the planning tools) are completely absent (even for the institutional tasks that they should fulfill). The only operators in the area are voluntary associations and healthcare facilities that mainly respond to emergency situations due to the lack of available resources (Todaro 2014).

In reference to the controls carried out by the police forces, Ambrosini (2015) reveals a high level of tolerance in Italian regions, characterised by significant agricultural production compared to illegal work, that is instrumental for the correct functioning of entire local economies. On this matter, referring to the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies data (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche sociali 2012), Ambrosini considers it to be a perfect example that in 2001, controls only found 361 workers in the whole of the South of Italy without a permit of stay. To all effects, this condition comes under the status of exception regulations suspension mechanisms.

5 Conclusions

It is a shared opinion that “immigration into rural societies in Southern Italy becomes a part of the functional and development methods of the South of Italy’s social and economic system, giving new life […] consolidated relations of local power” (Mignella Calvosa 2013, 10).

The immediate consequence of this condition is generally the suspension of current laws, including the forecasts for planning tools. Their application is not formally cancelled, but they are merely not implemented or postponed in time. In the case of the province of Ragusa, what makes all this possible is the economic success of agricultural greenhouse production. In fact, in recent decades, this type of production has produced widespread forms of social redemption, in addition to distributing wealth throughout the area.

In addition to being the engine for this socio-economic development models, the greenhouses are also an efficient control and spatial and social handling tool. They are a decisive factor in the transformation of the traditional landscape, carrying out extraordinary violence on a natural ecosystem, including coastal dunes, which are commonly thought to be non-productive, but are of a great environmental and landscape value. This ecosystem, recognised locally, nationally and internationally, with the establishment of protected areas (Nature 2000 reserves and sites, of the “Habitats” EU Directive), has been reduced to isolated fragments and shreds. The protection system defined by laws and planning tools for this type of natural heritage has been suspended and is not applied, allowing the greenhouses to spread wherever possible, right up to the coastline.
From a social point of view, the greenhouses are a huge employment basin, a certain offer of work (unqualified and flexible) that can guide international immigration flows, who consider it to be an improvement on the living and working conditions in their country of origin (Kasimis 2010). However, suitable working conditions are not provided given the high level of job availability. Work in the greenhouses is extremely harsh, and in many cases, increasingly unsustainable (Avalone 2011). Citizens’ rights, including legal contracts and fair pay, are denied and many forms of violence are carried out on the immigrants. Although the economic success of these agricultural productions is highly dependent on the immigrants’ labour, they are not aware of this. However, the economic-production sector and also the political-institutional level are perfectly aware of this fact. The latter, on the one hand, is indifferent to the social policies applied to receiving the immigrants they should take responsibility for, and on the other hand, makes the territorial protection tools, including planning, ineffective. This brings into play the ethical side of planning, as, in various realms of intervention, this should decisively contribute to guaranteeing citizens’ rights, via spatial and social balance (Lo Piccolo 2013).

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