

# Welcome to Europe!

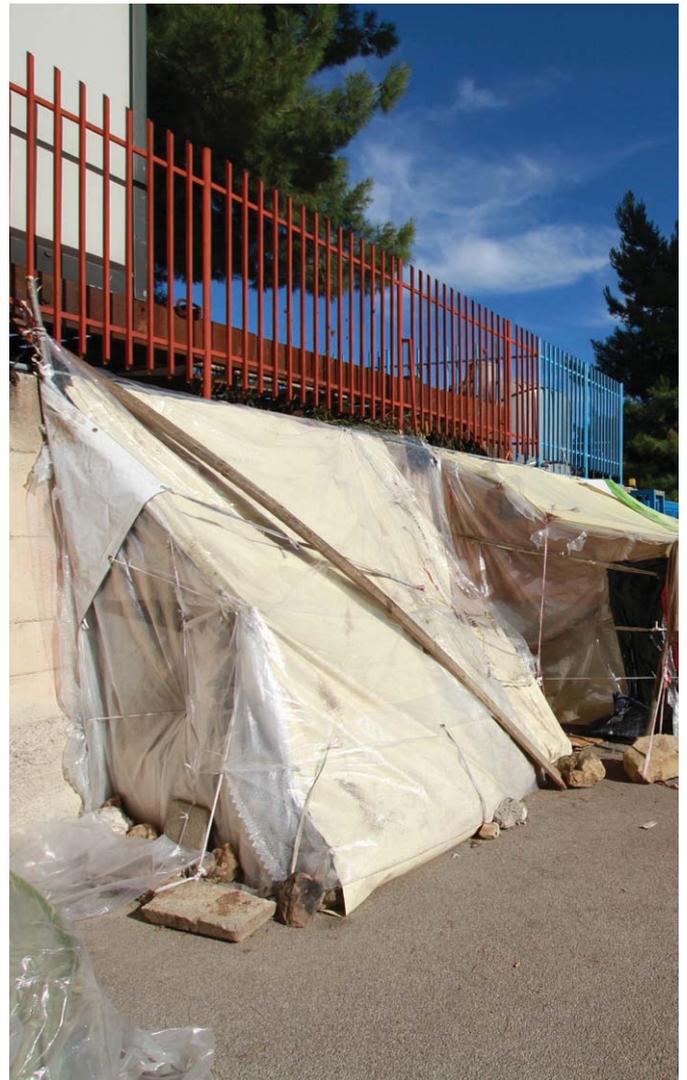
A view from Italy.  
The creation of a textbook  
neo-liberal worker.

## Carole Reckinger & Gilles Reckinger

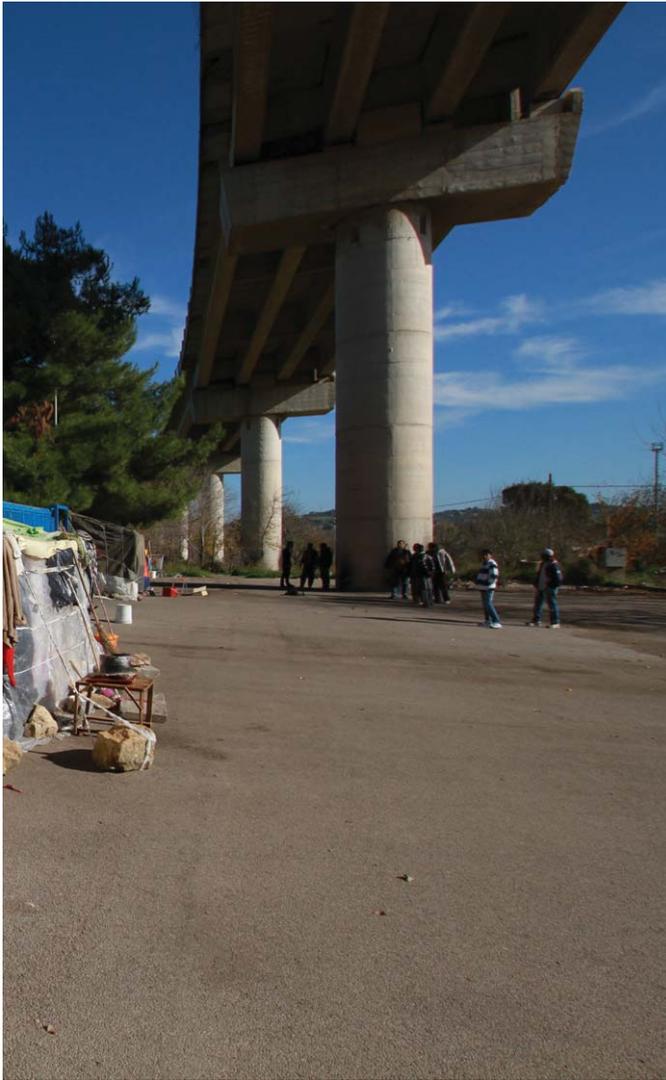
*Carole Reckinger, a political scientist, researcher and photographer, and Dr. Gilles Reckinger, an anthropologist and researcher specialising in migration issues and transformations of the labour market, spent December 2012 in southern Italy researching and photographing the living conditions of migrant agricultural workers who labour on the orange and tangerine plantations in Calabria. Their ongoing project in collaboration with anthropologist Dr. Diana Reiners is financially supported by the Ministère de la Culture du Luxembourg.*

Among green rolling hills and picturesque small villages in central Sicily, about four kilometres outside the ancient city of Caltanissetta, we meet Ahmed\*, a forty-something Pakistani man. We were told that scores of people sleep rough around the sports stadium located just a few hundred metres from the detention centre of Pian del Lago. One of the first things Ahmed enquires is if we are missionaries. A bit taken aback by the question, we start laughing and say, *no, do we look like evangelists?* He gives us a big smile, and explains that usually the only people interested in asylum seekers in this area are missionaries merely concerned to save souls but not to fill stomachs. With his perfect and articulate English, he volunteers to show us around after we explain that we want to learn more about the living conditions of asylum seekers. *"The hundreds of people who currently live in the centre, or wait outside to get their papers, have no chance to work, no access to money, and only those 370-something who live in the centre have regular access to food,"* he tells us while we cross a dry patch of land with rubbish scattered everywhere.

After crossing a busy main road, we walk up a small side street where Ahmed introduces us to a group of a



dozen Pakistanis and Afghans. Below a huge motorway bridge and attached to the wall of a factory they have set up a makeshift camp. The group of men in their 20s to 50s seem surprised to see us and eye us with suspicion. After exchanging Arabic greetings, they visibly relax, and Ahmed translates that they have been sleeping outside for between 15 and 25 days, waiting to receive an appointment in the centre to begin their asylum application. At first we do not understand why they need to sleep outside, and why it takes so long to start the asylum application, but we soon discover that it seems to be common practice. The men tell us that they have entered Europe through Greece, after a long journey



through Iran and Turkey. From there they travelled to southern Italy, having heard that in the detention centre of Pian del Lago the chances of receiving asylum are better than in other centres. After they have received their papers, they hope to join Pakistani communities already established in northern Italy.

The first thing that strikes us is the cleanliness of this makeshift camp. A broom leans outside every plastic and cardboard tent, and the area is devoid of the usual rubbish scattered everywhere else in the surrounding area. We are offered to have a look inside one of the makeshift tents, and are told that on the four mattresses with neatly folded blankets,

sometimes up to 10 people sleep. Even in Sicily, the nights get cold, and a week ago snow covered the area. Shoes are left at the entrance, and belongings are stored away in flimsy yellow plastic bags from the supermarket. In one corner a number of prayer rugs are stored. Ahmed explains that he also lived here for 20 days when he first got to Caltanissetta. He now sleeps in the detention centre across the road, but five months have passed, and he has not received any news on the status of his asylum application.

Behind a plastic yellow tarp and a couple of supermarket trolleys, an improvised shower has been installed. Ahmed translates that sometimes the people in the factory behind the wall let them take water. Otherwise they have to walk long distances, and this is when the supermarket trolleys come in handy. Apparently they are refused medical care until they have a place in the detention centre, and the biggest problem besides the cold and boredom is food. No one has an income, and they rely solely on people who live inside the centre to bring them food. Ahmed says that the workers inside the centre are nice, and they turn a blind eye when collecting food scraps after the meals to distribute outside. We hear what we have heard so many times before: “*We feel abandoned*”.

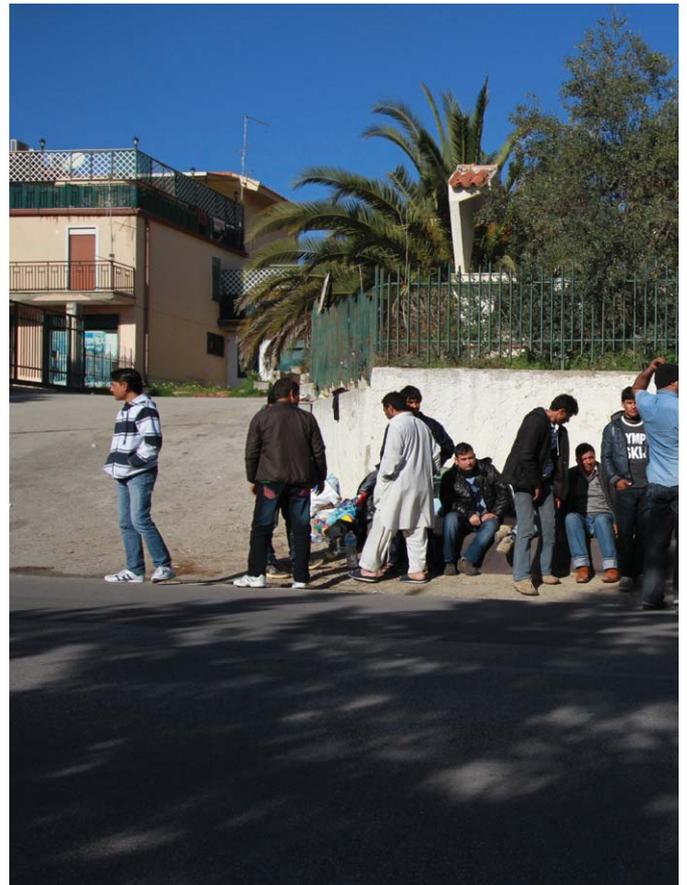
Just around the corner on the main road, ironically opposite a luxurious villa, lies one of the 13 Italian so-called ‘welcoming centres’. Having visited a number of detention centres in other places in Europe, we were surprised to find a large number of people outside the high fence equipped with countless cameras. The three-in-one Centre of Pian del Lago includes an Immigrant Detention Centre (CIE – *Centro d’identificazione ed espulsione*), a Reception Centre (CDA – *Centro d’accoglienza*) and a Hosting Centre for Asylum Seekers (CARA – *Centro accoglienza richiedenti asilo*). Every morning, the doors of the centre are opened, and most people who are not listed to be deported are free to hang out outside the camp until the evening, or even to leave Sicily for extended periods until a decision is taken on their case, which might take months.

The three-in-one formula of this detention centre means that completely different structures are concentrated in one place. Symbolically, it implies a criminalisation of every irregular immigrant, and practically, it is a source of conflict between the different groups, whose situations widely differ from each other. Theoretically, the CIE is an identification

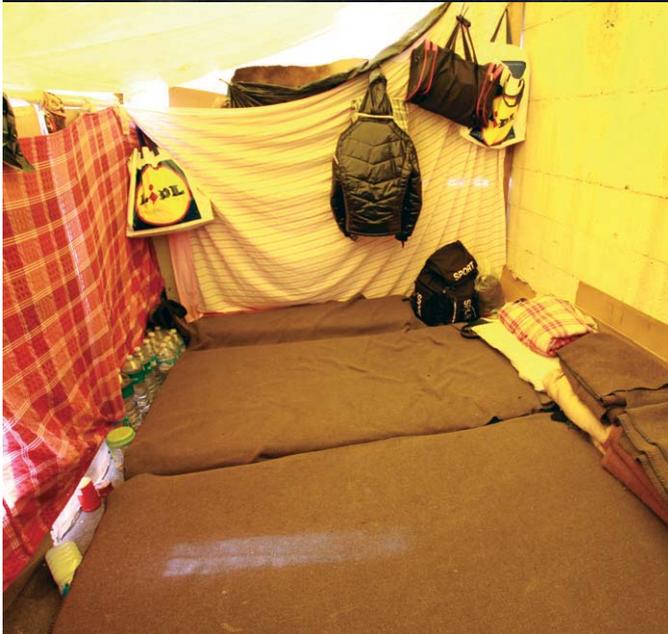
and deportation centre, where an immigrant caught without a residency permit, or not recognised as an asylum seeker, is taken to, identified and deported to his/her country of origin or first entry. The CDA are reception camps (literally “Center for First Assistance”) where immigrants are taken upon their arrival, identified, and where the legitimisation of their possible stay is checked. Here, the authorities decide whether immigrants can remain, or whether they have to go to a CIE for deportation. CARAs are identification centres for “immigrants (without documents) asking for political refugee status”, where the legitimisation of their requested refugee status is checked. In the three-in-one Centre of Pian del Lago, women and children are also housed, but we meet none outside the gate.

The large group of south Asian men Ahmed introduces us to, sit on the wall outside the fence trying to kill time. No card games or any other activity goes on, they all simply sit there and wait. The main gate opens directly onto the main road, and there is no square for them to wait peacefully. The city centre is a long walk away along a busy main road, and even the closest supermarket is miles away. All the men can do is hang around and wait. Due to the difficult situation of the inmates in the centre, tensions arise regularly and violence breaks out often. We are told that the police usually stand by and do not intervene. They just wait until the fight is over, to take the seriously wounded to the hospital.

We hear the same story all over: people sleeping outside the centre for 15, 20, 25 days when they first arrive to apply for asylum. While the procedure for their papers is in process, people might get a sleeping possibility in the centre, yet they are free to leave, if they can afford the bus ticket to leave Sicily. Even people with regular papers come from all over Italy back to Caltanissetta to renew their papers. Once a migrant obtains his or her documents, they always have to come back to the institution that has taken care of their case in the first place, even if they live on the other side of Italy. In the handling of the various procedures to renew permits to stay, issue the numerous types of documentation and the many other types of paperwork that are required, the migrants must go back and forth to the town centre in order to pay the necessary stamp duty and get photographs done. Asylum status, however, does not guarantee assistance from the government, nor a better chance to find work.



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Most people do not seem to stay around, but try to find some kind of irregular work for which they tour all over Italy. Thousands of them, from camps all over the country, are currently in Rosarno in southern Calabria, picking oranges for a pittance. Competition to find work is extremely high, and the daily wages range from 25 to 40 euros (1 euro a box of 22 kg for tangerines, and 50 cents for the equivalent in oranges). After the orange season is over, they will migrate to the next place where work might be available.

Living and working conditions for these people are catastrophic: the lucky ones manage to find a bed in overcrowded migrant labour camps, the not-so-lucky ones need to construct makeshift camps, sleep in abandoned factories, or even rough it on the street. Survival becomes for many the only option, accepting even the most degrading treatment and living conditions. Among those we met in Rosarno picking oranges, people with recognised asylum status and illegal migrants work side by side in the same conditions.

At the gate of the centre in Caltanissetta, the image of Fortress Europe takes on a supplementary layer: although the migrants in front of the gate are already inside the fortress, they find ever more fences they are unable to overcome. A collateral effect of holding people in highly precarious situations over long periods of time is that they are made to accept precariousness as their fate. This in turn makes them vulnerable, and gives them no choice but to adapt to the unstable and underpaid jobs in the informal or illegalised economy. The high competition of people willing to work for less and less money to be able to survive plays into the hands of large transnational companies and helps them to maximise their profits. A textbook neo-liberal people is formed, offering the highest flexibility and mobility. These people are voiceless, and have no opportunity to demand legal working papers and better working conditions.

Ahmed hopes that once he has his status, he will find a decent job among the Pakistani community in northern Italy, and he continuously reiterates that he is used to working very hard. He does not want charity, but a possibility to prove his talents. He might be one of the few lucky ones. The majority, whatever their educational and social background, will end up picking oranges for a hunger wage next Christmas season.

\* name changed