

Unstable Places. Modern-Day Slavery of the 21st Century in the Strawberry Sector in Huelva in Spain

Lugares inestables. Neoesclavismo en el siglo XXI en los campos freseros onubenses en España

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ABSTRACT

In a globalized world, the pursuit of a better future means that large numbers of people seek refuge in the most prosperous areas. Their need to reach the promised land takes them to the frontier between the legal and the illegal, which is more visible in contexts where temporary labor is needed. That is particularly the case of the strawberry growing fields in the province of Huelva, Spain, where temporary settlements are overcrowded with immigrants during the harvesting season. This article describes the systemic and symbolic violence that takes place in these contexts.

Keywords: 1. Migration, 2. liminality, 3. violence, 4. resistance, 5. Huelva, Spain.

RESUMEN

En un mundo globalizado, la necesidad de un futuro mejor hace que ingentes cantidades de seres humanos busquen refugio en las áreas más prósperas. La necesidad de alcanzar la tierra prometida provoca que vivan en una liminalidad entre lo legal y lo prohibido, siendo esto más visible en contextos donde se necesitan grandes cantidades de mano de obra temporal. Este es el caso de los espacios freseros de la provincia de Huelva, España, donde en temporada de recolección se produce una masificación y un hacinamiento en los asentamientos temporales, recogiendo el presente artículo las violencias sistémicas y simbólicas que se producen en estos contextos.

Palabras clave: 1. Migraciones, 2. liminalidad, 3. violencias, 4. resistencias, 5. Huelva, España.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction, the complexity of human relationships

Although the phenomenon of immigration is not recent, it can be argued that in recent times—as globalization has spread throughout the planet—it has become much more visible in everyday life. The purpose of the present study was to shed light on the asymmetric power relationships between immigrants and the residents of their receiving communities. To this end, we will focus on the relationships, visions, discourses, and practices of seasonal immigrants of African origin in illegal settlements along Huelva’s coastal geography and on the local population around these settlements.

This line of research has a very specific and highly relevant field of study, and pays special attention to the migratory phenomena in the populations of Lepe, Lucena del Puerto, Moguer, and Palos de la Frontera, a region known as “*Dorado del 'oro rojo' onubense*” located in Huelva, Spain, where intensive and highly technified agricultural activities associated with the production of strawberries and blueberries have become one of the main economic drivers of the Andalucía region. The area is characterized by unstable settlements inhabited by some 8,000 immigrants, many of them undocumented and very unlikely to return home, as they have entered a dead end.

For the purposes of this analysis, we will use Edgar Morin’s paradigm of complexity (2004) as a vehicle for discourse. Thus, we will partake from the idea of the impossibility of reducing a problem of this magnitude to a mere sum of its parts, since this would result in a reductionist and biased vision of reality. Similarly, in order to outline the ethnographic context in the different spaces where our research context unfolds, we have opted for the multisite approach formulated by Marcus (2001). Concept

Beginning the Journey

The new global disorder is first and foremost asymmetric, based on power relations² that reproduce and legitimize situations of oppression among subjects. Language generates structures, and this is especially true in the case at hand. Immigrants, who are very different from foreign residents,³ become the inferior link in this chain of power—the most vulnerable

²Understanding, as Foucault (2000) that power is not something that one possesses, but rather a control strategy comprised of a network of complex strategic relationship, will allow us to produce individuals, discourses, and truths which will give meaning from all the social ties, transforming thanks to their ability to adapt.

³To Manuel Delgado (2011) a differentiation must be established between the concepts “immigrant” and “foreign resident,” due to the fact that these two attributes will be applied by the receiving society to maintain the asymmetric relations of power. Therefore, the immigrant concept would be associated negatively by the receiving society, to intruder, poor,

among the vulnerable, the most stigmatized among the stigmatized. As Zizek (2016) points out:

Sloterdijk rightly pointed out that capitalist globalization represents not only openness and conquest but also a world enclosed in itself that separates the Interior from the Exterior; these two aspects are inseparable: the global reach of capitalism is based on the way in which it introduces a radical division of classes throughout the world, separating those protected by the sphere from those who are outside its coverage (Zizek, 2016, p.12).

There is a direct association between the concepts of immigration, globalization, and economy. The new global order—defined by deregulation, flexibility, and competitiveness (Haro, 2014)—generates situations of profound instability not only in markets but also among individuals.

Large population movements respond to the hegemonic logic of the market and its needs. Authors such as Morin (1993), Appadurai (2007), and Pogge (2000) have highlighted the significance of large transnational corporations in the current planetary configuration, as well as the need for global change. In this sense, Zizek (2016) proposes that:

A good way to begin [...] is to focus on what one cannot but call the political economy of refugees in order to develop a clear awareness of who and what is causing these mass movements. Here, the first step is, of course, to trace the ultimate cause to the dynamics of global capitalism and military intervention processes [...] this ongoing disorder is the true face of the New World Order. Left to their own devices, Africans will not change their societies. Why not? Because we, Europeans, are preventing them from doing so (Zizek, 2016, p.51).

Individuals are extremely fragile in the current global dynamics. This vulnerability extends to groups of individuals stigmatized on the basis of different categories—such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, or class—, and it leads to the creation of perfectly delimited borders, as well as to physical and symbolic segregation. Alterity is focused from a mixophobic position in a clear attempt to conceal the contradictions of the current neoliberal system.

In this way, the immigrants' agency and political character are intentionally constrained, and they are ensnared by dependency loops in a system that produced the immigrants

and inferior in the system of social stratification or as a danger to the security of the community. On the other hand, foreign resident are considered as citizens from places with a higher economic development, who enjoy a less integrated legal situation but won't suffer exploitation, nor will be rejected by being considered as "guests." The difference between the two makes us see how the process of building the alterity is only mediated by a lot of intersections such as social origin or ethnicity, perhaps as well as social class, levels of training and education, or their access to power-sharing.

themselves and needs them as a cheap and available workforce to reproduce the system, exerting symbolic and systematic violence on their corporeality.

Temporary immigrants are stigmatized based on a stereotype that reifies and essentializes their social condition as an “unavoidable evil” of the society in which their daily practices take place and where they are not seen as “citizens entitled to rights, but as dispossessed human beings who should be assisted by public or private charity” (Dagnino, Olvera, & Panfichi, 2006, p. 63). In addition, their identity referents are remote: they have left the places where their experiences and memories have taken place (Biasatti & Compañy 2014), which entails the dilution of “the support of social existence, that is, a set of ordinary people and things that carry meaning: the land, a home, a village, a city, parents, possessions, jobs, and other everyday references” (Bauman, 2005, p. 102).

With scarce prospects of being assimilated into the receiving social bodies, the immigrant’s life is marked by transience, lack of definition, and temporariness, which make it impossible for them to develop affective bonds with their surroundings, and so another stigma: the state of solitude, which is more striking when cultural differences between the immigrant and the host society intensify and results in anger and indignation, as pointed out by Zizek (2016) and Appadurai (2007).

Thus, being an immigrant entails assuming the stigma of this role in a culture outside their own, with its differing imaginaries and socialities. It entails entering a hostile environment where social networks are few, where immigrants will always be seen as the other, always in the liminality between partial acceptance or exclusion by the receiving society. This context brings changes in their self-ego-purposes and modifies their self-ego-centrism (Solana, 2000), affecting their reflexivity as a subject acting from intersubjectivity (Pozzoli, 2006).

THE MAP OF SHAME: THE PROBLEM OF UNSTABLE SEASONAL SETTLEMENTS

There is nothing more invisible than an immigrant, especially when they lack proper documentation. That is the case here, since temporary settlements in the province of Huelva, Spain—especially those inhabited by African populations—are, given the lack of legal recognition by the authorities, no more than frontiers of existence as subjects.

The phenomenon of migration raises mixed passions. An overall assessment of immigration throughout Spain reveals that migration flows are uneven in terms of country or region of origin. Data provided by the National Statistics Institute of Spain (INE) for the year 2018, shows that the Moroccan (769,050) and Romanian (673,017) collectives are the most significant among the different national populations comprising the ethnic mosaic of seasonal workers in Spain. Immigrants from other areas, especially from Central and Southern Africa, are approximately 150,000. This figure is significant because, as will be

discussed, this proportion is not representative of Huelva, even less of the groups based in the temporary camps.

Thus, the INE⁴ indicates that Romanian immigrants account for the largest proportion of foreigners (14,943) from a total of 41,923 living in the province of Huelva, and the Moroccan population accounts for the second largest proportion (10,037); other significant figures represent immigrants from Senegal (761) and Nigeria (138). However, these numbers represent people who are legally established in the country, therefore, undocumented populations are not included in the census.

Despite these figures, at the local scale, and more specifically concerning the four largest national populations included in the study, we found the Maghreb population to be the most numerous, whereas the Romanian population was marginal since many of these immigrants are settled in other parts of the region and in the capital. Nevertheless, data from the INE (Table 1) presents practically no records of African or Maghreb population in the area, which reinforces the idea, as we shall see below, that sub-Saharan populations are invisible in official statistics.

Table 1. Main National Groups Registered by the INE in the Four Strawberry Growing Areas

Main Nationalities	Main nationalities object of study				
	<i>Total</i>	Rumania	Argelia	Morocco	Other African Countries
<i>Total</i>	12,677	4,711	230	3,510	1,925
Lepe	4,273	1,371	122	879	776
Lucena del Puerto	1,086	579	26	315	45
Moguer	5,533	1,888	75	1,965	920
Palos de la Frontera	1,785	873	7	351	184

Source: National Statistics Institute municipal population records, Municipality of Palos de la Frontera (INE, 2017).

If the data are considered by municipality, the dance of numbers takes on a special role, since they collide when we enter more specific disaggregation levels, such as the infra-municipal. In this way, the disparities can at first be contradictory, although this is not necessarily the case. Thus, taking the case of the Palos de la Frontera municipality as a

⁴The data presented is drawn from the Spanish National Statistics Institute official database, available here: <http://www.ine.es/jaxi/Tabla.htm?path=/t20/e245/p04/provi/10/&file=0ccaa002.px>

reference, we found that 1,785 immigrants are currently registered in the population, most of them women from Eastern Europe, who settle in the territory at certain times of the year to sow and harvest strawberries and other red fruits. This figure contrasts with the population included in the present study, mainly from the sub-Saharan region—hence the dance of numbers, since the previous references highlight the importance of the African population, especially in the Huelva countryside.

An interesting aspect of this level of disaggregation is that it reveals the occupation model of the territory. As can be expected—using again Palos de la Frontera as a reference—the way in which the space is occupied and inhabited sheds light on the asymmetries between immigrants and local population. Thus, one out of three immigrants lives in rural areas close to agricultural holdings, as opposed to one in every seven residents, which indicates that the rural environment is where everyday life takes place among immigrants living in the Huelva strawberry zone. Therefore, we can speak of a hierarchy of space, which translates into a symbolic appropriation of space that establishes differences between local residents and the immigrant community.

Table 2. Occupation of Space by Origin in Palos De La Frontera and its Municipal Area

Type of zone (detail)	2017			2013			2009		
	Total	Spanish	Foreign	Total	Spanish	Foreign	Total	Spanish	Foreign
<i>Total</i>	10,885	9,100	1,785	10,196	8,389	1,807	9,043	7,792	1,251
Rural area (2,000 inhabitants or less)	1,905	1,381	624	1,807	1,259	548	1,393	1,046	347
Intermediate area (2,001-10,000)	8,509	7,779	1,161	8,389	7,130	1,259	7,650	6,746	904

Source: National Statistics Institute municipal population records, Municipality of Palos de la Frontera (INE, 2017)

These data, obtained directly from the INE for 2016 (INE, 2017), are highly questionable because they fail to register the itinerant population and the immigrant population lacking legal documentation to reside in Spanish territory. This is because speaking of temporary settlements in Huelva is speaking of invisibility. They are not included in any official statistics, they are not accounted for in municipal registers, nor are there any data on them in Social Security registers. It is a stigmatized collective, invisible to the administration, although its presence is essential in the strawberry fields in the province. Thus, the last count,

presented by the Comisiones Obreras workers' union (CCOO, 2016) evidences how the multiethnic composition that gives life to these places is very different from the official figures. Therefore, the present study used the figures that were undoubtedly deemed as more accurate, despite not being official.

Most illegal settlements are located between the towns of Lucena del Puerto-Bonares, Palos de la Frontera, Moguer, and Lepe, although small settlements scattered along the Huelva coast are also frequent. Moguer's settlements are the most numerous and most cosmopolitan, although the sub-Saharan African population is clearly predominant.

Table 3. Breakdown of Immigrant Population in the Main Settlements of the Studied Populations Based on Data Reported by the Comisiones Obreras Union

Percentage of total	Palos de la Frontera 36 Women/ 1,155 Men	Moguer 100 Women/ 3,091 Men	Lepe 4 Women/ 1,400 Men	Lucena del Puerto 237 Women/ 1,109 Men
Senegal	33	4.6	17.2	
Mali	15	37.8	52.8	6.7
Morocco	13	43.9	11.7	26.2
Gambia	12	4.45		
Guinea	6	0.35	5.8	
Mauritania	5	0.7		
Others (Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina ...)	16	Ivory Coast: 0.93; Gambia: 1.51; Libya: 0.57; Other: 5.92	Ivory Coast: 0.99; Romania: 0.2; Other: 11.31	Romania: 24; Ghana: 32.4; Burkina: 1.42; Nigeria: 0.57; Other: 8.57.

Source: Comisiones Obreras (2016).

As can be seen in Table 3, the most numerous groups come from Mali and Senegal, followed by Romanian gypsies, as well as other national populations, although to a much lesser extent. It was interesting to observe that the grouping was not casual since minority populations tend to concentrate within the same geographical area, often in the same camp, which indicates that nationality can be an important factor in explaining the ethnic distribution of immigrant populations. A notable aspect of the Comisiones Obreras report on the situation of immigrant settlements is the predominant presence of men.

RED GOLD, INVISIBLE SLAVES

I love you so much my friend, but you are on your own

Solidarity is a concept reserved for the other, never for oneself. Great care must be taken when addressing its different dimensions, especially in contexts where multiculturalism is associated with marked vulnerability and social exclusion. Thus, discourse and action are disconnected in many places throughout Huelva's illegal settlements.

In this study, we adopted a passive and participative observation method. Ten semi-structured interviews were administered: two of them to members of support groups that work with immigrants, one to a member of the immigrant security service, four to immigrants from various settlements in the area, and three to local residents. Our goal was to highlight the contradictions between the discourse and the practices of all the involved actors via a constant exercise in the estrangement of scenes and contexts. This approach was possible due to this author's geographical proximity to the subjects and familiarity with their lives.

In order to preserve the anonymity of the participants, real names were not used. Many of the interviews were considerably limited because the participants did not allow to be recorded, having to resort to the instant transcription of the interviews.

When, on a certain occasion, I read Juan Peris (2006), a Cáritas social worker who worked with immigrants in Huelva, his summary of the visual and emotional reality of this social group made a profound impact. He refers that, in nearby forests and on the outskirts of agricultural municipalities, settlements consist of slums built by immigrants, both documented and undocumented, out of leftover strawberry mulches; these people represent an army of reserve labor waiting for an opportunity to fill in for people who have contracts or on specific days, for example on holidays or during the high season (Peris, 2006, p. 172).

In an aseptic but authentic way, Peris (2006) describes the everyday life conditions of immigrants in settlements around the vast strawberry plantations that provide their owners with important profits. Hailing from different corners of Africa or from the most depressed areas in Eastern Europe, such as Romania (especially Gypsies), they pursue the European dream, deceived by the empty idea of a better future. Many of them have an academic background or reasonably stable jobs, but they abandoned their birthplaces in an attempt to provide for their family, such as the case of Lumumba, a 29-year old Senegalese man whose eyes show the hardships of life:

I was born in Darou, in Senegal, and I'm the eldest brother of nine. I'm married, and I have four children. Since you can't make a living there, they told me that I could come to Spain, that I'd find a job here, and that I'd make some money to send home and start a business in the future. With the savings I had plus what my relatives gave me (I promised to return this money), I spent almost two years in different places until I could come to Spain. One of

my worst moments was at Mount Gurugú when the Moroccan police used to come and beat us with sticks. But in the end, I was able to move to Spain, and here I am, although I'm not sure why (Lumumba, personal communication, March 5, 2016).

I cannot linger in Lumumba's narrative because he mistrusts my intentions with the conversation and he does not want to be recorded. Mistrust is common among these invisible citizens of ephemeral architecture. Local residents rarely visit this area, and they try at all times to keep their distance. We cannot say whether they do that out of fear or mistrust. This is logical if we understand, following Morin's (2004) complexity paradigm, that there are two fundamental relational principles in regard to the Other: sociocentrism and social exclusion: the Other is either accepted or pushed away (Solana, 2000).

The dimension of integration has multiple angles, depending on the individual who sets it in motion. As Llobera (1990) or Manuel Delgado (2006) have indicated, care must be taken when addressing the concepts of integration and tolerance, since, in addition to being concepts associated with a specific cultural dimension, they are usually multidirectional. We observed examples of intolerance even among organizations that allegedly support immigrants and from immigrant groups who are fighting against this phenomenon. Thus, it is not uncommon to find in local media confrontations between groups of Romanian and African immigrants. This is reflected by the presence of a symbolic occupational liturgy of the space in these camps, where roles, times, and rituals are clear-cut.

A walk through these in-temporary settlements allows us to confirm the lack of culturally diverse areas, and how camps of individuals from Eastern Europe are entirely segregated from the rest of the settlements, especially those composed of Africans. This shows how the phenomenon of integration is not simple, nor is it limited to receiving communities or compulsory among immigrant groups (Delgado, 2006). This is bluntly expressed by Miha, a gypsy of Romanian origin who lives in a camp in Lucena del Puerto⁵:

We (Romanian Gypsies) don't want anything to do with black people. They are there, and we are here. For me, my people are essential; I don't want to be with people from other places, because I don't even need it. When one of us has gone to live in a black camp, in the end, they have had to run away, or it has ended badly. Their things were stolen, they were left out because they didn't speak their languages or they were housebroken, and, without saying a word, they took what they wanted. The same thing happens in the fields, we are working, and there are no problems, but when many people get together, there are always problems, for sure (Miha, personal communication, April 9, 2016).

⁵ The case of Miha was special at the time of gathering information. The interview was carried out in an informal context, since I knew him for some years, which facilitated the process.

In his faltering Spanish, Miha informs us that not everything that shines is gold in these camps, and also how survival often drives conflict among groups or individuals. Thus, intolerance and mixophobia are latent not only in the host community but also among immigrants. Diverging imaginaries, social networks limited to their countrymen, and feelings of social exclusion are nothing more than springs that create a situation of tension and fear in the person, as well as suspicion toward the other. The fact is that coexistence with fear is perhaps one of the main elements of group cohesion in the face of alterity (Bauman 2005).

This fear is even more evident when the word “return” emerges in these settlements, awakening mixed feelings among them. Lumumba makes it clear:

If I could, I would go back to my homeland in a heartbeat, but now I am in no man’s land. Here in Spain, I don’t have papers, I can barely work, only when they want people in the fields, and I don’t earn enough money to send home. But I don’t have the money to go back either or to pay back what I borrowed. In my country, I had a job and food every day, but here I am nobody, and I’d like to go back, but I don’t know how I could do it (Lumumba, personal communication, March 5, 2016).

This is not Miha’s case, who has many relatives scattered throughout the province who also work in agriculture. Lumumba’s words express his longing for his origins, and his circumstances are drastically different from Miha’s, who has documents and is free to move across Europe.

The documented-undocumented situation marks the boundary between the subject with rights and the subject without rights, as well as the invisible barriers between the subject and alterity, which often emerge from the immigrants themselves since symbolic elements from both sides intervene in their construction. This is evidenced in aspects such as the difficulty to access the site to conduct research: visible and invisible barriers were constantly present. Llobera (1990) recognized how anthropologists themselves are racially biased as a result of their being immersed in a concrete social and cultural context.⁶ As Solana (2002) points out:

Universalist orientation policies tend not to take into account ethnic, identity, or cultural dimensions; they consider that racist manifestations affect individuals defined as human beings with rights, and not groups defined by their cultural differences (Solana, 2002, p. 143).

This form of symbolic violence—in its multiple dimensions and directions—also affects the receiving culture, wherein the immigrants’ life circumstances are demonized and their conflictive behavior is stigmatized. Thus, residents often express their discontent: “*they*

⁶We recognize that, due to geographic and cultural proximity or by being aware of his ethnicity, the chat with Miha was a lot more comfortable than the one we had with Lumumba, which only makes us think about to how racist bias influence the appreciation of alterity.

bring no good, "they only come here to steal and live off of charity, "they can't live in their country, but they don't let us live in ours." Immigrants are associated with a lack of safety and tranquility; this is a clear expression of what Girard (2005) has written concerning "the construction of scapegoats," on which all blame is deposited, in an attempt to normalize asymmetric conditions and power among social classes, legitimizing inequality. Thus, during a conversation with José, a local strawberry farmer, this stigmatized vision of the Other is more than evident:

I make contracts of origin via local organizations. I hire Polish and Rumanian women, and they come to my fields to work. I give them a job, a house, and a salary, and when the season is over, they go back and everyone is happy. Things are different with people from the shantytowns (settlements). They come looking for work every day, and I always tell them that it's impossible without papers. (José, personal communication, April 15, 2016)

Throughout this conversation, my chat with Lumumba comes to mind, and how he often finds work in one field or another, especially on weekends, which is when security forces fail to control workers. I ask Jose if he hires undocumented immigrants or immigrants from nearby settlements.

Of course, you resort to these people, on special occasions when the season is at its highest and nobody is around, but this is exceptional and only for a few days. It's a shame to see them wander around these fields, and sometimes they have to be given a little margin; they have to eat at least (José, personal communication, April 15, 2016).

A sword of Damocles is behind these expressions. It brings to light one of the main contradictions in the discourse and practices of local entrepreneurs, who criticize the use of undocumented labor but hire undocumented immigrants and pay them much less than what a legal worker is paid, further aggravating the asymmetries and structural violence against them and reinforcing a true form of neo-slavery. Thus, irregular immigrants are administratively invisible, overqualified for the local agricultural market, slaves at the expense of the needs of local businesspeople (Miedes & Redondo, 2007).

This invisibility is commonly accepted by all actors participating in this macabre play, which is justified from multiple points of view, sometimes using purely humanitarian arguments and sometimes appealing to the market's needs (Rodríguez & Breva, 2012). The complicity of this new form of exploitation with State structures is more than evident, and it is practically impossible to bring these situations to light except through trade unions or aid organizations. In this regard, city halls, security forces, and other organizations dwell in the liminality between what the law dictates and what the market demands, repeatedly playing with the innate human dialogic. Such is the case of Damián, a member of the State's security forces, who periodically carries out raids and checks on the Huelva farms and speaks anonymously with an absolute clairvoyance:

Of course, we know there are illegal immigrants in the fields, but you have to try to find a balance... Sometimes we know which places to visit and, when we go, we find everything in order, but we know that when we turn around, the illegals who are hiding among the pine forests will come back and it will all go back to how it was. It's a problem we can't control (Damián, personal communication, April 27, 2016).

Throughout the conversation, he tells me that when they have to go to a settlement, they are afraid of running into situations that they are not prepared to control, and several agents must be present to better control the tension. According to Damián, frequent fights take place due to small theft of personal belongings or money saved to send to their families, and immigrant groups are organized according to nationality. This brings us back to the idea of how culture creates exclusion islands amidst the occupants of these settlements, which territorialize their living space as a result of their cultural proximity, a survival strategy in the face of alterity.

The Problem of Access to Housing

One of the determining factors when it comes to understanding the phenomenon of immigrant slums in Huelva can be found in their access to housing. Sectoral studies in the context of the Forum for the Social Integration of Immigrants (Rodríguez & Breva, 2012) point out certain factors that explain the difficulties faced by immigrants in regard to housing:

- a) Immigrant populations seek to recreate bonds, social networks, and community solidarity that favor their integration and adaptation to the new environment.
- b) There are obvious difficulties in accessing housing due to the existence of discriminatory behaviors or profit motives among landlords and intermediaries in the real estate market (Foro para la Integración Social de los Inmigrantes, 2007).

The problem of access to housing was a constant theme in all the interviews, and it was confirmed during the on-site observations. It is sometimes due to the immigrants' needs of belonging and safety among their countrymen, and other times due to the xenophobic attitudes of local residents. In any case, the solution to this problem is not easy (Olea, 2012). Dembele is part of the Malian community, a very important group in the settlements, he recounted how being an undocumented immigrant causes him to recreate, in a recursive loop, his unsuccessful search for housing, as he encounters reticence on all fronts:

I'd like to live in an apartment like everyone else. But you go somewhere and they give you a bad look, or they ask for your papers, and because I don't have them, well, they tell me they won't rent the apartment to me. I tell them that I am going to pay, but they don't trust me, and I have to stay here with my people. At least I don't feel alone (Dembele, personal communication, May 5, 2016).

These appraisals—similar to those made by Lumumba, or Joffre, a Senegalese man in the same camp—express an alterity construction process based on inequality, by associating immigrants with problems, disregard for maintenance, or lack of payment (Olea, 2012). Many local residents say that they prefer not to rent their property to a “Moor” or a “Negro” since they will not be responsible for its maintenance. This is nothing more than an essentialization of immigrants that associates them with negative cultural categories in the receiving community and further stigmatizes their social condition.

Housing is denied in many ways, both in its form and in its substance. Sometimes, abusive rents are requested, with clauses that are impossible for immigrants to assume (Olea, 2008; Rodríguez & Breva, 2012). In other cases, the request for work or residence documentation—which they lack—or a limit to the number of occupants in an apartment make any attempt to leave the settlements unviable, as reflected in everyday conversations with both immigrants and local residents:

I want to go to an apartment, but when I arrive and they see me, their face changes. They are racist. The other day, they asked me for 700 euros per month, and I had to pay two months in advance, but I don't have that kind of money. They told me that only I could live there, that if I had someone else living in the apartment, they would kick me out and get me in trouble (Lumumba, personal communication, March 5, 2016).

The difficulties to find decent housing and the limited social networks make temporary settlements the only option for many immigrants. The roles assigned to each social class are reproduced, normalizing their confinement and overcrowding in the city's outskirts (Zizek, 2016) as a segregated group far from urban comfort zones. Many settlements lack electricity, drinking water, and waste collection containers because the municipality refused to provide these services, claiming that the settlements are located in peripheral areas outside the urban spaces included in urban development plans. As a consequence, people in the settlements must self-organize and defend themselves against external aggression, forming an ethnic locus where solidarity is intertwined with the survival of the group.

Strolling through any camp takes us to a highly precarious space. Kitchens are improvised inside shacks made of various plastics and cardboard, and an unsanitary environment is as omnipresent as the many bonfires on the “streets” and open spaces where people carry out their daily lives. Therefore, news stories about fires in camps are not uncommon. In these fires, occupants have lost the little money they had been able to collect to send to their families as well as important documentation for their regularization, or even their lives.

Here, we cook inside the house, and we also use fire to get warm. We take metal drums and make our meals there. In the winter, it is very cold and humid, and our bones ache. We have to light a fire to warm ourselves. Sometimes a wind comes up and the shack gets on fire, and we lose everything (Dembele, personal communication, May 5, 2016).

Despite the constant efforts of humanitarian organizations, many attempts to relocate immigrants have fallen on deaf ears with the administration. In this way, space becomes a generator of boundaries between cultures, between those who live in the urban nucleus and those in the forest, between those who are alike and those who are different from the community. There are different ways of generating spatial asymmetries, of establishing the limits between the subject and the Other, and mixophobia is widespread among all parties.

Charity is not Solidarity

One of the main types of violence suffered by the group of immigrants living in the camps has an eminently symbolic undertone. The asymmetric relationships established with the hegemonic society are by no means favorable to immigrants. In a clear ethnocentric outbreak, the immigrant is seen as an unprotected being incapable of having agency, who enters the circuits of dependency and charity via associations, institutions, and the neighborhood. This causes their self-ego-purposes to be undermined by the existence of a well-intentioned limitation of their capabilities that ensnares them into the circuits of dependency. As Carlos, a member of the NGO Proyecto Unidad of the University of Huelva, declares:

I am sorry about what happens in the camps. When it rains, they huddle in mudflats, and in the summer, they roast with the heat. It is not OK to leave them so unprotected. It is necessary to help them have minimum living conditions. With the association, we go from time to time to bring them food and medication... (Carlos, personal communication, May 8, 2016).

This clearly paternalistic conception—bordering ethnocentrism—regards immigrants as having a limited capacity to act with agency, as if they had an innate incapacity to achieve minimum levels of quality of life, which constitutes symbolic violence of the first order. Furthermore, it reproduces and legitimizes social asymmetry and inequality by turning the issue at hand into a chronic problem.

Often, this paternalism creates confusion about the role of each actor in this tragicomedy. Via on-site observations made, we verified how, sporadically, neighbors from the area or nearby localities bring food or clothes to the camps in a well-intentioned attempt to mitigate the deplorable living conditions of the immigrants. However, things change when it is time to debate whether they would like to have one of these immigrants as a neighbor, and they bring up countless excuses:

If they came as they should, I'd have no problem. I bring them food and clothes from my neighbors, but I would not mind if they were my neighbors. But, of course, if they follow the rules of the community where I live. You can't get twenty people in an apartment, nor can you do whatever you want because there are rules to be followed, and that is logical (Alberto, personal communication, April 27, 2016).

This statement hints to a profound distance between social groups. Such intersubjectivity is full of contradictions and prejudices, it stereotypes immigrants and bestows them with negative qualities that become stigma. It reflects the diverging imaginaries, social bonds, and practices among cultures that, more than anything else, arise suspicion among subjects.

It's not that I distrust them, they have customs that I can't tolerate. On the third one [referring to their apartment building], a group of Mauritians moved in, and they would kill sheep in the bathtub. Their clothes and they smelled strongly, bad hygiene habits, and at night they used to talk until late. When they left, the owner had to put two layers of paint because of how they had left it (Manuel, personal communication, April 30, 2016).

In both cases, the Other is associated with conflict. The immigrant cannot be stigmatized, nor can the hegemonic subject be demonized. The clash between social and imaginary norms and the limited capacity of both to manage and resolve conflicts create a struggle between both conceptions of life responding to different cultural models.

For this reason, charity—confused with solidarity—becomes a powerful tool for social calm that appeases and justifies the contradictions of the system (Chouliaraki, 2011). On the one hand, hegemonic society ascribes the original cause of the problem to the immigrant and their inability to be a subject with their own agency, in need of (ethnocentric) help, since they are unable to reach a minimum level of progress. It justifies power relationships and reinforces the class structure in this drama. On the other hand, for immigrants, this relationship of submission represents a loss of self-esteem, a devaluation of their corporeality, and they end up accepting their inferior role. The access to free resources—no matter how meagre—often leads them to apathy and a lack of optimism, even if this has consequences in their daily routine:

I don't care anymore. Cáritas and the Red Cross come to bring us food, clothes, and medicines, and that is how we get by. Since there is no work in the fields, what am I going to do? Honestly, at least I eat, and I have a roof over my head. It is more than what I had in my homeland (Lumumba, personal communication, March 5, 2016).

Charity, thus understood, is a symbolic intersubjective frontier. It makes the immigrant live in a liminality between the legal and the illegal, dependence and independence, being and non-being. No matter how well-intentioned an action is, the actual result will contribute to the submission of immigrants.

For that reason, associations such as Cáritas and the Red Cross have changed their coping strategy by combining their support activities with social criticism and the launching of public awareness campaigns that call for new practices in regard to this group (Peris, 2006; Cáritas, 2013), such as housing access programs, inclusion programs, and the creation of local projects to eradicate shantytowns, many of them curiously similar to those implemented decades before with the Gypsies in the area.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Beyond its local effects, the phenomenon of migration must be evaluated on the basis of global dynamics and social and economic asymmetries. As Edgar Morin (1993) would say, we live in an “earth-homeland,” but it is not the same home for everyone equally. As stated by Bauman (2005), immigrant settlements in the Huelva strawberry area are just another expression of the tensions that take place in an increasingly fluid world, and local action is just a way to face the problem at a reduced scale.

It is only from the need to approach relationships with alterity from a supportive rather than a charitable point of view that we can achieve a fairer and more egalitarian world order, as advocated by authors such as Zizek (2016), even though this is done through criticism.

As subjective beings acting from intersubjectivity, it is impossible for us to achieve a perfect, conflict-free society because conflict is part of human culture and sociality (Haro, 2012). However, if cultural diversity is acknowledged and respected, despite its differing imaginaries, social networks, and bonds, an end to these new forms of 21st century slavery can be glimpsed.

Translator: Miguel Rios

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