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Focus Section

Challenging internal (b)ordering. Antiracist and migrant rights activism in Italian cities: Introduction to Focus Section

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A growing scientific literature shows how contemporary racial states externalize and internalize borders, reinforcing racial hierarchies with everyday and bureaucratic violence, sharpening social inequalities and divisions with racist nationalism. In international political discourse, an explicit colonial agenda is emerging that can no longer obscure the coloniality of the European Union. Indeed, «race, racism and racialization have shaped postcolonial migration governance regimes in Europe since the very establishment of the EU and in post-war European capitalism» (Mellino 2025, 383).

Drawing on the internal border perspective (Fauser 2024), our goal in this research is to understand how these processes occur in Italian urban spaces. Our special issue thus aims to investigate, from field research, ethnographic studies, but also from activist experiences, the specific dynamics of all these processes within a broader reflection on the current configuration of racial capitalism in Italy. This is an unusual bias in social and political research in our territories, as the category of race, like its conceptual derivatives, remains neglected in mainstream Italian social and human sciences. To bring into light the dynamics of racial capitalism in Italy, we have chosen the prism of migration processes (Hall, 2024), that is the contemporary policing of migration and difference in the articulation of the national capitalist formation.

The contributions aim at discussing the limits and the potential of activism for migrants' rights at the urban level, analyzing discourses and practices of resistance and disobedience in relation to borders and racialized social orders. We follow the research line of Keskinen, Alemanji and Seikkula (2024), adopting a critical lens of decolonial studies and critical border studies to put in relation antiracism and migrant (solidarity) activism. Our proposal is to discuss the often contradictory processes taking place in different Italian cities.

The combination of some particular phenomena such as the development of logistics and other sectors of platform capitalism, the touristification and gentrification of ever larger areas of urban centres, the new ultra-right governance of the reception, asylum and migration regimes are changing the relationship between local territory and migration, between economy, social life, right to live and racialization. In some urban areas, asylum centers are increasingly becoming dormitories for a precarious and racialized labour force ready to work in certain sectors of the city economy: services, domestic work, catering, tourism, construction. These processes are accentuating social, housing and labour segregation, as well as racist violence and social control by police and institutions that characterize the living conditions of a large part of the postcolonial population in Italy. At the same time, the worsening living conditions of migrants, post-migrants and asylum seekers in urban centres have fuelled the formation of new movements of anti-racist resistance and solidarity.

The special section includes empirical studies from a national research project (Mobilities, Solidarities and Imaginaries across the Borders coordinated by the University of Genova, Italy) to offer a rich and diverse picture of the city as urban border space, with its struggles for spatial/social/racial justice.

Gaia Farina and Omid Firouzi Tabar present the results of an ethnographic research concerning the places of anti-racist solidarity in the city of Padova, by focusing on the activity of a socio-legal helpdesk for migrants present in the city or in transit. The research shows how new porosities and policies are redefined at the urban level, through everyday practices which contrast institutional racism.

Annalisa Frisina, Gustavo Alfredo Garcia Figueroa and Francesca Helm propose to rethink internal border struggles in relation to the emergence of political antiracism in Italy. Their research experience shows how a collective reflexive work is crucial to contrast anti-migrant racism at the urban level. Through an innovative method, the Collective Analysis of Practices, solidarity and antiracist activists can learn from their everyday practices. Moreover, they can have insights on new convergences of their struggles, working for a common liberation which goes beyond the migrants-natives divide.

Andrea Ruben Pomella presents the results of an ethnographic research, exploring how Naples has become an urban battleground for migrant rights amid rapid touristification. He observed how *barrier-borders* enforce a condition of “eternal waiting” that immobilises migrants in space and time. His research exposes the contradictions of a city marketing itself as “beautiful” while its housing crisis, driven by Airbnb expansion and an alleged new governance of tourism affects both locals and migrants. In contrast to institutional failures there is the solidarity expressed by activists and social workers who nurture their everyday struggle from lived experience of migration.

Federica Cabras e Luigi Di Cataldo discuss the outcomes of a qualitative research carried out in Milan (2023-2024), aimed at exploring forms of exploitation of migrant workers linked to the so-called *digital gangmaster* existing in the city’s food delivery sector. In the framework of platform capitalism, migrant riders experience daily survival practices marked by reiterated forms of differential inclusion. The article shows the networks of local activism and the degree of support provided to this heterogeneous group of workers in the defense of their rights.

We believe that analyzing all these processes using an approach and theoretical tools that are neglected in our local contexts, while at the same time seeking to contribute not only to the broader debate on racial capitalism, but more specifically on the historical intertwining of capitalism, colonialism, race and racism in Southern Europe, could be an interesting opportunity to stimulate political action that is more in line with our current conjuncture.

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