

Lessons from the mountains

Mobility and migrations in Euro-Mediterranean agro-pastoralism

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International migrant workers and extensive agricultural systems

This chapter explores the role of international migrant workers in mountainous, island, and inner territories that cover large parts of Mediterranean Europe (Greece, Spain, and Italy), where intensive and mechanised agriculture is not feasible due to agro-ecological features and the nature of the terrain (steep, remote, rocky). The modernisation process that unfolded in the aftermath of the Second World War has further pushed agriculture towards more market-oriented and capital-based patterns. As a result, these settings have been marginalised and undergone longstanding decline, leading to economic crisis, demographic regression, and land abandonment (Jentsch and Simard 2009, Nori and Farinella 2020). Here agro-pastoral systems – the extensive livestock rearing of mostly sheep and goats (but also cattle, horses, and pigs) based on natural or cultivated grazing and complemented by forms of crop farming – still represent a main source of local livelihood. As shepherding has become a less attractive opportunity for local populations, labour is today increasingly provided by international migrants.

This chapter presents the results of extensive fieldwork based on ethnographic observations, field notes, and semi-structured interviews with some 170 stockbreeders and 50 international migrant shepherds over the last five years in different regions of Mediterranean Europe: Greece (Peloponnese and Thessaly), Spain (Cataluña), and Italy (Piedmont, Trivento, Abruzzo, and Sardinia). Qualitative research was conducted by the authors, with semi-structured interviews collected both directly and through collaborators. Agro-pastoral settings provide an original perspective because most European literature (among others, Ortiz-Miranda *et al.* 2013, Gertel and Sippel 2014, Corrado *et al.* 2016) focuses on migrants' presence in intensive agricultural systems that characterise high-potential areas, while limited research explores other production systems (Rye and Scott 2018).

Since the mid-1990s, the exploitation of international migrant workers has been analysed as a structural component of commercial agriculture

(Martin 2016), driven by agricultural modernisation and the global integration of agri-food chains. The intensification of productive processes has led to the decline of peasant agriculture, a drop in agricultural employment, and its proletarianisation with a shift from family labour to wage work. The neo-liberal restructuring of agri-food controlled by multinationals and the supermarket revolution (Burch and Lawrence 2007) increased small farmers' dependence on the market and reduced their negotiating power. This agricultural squeeze forced independent farmers to cut down on production costs, including labour. Similar trends can be observed in both northern and southern Europe (Reigada 2017, Rye, Slettebak and Bjørkhaug 2018), as well as in other global regions (Martin 2016).

Segmented market theory (Piore 1979) has been commonly used to explain the consequent exploitation of international migrant workers to reduce costs, as they offered a new reserve labour pool willing to accept low-wage and sub-standard work conditions refused by local people (Castles and Kosack 1973). For migrants, agriculture remains a sponge sector and viable gateway to local labour markets, where even precarious opportunities are appealing compared with those in their country of origin (the so-called dual frame of reference) (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). The constant pressure of such a 'reserve army' swelled by new migratory waves consolidates exploitative conditions, as evidenced by the continuous replacement of migrant labour with new arrivals and different ethnic groups (Waldinger and Lichter 2003, Gertel and Sippel 2014). This competition is powered by the 'good worker' rhetoric employers use to essentialise stereotypes and prejudices as 'natural attributes,' justifying 'changes in labour force hiring, to reject one group and legitimate the next one' (Hellio 2017, 212).

Within this framework, agro-pastoralism provides a unique perspective compared with more intensive agricultural sectors, emphasising the variability of farming systems and their environmental embeddedness, the relevance of peasant strategies and family labour, pluri-activism, socio-ecological services, and other 'off-market' factors relevant in contrasting agricultural squeeze and the abandonment of marginal settings (Van der Ploeg 2008, 2013).

In intensive farming, work is seasonal and requires a certain number of workers concentrated in the field or in greenhouses to carry out simple and repetitive tasks. Labour relations are very hierarchical: employers are separated from migrants and interact with them through intermediaries such as '*caporali*' for hiring, pay, accommodation, and other aspects linked to their work (Corrado *et al.* 2018). Migrant workers' segregation and exploitation are thus evident and bolstered by workers' concentration in rural ghettos with sub-standard living conditions.

In agro-pastoral farms, self-employment and unpaid family work is fundamental and migrant work is often complementary. The stockbreeder works alongside the wage worker, merging exploitation with self-exploitation. This has important implications in terms of personal relations, which seem more

horizontal and less hierarchical. However, employers develop hidden forms of control, subordination, and exploitation: a prime example is the rhetoric of the ‘good worker.’ In addition, agro-pastoral labour is multifunctional and less stereotyped than in intensive agriculture, thus generating spaces of autonomy and freedom within which workers exercise their own agency.

The next section presents the main results of our research, analyses how agro-pastoral systems respond to the pressures from global agri-food chains and examines international migrant workers’ role in this process. The third section discusses ‘good worker’ rhetoric as a means of exercising power over migrant shepherds and their response in terms of migrant agency. The final section summarises some conclusions to be drawn from this research.

Migrant shepherds in agro-pastoral systems: a patchy mosaic

Extensive rearing of goat and sheep represents a minor segment of the broader livestock sector in the European Union which hinges on more intensive breeding of cattle, poultry, and pigs. Sheep’s and goat’s milk totalled about three per cent of total EU milk production for 2015, while small ruminants ‘represented less than 2 per cent of total EU meat production [...] and less than 6 per cent of its value’ (BEPRS 2017, 3). However, this sector is strategic for Euro-Mediterranean countries, where extensive livestock breeding is a main economic activity in the mountainous territories, inner regions, and islands that are not suited to intensive agriculture. In these settings, agro-pastoralism provides critical contributions in managing landscape and ecological resources, supporting employment and income of local communities, and helping to avert depopulation. In 2015, Greece, Spain, and Italy concentrated 39 and 67 per cent, respectively, of all sheep and goats in the EU, and among the largest producers of sheep milk, with Greece accounting for 31 per cent, Spain 25.2 per cent, and Italy 21.4 per cent in 2018 (ISMEA 2019). Sheep milk is used to produce standardised cheeses that are relevant in local food culture, such as Italy’s Pecorino Romano, Greece’s Feta, and Spain’s Manchego.

Meat production is another important component of the agro-pastoral economy. For example, in Greece ‘the value of sheep and goat meat production represents almost half of the total livestock production value’ (BEPRS 2017, 3), while Spain ranks second in production of lamb meat after the UK (EC 2020).

Dairy products and meat, however, are also commodities in international markets and within global agro-food chains, and therefore subject to international competition and price volatility (Farinella 2019). For example, from 2000 to 2017, sheep milk price averaged €0.80/litre in Italy and Spain and €0.90/litre in Greece (our calculations, Eurostat 2020), with negative peaks reaching €0.60/litre. When mentioning the agricultural squeeze, many

respondents indicated that the price to ensure adequate profitability for sheep farms is at least €1.00/litre.

Recent decades have witnessed a growing global competition on these markets. Many agro-pastoral farms have been forced to either close or restructure their farms by expanding their herd and reorganising land and labour resources in order to adjust cost-benefit ratios (Hadjigeorgiou 2011, Ragkos and Nori 2016, Mattalia *et al.* 2018, Farinella 2019). This has resulted throughout the region in fewer agro-pastoral enterprises with larger flock size. Eurostat (2016) data show the number of sheep farms have roughly halved since 1990, with a 68.1 per cent drop in number in Italy, a 50.6 per cent drop in Spain, and 46.4 per cent drop in Greece. Respective national flocks also decreased, albeit at lower rates, during the same period: 0.4 per cent in Greece, 9.4 per cent in Spain, and 19.4 per cent in Italy, underscoring an expansion in size for the remaining farms.

Despite this common process of intensification, agro-pastoralism in Mediterranean Europe remains territorially diversified and adapted to local ecological conditions. Using the results of our research, a broad classification could combine the magnitude and intensity of livestock mobility, and the scale of agricultural farming:

- a) Transhumant systems (from *trans-humare*, moving through lands) based on seasonal mobility of livestock, which are grazing outdoors and get their nutrients from the natural pasture. These farms of medium- to small-sized flocks are typical of mountainous settings and often devoted to meat production.
- b) Extensive or semi-extensive systems, often associated with inner and hilly areas, where animals spend most of their time in pastures nearby or at short distance. These farms have small or medium size, with some of their land partly devoted to their own production of feed, forage, and cultivated pastures.
- c) Semi-intensive systems, typically for large farms in the plains, whereby livestock are kept mainly inside stables; animal feed is partially produced by the farm and supplemented with the purchase of external inputs, with limited degrees of open grazing.

The pastoral territories of Mediterranean Europe display agro-ecological and socio-cultural diversity, as well as important similarities. In Greece, sheep and goats represent about 75 per cent of overall grazing units, contributing significantly to local income and the GDP. Agro-pastoralism is territorially diversified: in mainland territories (Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly, and Peloponnese) a patchy mosaic is found, with more intensive farming in lowland plains characterised by high investment and modern infrastructure, especially since the 2000s. Mixed systems of transhumance and semi-extensive breeding prevail in mountainous areas, where agro-pastoralism accounts for 17 per cent

of employment and 6.5 per cent of local production (Ragkos and Nori 2016). In most Greek island communities, lower scale extensive grazing of sheep and goats represents an important source of livelihood through the processing and sale of traditional cheeses in tourist networks (Ragkos *et al.* 2018).

In Spain, sheep and goat farming represents about one third of all livestock units. There is great territorial diversity, from the northern mountainous ranges to central mountainous *meseta*, and to drier southern pasturelands. Pastoral systems in Spain have changed dramatically in recent decades, towards enlarged flock size and reduced mobility, often with a view to enhance per capita milk production. Evolving from the traditional system that connected grazing areas in Castilla y León to Extremadura and Andalusia according to the season, transhumance is still quite popular throughout the country, especially for meat production. While the distances covered today are limited, the living and working conditions during some of the year remain difficult due to geographical isolation and climate conditions. Extensive rearing of small ruminants remains important throughout the country; sheep and cattle breeding with mixed orientation predominates in the northern temperate regions, while extensive beef and pig production is more typical in the western and southwestern peninsular lands.

In Italy, agro-pastoral breeding of sheep, goats, and even cattle is widespread in the inner territories; important agro-ecological differences exist across regions and between alpine, apennine, and insular areas. In the northern alpine settings from Piedmont to Veneto, seasonal transhumance from lower to higher altitudes is a most-performed activity, with small ruminant flocks often devoted to meat production, while cattle herds are raised for mixed purposes. In the apennine systems typical of central and southern Italy, as well as in Sardinia, the characteristic transhumance systems have almost disappeared to the benefit of semi-extensive permanent ones. Here, sheep and goat are mostly raised for milk production to supply local dairy value chains. Driven by Pecorino Romano marketing, semi-intensive farms are increasingly spreading throughout Sardinia (Farinella 2019), though more extensive grazing and artisanal dairies are important for local tourism.

Common traits of agro-pastoral systems include technical, policy, as well as socio-economic aspects. Mechanisation is limited and labour continues to be mostly physical and manual. Productivity rates have increased more slowly than production costs, whose rise has often been on the shoulders of the shepherding workforce: wages have not improved through time, while working conditions have intensified. Since 2003 the reorientation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) towards rural development has enabled recognising agro-pastoral practices in managing landscape and ecological resources of marginal territories. Public support has shifted accordingly from remunerating production to a multifunctional vision of agriculture (Kerven and Behnke 2011, Nori and de Marchi 2015). The constant decline in the number of agro-pastoral farms suggests though that CAP schemes

are not an adequate guarantee for these systems' permanence and reproduction (Farinella *et al.* 2017). Eurostat figures indicate that conditions are not attractive and/or enabling for new generations: in 2016 46.8 per cent of farm heads in Greece, 49.2 per cent in Spain, and 42.2 per cent in Italy were aged 55 and older.

Through these lenses one can understand the crisis of the agro-pastoral 'vocation' and the relative lack of workforce on pasturelands in the Alps, Epirus, Apennines, and Pyrenees which rank among the areas most exposed to the risk of abandonment (Nori 2017).

This is the context in which international migrant workers have come to provide a skilled labour force at a relatively low cost. Based on our research, the typical profile of a migrant shepherd is: a male, aged between 25 and 40; a native of a Mediterranean country (predominantly Romania, Morocco, Albania, or North Macedonia) and more recently Asia (i.e., Pakistan, India), and sub-Saharan Africa (i.e., Ghana, Senegal); often issued from pastoral settings and thus have some experience and skills related to livestock husbandry. History, language, and migration networks have shaped the different migratory patterns and presence. For instance, Romanians are found mostly in Italy and parts of Spain, while Moroccans are more usually found in Spain and Albanians in Greece (Nori 2017).

In Greece, the influx of international migrant workers began in the 1990s, after the collapse of the Albanian regime and the opening of Albania's borders. Apart from their contributions to the extensive livestock sector, Albanian migrant workers have also played a critical role in revitalising the local social, economic, and demographic fibres in many rural communities (Kasimis *et al.* 2010, Kasimis and Papadopoulos 2013). These early flows slowly opened the way to shepherds originating from eastern Europe (Bulgaria and Romania) and, more recently, to workers from India and Pakistan. Today, migrants represent about half of the agro-pastoral salaried workforce in Epirus and Peloponnese, and about one third in Crete (Ragkos and Nori 2016). On one hand, the migrant workforce has supported the development of large, innovative, and specialised dairy farms, while, on the other, it has contributed to the endurance of more traditional transhumance systems. As a substitute for family labour, the recruitment of migrants has allowed household members to pursue other activities or to look for employment outside the agricultural sector (Papadopoulos and Roumpakis 2009, Ragkos and Nori 2016, Papadopoulos and Fratsea 2017). Contracts are completely informal, and salary ranges between 300–600 euros per month according to the region and system.

Also, in Spain, migration from several countries has contributed to the labour reconfiguration of existing agro-pastoral systems. In areas where wildlife predation is encroaching, the presence of shepherds is increasingly important for tending flocks and because it is difficult to source local workers, most shepherds are of foreign origin. Traditionally migrant

shepherds originate from Morocco and Romania, but more recently also from Bulgaria, Ukraine, and from Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin-Americas. In the Catalan Pyrenees, international migrants constitute about half of the waged shepherding workforce (Nori and López-i-Gelats 2017). The ratio of migrant to local shepherding labour drops to one in three in central Spain, Galicia, and Extremadura – where migrant labour is usually from Portugal (Nori 2017). Some of these workers have benefited from some form of training in one of the country's six pastoral regional schools. Monthly salary averages 600–700 euros, with higher rates in the northern regions.

As in the case of Spain, the growing presence of predators has contributed to the reincorporation of shepherds in many areas of Italy. In the northern alpine regions, where transhumant systems are characterised by lengthy and harsh periods of constant mobility, two out of three salaried shepherds are international migrants (Nori and de Marchi 2015). In the northern Italian lowland areas, migrant shepherds are also the main labour source in intensive cattle stockbreeding linked to the production of Parmigiano cheese (Lum 2011). In Abruzzo, a region with important pastoral traditions, official data indicate a long-established presence of shepherds from North Macedonia and Romania (Coldiretti 2010). In Sardinia, which holds over 40 per cent of the national sheep flock, one in three hired shepherds is an international migrant (Farinella and Mannia 2017); Albanians have been replaced over time by Romanians and, more recently, by Moroccans and Indians. Salaries range from 500–900 euros monthly, depending mostly on the size of the flock (Farinella and Mannia 2017).

Migrant shepherds and the 'good workers' rhetoric

The dynamics characterising migrant workers in agro-pastoralism present some continuity but mostly differ from those typical of other agricultural systems. Conditions of illegality, limited rights, low wages, and poor living and working standards are typical and common. International migrant shepherds show high degrees of mobility, often moving from one farm to another seeking better working and living conditions (Farinella 2019). Recruitment is mostly by word of mouth through personal networks and individual arrangements among migrant communities who often engage friends and relatives. The contractual arrangements are often quite informal and precarious, although in many cases there is a formal contract that covers only partially the worker's rights and social insurance.

The main differences concern the type of work and the employment relationships. As noted earlier, harvesting in more intensive agriculture systems is a strenuous physical activity, stereotyped, and monotonous, temporally and spatially concentrated, and often carried out in work groups. The organisation of the work is hierarchical, with a separation of employer from workers through the presence of several intermediaries. Supervision

is close and constant, with pay set by the piece. Picking fruits and filling boxes as quickly as possible, for example, represent simple goals connected to standardised tasks that subordinate the worker to the production chain according to Marx's description of the worker as the 'living appendix of the machine.'

Agro-pastoralism is more multifunctional: in addition to livestock shepherding and its overall management, there are collateral tasks such as clearing lands, building fences, collecting timber, and building or mechanical activities on the farm. Sometimes migrant shepherds carry out tasks requiring 'high' skills, such as cheesemaking or land cultivation and the related use of agricultural vehicles. While the workload is widespread throughout the year, some tasks are seasonal, such as lambing, milking, dairy processing, shearing, and farming. However, the main task remains accompanying the grazing flock. This is not particularly strenuous or physically demanding, but rather requires the ability to adapt to harsh environmental conditions, flexibility, and the management of risk and uncertainty that open spaces entail. Time management may be flexible during the day, but milking periods are intense and the livestock requires continuous care, including at night.

Migrant shepherds are scattered across the countryside and generally work alone or at most in pairs, live in isolated sheepfolds, often in areas remote from villages and with limited means to move and socialise or to organise collective forms of mobilisation (as it is the case for other contexts, see Perrotta and Sacchetto 2014, Corrado *et al.* 2018). However, isolation and solitude are typical features of this profession (Meuret 2010). These conditions improve when more migrants work together, when the sheepfolds are near to rural towns, or if the workers own a vehicle (car, bicycle, or scooter). The relationships between the employer and the hired shepherd seem horizontal and direct. Stockbreeders are involved in daily activities, and they share the same work environment and conditions with their workers, with the ambiguity of stockbreeders representing themselves as 'self-exploited' like the migrant. This does not mean that there are no conflicts or exploitation. Working relationships are embedded within a complex family fabric in which bonds are limited, personal, and constant: the forms of subordination and exploitation become more subtle and less explicit. Furthermore, the informality that characterises the contractual arrangements offers ample room for ambiguity and uncertainty. In the case of Romanian shepherds working in Sardinia, the monthly salary for a full-time activity with limited holidays or spare time is quite low; board and lodging is generally provided on the farm, often associated with the sheepfold. According to employers, the provision of food and accommodation in kind implies significant savings for the worker, around 400–500 euros per month. According to the workers, however, sometimes the accommodation is not comfortable, and the food provided may not be appropriate in type or quality. This kind of arrangement enables farmers to underpay workers and maintain forms of control over them. Family

practices presented as neutral or even ‘helping’ express a governmental power on migrant life. Following Foucault (1982, 790):

“Government” did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed – the government of children, of souls, of communities, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection, but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to control the possible field of action of others.

When the farmer’s family establishes what and when to eat, how and when to sleep, how to dress, and when to wash, this structures the migrants’ field of action, determining their subjection (Farinella and Mannia 2018).

However, the uncertainty related to shepherding gives to the migrant workers the opportunity to mobilise numerous ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott 1985) and survival strategies. They carve out wide spaces of freedom and autonomy through the daily practices that ‘build’ pastoralism as an open and multifunctional activity in an uncertain context. This becomes visible both in the routine tasks of tending the flock (as, for example, in the personal style with which the flock is led to grazing), as well as in all those complementary activities important to the overall income. As recalled by an interviewed shepherd:

First of all I have experience, I know everything, so I don’t have problems [...] In addition to what I earn [as a shepherd], I am a handyman, I do a little bit of everything [...] I am free because I can manage myself, [...] the basis is here [the shepherd’s salary]. I can fix things, I did that walker, I fixed it, I fix chainsaws and I get paid of course. [...] Here I gain €500, but cutting the wood and with other things [...] my annual count is more than €1,000 per month [...] And I have bed and board [...] I don’t have to pay my rent so... Of course we have to buy children’s stuff, but the primary needs such as eating, meat, bread, and wine and other things are provided by our shepherds! [...] I have a vegetable garden, I always had one [...] I have it since the day I arrived. Yes. We breed chickens, quails [...] We sell them. I mean, my wife is a housewife and she takes care of it to raise some money, with mushrooms, with the hens or its eggs, with quails, and then when we have them with tomatoes, I mean we know how it works! We get by and we are doing well!! [...]

(Romanian shepherd, Sardinia, Italy, aged 33)

This excerpt shows how the migrant shepherd bases his ‘agency’ on a set of everyday practices of existence (De Certeau 1980) related to agro-pastoral work and is thus able to limit subordination and increase autonomy.

To counter this, the rhetoric of the ‘good worker’ is used. According to all stockbreeders interviewed, willingness to adapt, flexibility, a spirit of sacrifice, endurance, familiarity with harsh living conditions in the countryside, and acceptance of working conditions and pay generally rejected by the local population are some of the reasons they prefer hiring foreigners rather than ‘lazy’ young locals (Hoggart and Mendoza 1999, MacKenzie and Forde 2009):

People from here do not want to do that job. It is a hard job, with scarce holidays. There are no people from here available. Those that would, they are all too old. Romanians are hard workers and experienced. In their country the situation is more difficult than here.

(Spanish stockbreeder, Tartareu, aged 60)

Reliable, always there. Greeks would only take this job if they were completely desperate.

(Greek stockbreeder, Vlohos, age not recorded)

They adapt to everything and they work under the terms and the conditions we set! Those who resist and continue to work with us are the ones who like the job enough and are comfortable with the stockbreeders. They do what you tell them. They have reduced economic needs compared to Italians.

(Italian stockbreeder, Friuli Venezia Giulia, aged 33)

The ‘good worker’ rhetoric expresses the stockbreeders’ need to affirm their power and control through ethnic essentialisation mechanisms (Balibar 1991). The migrant shepherds need ‘willingness to accept the hard conditions of this business’ and to be ‘hard working,’ ‘trustworthy,’ ‘clever,’ ‘skilled,’ ‘quick learners,’ and, at the same time, ‘cheaper’ and ‘obedient’:

He is very obedient and trustworthy. Does not say ‘no.’

(Greek stockbreeder, Anilio/Zarko, age not recorded)

This excerpt shows all the ambivalence of a performative sentence: the migrant is trustworthy because he does not say ‘no’: that is, he remains subordinate. This mechanism of essentialising subordination is very evident towards a main ethnic group of shepherds, the Romanians. The stockbreeders interviewed emphasised that, on one hand, Romanians are selected precisely because of the cultural correspondence to local populations, for example originating from rural areas, being in contact with animals, their ‘white’ skin and more ‘European’ culture and traditions:

Ours is a particular lifestyle, no Saturdays or Sundays: Italians would not live this way. We are comfortable with Romanians, they adapt. 90 per cent are children of shepherds, they have sheep in Romania.

(Italian stockbreeder, Lentiai, Veneto, aged 35)

On the other hand, it is implicitly emphasised that, despite these similarities, migrant shepherds originate from more *backward* areas.

They are like us 40 years ago, they can do without medicines; they adapt, they have no specific needs. For our work this means a lot!

(Italian stockbreeder, Pergine Val Sugana, Trentino, aged 43)

They are like we were 50 years ago. Tough and hard workers and ready to overcome hardships.

(Spanish stockbreeder, Estorm, aged 55)

Work in Romania is completely different. [...]. They make a grim life for 200 euros a month.

(Italian stockbreeder, Veneto, aged 49)

This ‘imagined backwardness’ allows stockbreeders to assert a sort of moral, cultural, and technical superiority over the foreign worker that legitimises the low wage and the demand of obedience. For example, employers claim that previous experience with animals is of limited use since sheep farming in the country of origin is different, simpler, and not advanced; the migrant ‘needs a lot of training’ and lacks specific skills especially in the case of large flocks (such as in Sardinia or in Spain). Similarly, migrants are presented as having lower economic needs and therefore able to accept a wage rejected by locals.

They pretended to be able to do everything, but when it was time to work they didn't know where to begin. Some of them liked to work, and others didn't, that was eventually clear from the early morning. They did it but didn't want to. They are good as welders and bricklayers; not so much with animals. [...] And if you are not there, they don't do anything. They need to be monitored otherwise they won't do anything at all. They are fast learners though, but they aren't reliable.

(Italian stockbreeder, Sardinia, aged 60 about)

In the stories told by the interviewees, the ‘good Romanian’ turns into ‘a savage’ when he stops being docile and obedient, even going as far as quitting the job without notice, inexplicably turning into a drunk and untrustworthy (Farinella and Mannia 2018).

[The Romanians] are ‘unreliable in that they can leave at any time.’

(Greek stockbreeder, Lefktra, Viotias, aged 50)

This last excerpt shows a paradoxical situation in which informality stops being passively suffered by the worker as a means for the employer to impose bad conditions and low wages, and instead becomes a weapon to claim his

own power of action. The act of 'leaving' as a unilateral choice, without notice, reaffirms the migrant's agency.

In addition, the 'good worker' rhetoric conceals stockbreeders' tendency to tackle the continuous need for labour without increasing wages, according to a short-term strategy by which they switch employment from one ethnic group to another, sustaining 'a competitive advantage based on minimizing labour costs to the lowest point of regulatory compliance' (McKenzie and Forde 2009, 147).

This seems to happen in the recent phenomenon of replacing Romanians with Indians and north Africans to whom, once again, 'essentialised' characteristics are attributed: a Sardinian interviewee claimed, for example, that their Muslim faith would make them more reliable because it refrains them from getting drunk.

Conclusions

This chapter shows the complexity of migration patterns within Euro-Mediterranean agro-pastoral systems based on multifunctional family farming. As a primary source of livelihood, agro-pastoralism has proved to be a resilient practice in face of many and growing embedding uncertainties affecting inner and mountainous rural settings, where alternative opportunities for income and employment are limited. These areas are characterised by important phenomena of socio-economic marginalisation, demographic decline, land abandonment, and problems of generational renewal.

Global competition has forced most agro-pastoral farms to restructure their practices, pushing towards an expansion of flock size and the intensification of its management. Socio-economic conditions have hardly improved, while responsibilities and costs have grown. As it becomes increasingly difficult to recruit local workers for shepherding tasks, international migrants have become a strategic asset for these systems. In recent decades, the supply of 'good migrant workers' has sustained agro-pastoral farming, with relevant implications as well for keeping marginal territories vibrant and productive.

As it is more broadly the case for capitalistic agriculture, the migrant workforce serving agro-pastoral farms is subject to high degrees of exploitation and precariousness, expressed by low pay, harsh living and working conditions, and the limited formalisation of contractual relationships. International migrant shepherds are caught in a 'bad job' with limited options for improving their situation and upgrading their conditions. However, the relationships between local employers and migrant workers are more complex than in other contexts. On the one hand, exploitation is more nuanced and less visible because it is embedded in family bonds and articulated in more horizontal interactions. On the other, the unpredictability and multifunctionality of agro-pastoral work leaves vast spaces of autonomy and agency for migrant shepherds.

In a constant tension between the employer's need to exercise control and the worker's will to reaffirm his own agency, the rhetoric of the 'good worker' emerges in the stories of the interviewed stockbreeders. This rhetoric functions to essentialise and subordinate the migrant workers, but also to maintain competition between different groups in a segmented market: the shepherd is a 'good worker' only as long as he is docile, obedient, and willing to accept low wages. The migratory paths remain circular and international migrants move from one farm to another, from one territory to another; they cannot think of shepherding as a 'career' with opportunities for social mobility, but only as a precarious and uncertain employment and temporary source of income.

Such dynamics explain to a good degree the limited effectiveness of the migratory phenomena in tackling the generational renewal problems that affect the European agrarian world and that jeopardise its reproduction. These also help unveiling the inconsistencies of the political and financial engagements that aim to support agriculture and rural development in Europe.

Acknowledgements

The chapter is part of the European Research Council (ERC) project *PASTRES (Pastoralism, Uncertainty and Resilience)*. Data and interviews have been mostly sourced through two projects: the European Commission Marie Curie project *TRAMed – Transhumances in the Mediterranean* (2015–2018), coordinator: Michele Nori, and the ethnographic research *Changes of the Sardinian Pastoralism: Shepherds and Romanian Workers* (2016–2019), coordinator: Domenica Farinella. We wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their comments on the manuscript.

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