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Abstract

The piece examines the figure of the ‘essential worker’ and the special arrangements it implied to introduce and discuss the concept of exceptionality. The theory developed by Agamben and Neocleous on the state of exception suggests the need to move away from classic discourse analysis and put the focus on silence and absences in discourse. The need to go beyond general theories on exceptionality is suggested, leading to a methodological proposal that can account for the invisible everyday resistances of the subaltern. This is done by looking at a specific case study deemed useful to grasp the affective dimension of exceptionality, while mobilizing ethnographic methods. Using fieldwork materials collected in Swiss vineyards between 2020 and 2022, some telling examples of abuses are described and analysed. To analyse these experiences, a conceptualization of the wine-production sector in Switzerland is provided and then complemented with examples of exceptionality in Swiss vineyards. The results suggest the need for further research on what exceptionality does to the bodies which are affected by it, and how it separates them from the remaining.

Key words: *Exceptionality, Essential Workers, Silence in discourse, Swiss wine-production, Covid-19 pandemic*

1. Intro

This piece reflects on the reconfiguration of the political brought on by Covid-19 by analysing how the arbitrary notion of ‘essential workers’ was forced upon the most precarious who keep society running. The main reason why this social category is seen as contentious concerns the tension between the appraisal of essential workers undertaken by sanitary exceptionality and the disposable nature of the populations performing this sort of work. Being designated as an essential worker meant the difference between infection and safety, continued earnings versus unemployment. For some, like the medical staff, this exposure came hand in hand with the nature of their professions. But for most, being labelled as an essential worker essentially confirmed their belonging to the underclass. Invisible workers suddenly found themselves elevated to the status of ‘heroes’ and recognized as an essential part of our society, while simultaneously being forced to make impossible choices between putting their and their family members’ lives at risk or being unable to pay their bills (Loustaunau et al., 2021). Within the context of wide-ranging mobility

restrictions, the selective shutdown of economic activities required a complementary explanatory discourse concerning the exceptions to the rule of 'staying at home'.

The sanitary crisis caused by Covid-19 provided mankind with a good opportunity to return to use value and services that meet sustenance needs, rather than the accumulation of speculative exchange value (Qiu, 2022). Unfortunately, this possibility has hardly materialized. While some middle-class sectors were preserved from the most devastating effects of the pandemic, essential workers were not. The conflation of social and biological factors implied an uneven and ever-changing distribution of risks (Vergnano, 2023). As the crisis at hand was triggered by an epidemic, the protagonism of the medical staff in public hospitals was unavoidable. They quickly took on a leading role as 'essential workers' and were applauded every evening from most balconies, while media stories boasted their bravery and selflessness. Although their courage was undeniable, it was also abused, as most governments didn't properly invest to support them. It suddenly became self-evident that human life depends on the work tied to social reproduction. Although less than for the medical staff, care workers were given a higher status and recognition, which is certainly a positive outcome of the pandemic. Yet, for medical and care workers alike, the contradiction remained between being essential, on one hand, and disposable, replaceable on the other.

The sanitary exceptionality used to handle the pandemic was also deployed well beyond care and health workers, in a telling sign of the subtle reconfigurations of the political which took place in the past decades. As one looks further into the different lines of work which were deemed essential, the more the explanatory frame becomes questionable. Mayer-Ahuja and Nachtwey (2021) identify three other sorts of essential workers. First, hygiene and mobility; then, logistics; and last, nutrition. It goes without saying that hygiene workers were of the utmost importance to limit contagion, although their efforts were not made as visible as those of health and care workers. There are also sound grounds to argue that some nutrition-related activities are crucial for human survival. Certain crops are of high strategic importance, and the same applies to water-related industries – might these be bottled-based or oriented to the treatment of used waters. Finally, mobility workers who transport people worked in reduced numbers, as allowing for some movement remained necessary even when respecting lock-down measures. Supermarkets and other suppliers of edible goods could not have been refurbished without transport. Yet, grouping essential workers in these three categories miss out on the transversal presence of logistics, which can be thought about as a category of its own.

A revolution in logistics took shape in the 1960s that gave rise to transnational circulatory systems that span sites of production and consumption (Cowen, 2014). When thinking about the logistical system's needs, it becomes self-evident that many workers were more important for the sector itself than for the service that was being provided to society. That is not to say that hygiene, nutrition and mobility were not important to withhold human life or to keep everyone safe and healthy. Rather, it pinpoints that a fair amount of goods dispatched through the supply chain were superfluous. For instance, the exponential growth of digital tools allowing to set up remote workplaces in domestic spaces was followed by the subsidiary growth of home-delivery services. Amazon delivery services and the like seldom focus on goods

of first necessity, and instead aim to foster a specific lifestyle and self-centred material comfort. Following Lakoff (2008), it seems fairer to say that the object of protection was not the national territory or the population, but rather the logistic systems that underpin social and economic life. With the securitization of supply chains, it is the circulatory system itself that becomes the object of vulnerability and protection.

More broadly, governments' lack of adequate and effective response to Covid-19 questioned their control capacity and revealed many vulnerabilities of our economic and political systems. The agricultural system is a telling example, insofar as it is a strategic sector well-known for its exploitation of precarious migrants. As covid-related mobility restrictions prevented temporary workers from reaching their destinations, a workforce shortage was observed all across Europe's agricultural sector. Certain temporary workers were then deemed essential, and special exemptions and arrangements were put in place in haste in the second quarter of 2020. For a brief moment, the exploitation of migrants was made visible, as many professions labelled as essential work rely heavily on migrant labour. For many workers, this implied handling all sorts of exceptions to the sanitary rules that were otherwise applied to the rest of the population. Yet the governmental initiatives which stated the purpose of providing security to migrants have been shown to become an additional administrative burden on seasonal workers (Vergnano, 2023).

The current piece focuses on seasonal agricultural work at the height of the pandemic to conduct a critical inquiry into how disposable populations were handled. Keeping wine production going illustrates how arbitrary the social category of 'essential worker' can be, although for different reasons. What was at stake here was the viability of a significant economic sector, already fragilized by global production and distribution chains. Wine sales plunged, as restaurants and other social settings encouraging wine consumption were shut down. As argued above, Covid-19 brought the focus on workers undertaking crucial reproductive work in our societies – such as those involved in the agricultural sector. Accordingly, the theoretical implications of exceptionality will be laid out in the following section. It will be argued that the lives of such workers are subject to a permanent state of exception, which is seldom explicitly spelled out. The argument will be made that discourse analysis struggles to render a good account of silence and absences. The challenges that exceptionality raises for discourse analysis require adopting innovative research methods. Section 3 develops the argument that ethnographic research allows us to overcome those limitations. This will be done by mobilizing fieldwork materials gathered in Swiss vineyards at the height of the pandemic. Swiss viticulture will be briefly described in section 4. A few contextual elements regarding geography, history and economic data are listed before looking at the work conditions in the vineyards.

The case study at hand shows that governments turned a blind eye to certain activities which are certainly not needed to ensure human survival. By reflecting on the time spent in the fields with other migrant workers and the process of crossing borders in pandemic times, I seek to shed some light on how exceptionality shaped the contours of the figure of the 'essential worker' during the height of the pandemic. Field notes are briefly shared in section 5 to illustrate the hardships endured by vineyard workers. It will be shown that the harsh reality of the sort of jobs which were considered essential work was hardly made any better. I conclude with some final remarks on how these ethnographic

materials relate to exceptionality. On the one hand, by considering the contrast between the dominant affect caused by sanitary measures and its' denial in Swiss vineyards. On the other, by examining the normalized exception in Swiss vineyards and showing that exceptionality is bound to specific, unevenly distributed, affective states. Literature and reports on the Swiss agricultural sector are particularly scarce, making the current piece an important contribution to the field.

2. Crisis and Exceptionality

The figure of the essential worker appears in the peculiar context of a sanitary crisis which sparked widespread emergency politics. Now that most governments have declared that the pandemic is over, it matters to insist on how much the first epidemic waves challenged pre-existing balancing mechanisms within our societies, causing a crisis in its strict etymological sense.¹ The initial denial and inaction of governments turned their previous austerity-led dismantling of health institutions into a sanitary catastrophe. The necropolitics involved in calculating who should be left to die transformed the pandemic into a full-blown and multi-layered crisis. Shutdowns became the main contention tool, and a wide array of technological solutions were enabled to allow qualified jobs to be compatible with staying at home: remote work, collective video calls, home-delivery services, big data population management, smart devices, and so forth.

The permanent character that crises have obtained under neoliberal modernity implies that the exception becomes the norm, with wide-ranging and long-lasting consequences (Bauman & Bordoni, 2014; Krisis, 2015; Rodrigues, 2001). Drawing from Schmitt, Agamben's influential contribution has shown how the normalization of exceptionality creates a space of lawlessness tending to perpetuate itself (Agamben, 2004). According to the logic at play in exceptionality, extraordinary action must be undertaken to face up to existential threats. This war-like logic of emergency talk relates to the Schmittian concept of the state of exception, which consists in suspending the law (in liberal regimes, the constitution) to protect the law. Still, the idea that the permanent emergency involves a suspension of the law encourages the idea of a 'return to legality', a return to a previously existing normality (Debelle, 2021). Against this idea, Neocleous (2008) argues that the concept of emergency is preferable insofar as it has a sense of 'emergence' – as opposed to the exception's implication of *ex capere* (being taken outside). The genealogy of 'emergency' points towards what is emerging, coming out of concealment or issuing from confinement by certain events. The author makes a strong point when arguing that emergency powers will be invoked whenever the law becomes too narrow to maintain existing power relationships. Are emergency powers then located outside of the law, as Agamben argues, or instead emerging from it?

Without pretending to settle such deep-rooted debates, it remains that invoking the state of exception is an arbitrary decision. No objective measurements can certify threats' existential character beforehand (Buzan et al., 1998). Threat perception remains ultimately a subjective issue, and existential threats cannot be objectively identified until they materialize, as by then, it is too late to act (Žižek, 2002). It thus becomes relevant to look at the perceived insecurities and

the subjective dimension of exceptionality. As Castoriadis (1980, p.247) rightly pointed out, 'the crisis is the feeling of crisis', bringing to the fore the collective *perception* of the crisis. More broadly, one can argue with Castoriadis that the threat is the *feeling* of the threat. Interestingly, the overwhelming insecurity consciousness triggered by the emergency mentality makes it easier for states to further enact exceptionality. It is precisely over the condition of fear, insecurity and disorder at the heart of civil society that states preside over the permanent state of emergency (Neocleous, 2008). This is relevant for understanding the Covid-19 sanitary crisis insofar as the discursive construction of the epidemic waves showed well that the affect of fear can circulate even faster than the virus causing it. During the pandemic, affect mobility stood in stark contrast with mobility restrictions, the same sanitary measures that 'essential workers' were allowed to bypass. One might note the irony of lifting mobility restrictions on a migrant workforce which otherwise suffers the hardest consequences of the globalized border regime. Those who are otherwise conceived as threats suddenly became inoffensive.

It matters to explore how exceptionality is experienced and how it triggers certain emotions to understand *how* exceptionality transforms society. Besides being emotionally loaded, the strive of exceptionality to go beyond established norms will often involve a redefinition of the values that are underpinned by a particular constitutional arrangement. As exceptionality overrides the rules of the game, the emphasis of our analysis should then be on its *stakes*, namely the implicit normativities and values underlying political choices and decisions. Following Fassin (2009, p.59), it matters to look at how 'the specific way in which individuals and groups are treated, under which principles and in the name of which morals, implying which inequalities and misrecognitions'. In line with these reflections, the current analysis aims to go beyond tactical discourse. It aims to make room for the implicit shifts in the logic of governmentality that Covid-19 emergency talk generated. The sort of reconfiguration of the political operated through the exception is necessarily a violent one. One that overrides the standardized violence of current neoliberal capitalism, one that re-invents it by changing the context in which it takes place, and most crucially, by modifying the rationale behind neoliberalism.

Researching contexts affected by full-blown exceptionality raises a series of methodological difficulties, the first being that exposure to violence has an arbitrary dimension (Ahmed, 2019). The feeling of threat is thus always mobilized for actors inhabiting spaces of exception, in a sort of un-wished state of preparedness that the neoliberal logic celebrates as 'resilience'. Having investigated antagonist activist spaces for many years allowed me to develop research awareness regarding the dangers to which my object of inquiry was exposed (Debelle, 2017). Yet, such movements make public statements, will receive media attention, will often be criminalized by politicians, and so forth. This implies that diverse materials are available to conduct discourse analyses, but it is not the case with essential workers such as those on whom this article focuses. Seasonal workers in Swiss vineyards do not have access to discourse, as social status interacts with conditions for accessing and producing discourse (Blommaert, 2005). As Spivak (2023) has put it, the subaltern cannot speak, their voice is systemically erased, silenced and repressed.

Absences are understood here in their structural sense, that is to say, as what arises from hegemonic discursive constellations. This sort of contextual predetermination has been studied by Critical Discourse Analysis scholars, who

have highlighted the social, political, historical and cultural contexts which determine and are reflected in discourse, as well as their ability to define what is thinkable and speakable (Blommaert, 2005). Yet, for this research, it also matters to introduce the notion of silence, understood as that which can be ascribed to individual speakers when they make a more conscious and intentional choice about what (not) to say (Schröter and Taylor, 2018). Following Glenn (2004, p.157), we consider that 'like the zero in mathematics, silence is an absence with a function.' Silence should be interpreted in the backdrop of silencing processes, as the marginalisation of certain groups silences them from the order of discourse. Here, silencing is understood as an active and socially constructed practice of using language to limit, remove and undermine the legitimacy of another use of language (Thiesmeyer, 2003). This cultural and legal framework translates into an ethos characterized by resignation and submission. Sad affects are enforced upon workers, although they are met with resistance.

The interest of Agamben's works is that they provide material to think about how emergency has become inscribed in contemporary forms of government. Regarding research on silence and absences, Agamben has reflected on the importance of testimonies departing from nazi concentration and extermination camps (Agamben, 1999). As the author underlines, 'Auschwitz is then the place where the state of exception perfectly corresponds with the rule.' Hence, his conceptual apparatus has been useful to enlighten the growing importance of executive-led, decree-based governmentality, based on the pervasive production of enemy figures and threats. It has also been fruitfully employed by scholars looking at extreme forms of violence and domination such as foreigners' detention centres, refugee camps, traumatic experiences of war and other forms of armed struggle, etc. (Ahmed, 2019; De Oto, 2010; Murphy, 2019). The case study at hand is hardly comparable with the aforementioned case studies, but it remains that Agamben's insistence on the importance and the limits of testimonies suggest the need for ethnographic enquiry.

3. Silence in Discourse

The current piece employs ethnographic methods as a means to reflect upon personal lived experiences and their relationship with the aforementioned theory on exceptionality. Ethnographic material allows for increased flexibility to capture an otherwise inaccessible reality. Indeed, this investigation has been complemented with immersive fieldwork, consisting of several work periods in Swiss vineyards. The data has been collected in Switzerland during the spring and early summer of 2020, 2021 and 2022, allowing for in-depth ethnographic observations of the context within which migrant workers are embedded. Insider data about agricultural work in Switzerland is hard to access, hence making testimonies and first-hand experiences important. Drawing from field notes and interviews, a reflection is made on how workers' lives become entangled in exceptionalism. This sort of research method might contribute to overcome the failure of theories on the exception and exceptionality to account for how such violence is felt and how it is unevenly distributed (Ahmed, 2019).

Simultaneously, it poses the question of how to conduct linguistic analysis on issues which are doomed to be absent from discourse. Ideological formations

will influence the pragmatical selection choices from language speakers and can even silence certain viewpoints altogether when hegemonic formations prevail – conversely, a sign of true power is in not having to refer to something, because everybody is aware of it (Baker, 2006, p.19). Specific thoughts and discourses will no longer be conceivable nor verbalized. That is not to say that meaning construction can opt out of suppression, as choosing what to say immediately defines what will be left out. Language ideology begins at the level of sound, where any recognition of meaning in speech relies on phonemic discreteness. Thus, selection is the first layer of suppression and is an ideologically bound process, implying the dilemma of knowing what a meaningful absence (Achino-Loeb, 2006) is. Only when we can hold something that gets not said against the possibility of saying it are we dealing with epistemological salient absence, in contrast with an unthinkable ‘non-thing’ (Schröter and Taylor, 2018).

The particularity of collecting field data among seasonal workers in Swiss vineyards is the fact that, there, the exception had been the norm for at least some decades. A telling example of this exceptional status is the virtual absence of labour rights for vineyard workers, which stands in contrast with the comfortable setting characterizing most economic sectors in Switzerland. The lawlessness framing seasonal work allows for arbitrary and frequent abuses and the status of ‘essential workers’ changed little in the everyday lives of those who spend virtually the whole week outdoors, enduring constant pressure and bodily pains. Almost no extra regulation was enforced on workers – like social distancing, face masks, tests, Covid passports and the like. In a nutshell, normal societal rules don’t apply in Swiss vineyards. I was exploring a field expecting it to react according to my preconceptions about work regulations. These expectations were an alternative discourse against which to gauge the absences in discourse. But it was not as a knowledgeable subject that I perceived those absences. Quite on the contrary, it was my ignorance about the unspoken rules applied in Swiss vineyards which made me bump into the absences and silences which structure them. Then again, observers always actively participate in the construction of the objects of observation, as the baggage of knowledge brought to the task conditions our perception (Achino-Loeb, 2006).

In line with Spivak’s (2023) considerations about the subaltern, taking silence into account became an important part of the investigation. Even after two seasons working side by side 60 hours a week, conducting interviews remained a no-go. Only half a dozen of those who had left the company agreed to be recorded, and still, the agreement was that the questions would not concern work. The failure to obtain this material is a result in itself. It vividly shows the concern shared by migrant workers in Swiss vineyards to get in trouble for speaking their minds. Silence is not opposed to discourse, but rather establishes and maintains a tension among the several levels of discourse (Glenn, 2004). This piece aims to discuss precisely what could not be said, which makes the interviews’ content superfluous. Silent acts can be as important as those in plain sight, and it is indeed through everyday practices that the conditions for resistance develop. Unfortunately, social sciences are not well equipped to uncover the silent and anonymous forms of class struggle which typify the peasantry and their everyday resistances (Scott, 1986). Making room for such absences in discourse transforms ethnographic work into a “inter-communicative science of listening” to self-imposed silences (Fernandez in Achino-Loeb, 2006, p.163).

Exposing oneself to the field as a worker instead of approaching it as a researcher does not imply one gets the same pressure as others. But it does place the researcher in a privileged position to identify the absences in discourse, and thus to spell out the workings of exceptionality in Swiss vineyards. Then again, the subjective stance of the researcher influences data-gathering processes, making it misleading to erase the positionality of the author in the presentation of the design and interpretation of the research (Holmes, 2013). Distance must be preserved if there is to be a *science* and even if there is to be anything to *describe*; and it must be eliminated as far as possible if what is observed is not simply to be observed and eventually explained, but understood (Bouveresse & Wittgenstein, 1982, p.106). What is at stake is to understand how exceptionality affects the workers' behaviour and my own; how certain attitudes are encouraged or punished; how this pressure is felt and reproduced (or not). The goal is not to speak for them but *with* them.

I now proceed to contextualize Swiss wine production and to share some details about the work conditions within this sector. The latter have been obtained by taking part in seasonal work between 2020 and 2022, mostly in Canton Wallis.

4. Contextualizing Swiss Viticulture

Notwithstanding a central geographical location within Europe, Switzerland remained poor until the mid-nineteenth century, only to emerge since then as a semi-periphery. Canton Wallis is itself a peripheral region within Switzerland and has only become industrialized in the last decades. Economic activity initially revolved around cattle exports and cheese production in the surrounding mountain slopes (Casparis, 1982). More recently, industrial activity progressively developed at the bottom of the Rhine Valley, with the chemical and metallurgic industries taking the lead. Within Switzerland, Canton Wallis is where wine making is more entrenched in local customs. The tradition of growing one's family vineyard subsists until today, although modern and industrial techniques have come to take over. Overall, viticulture has become the fourth industry of the region, although the extension of vineyards has been declining over the last three decades (Reynard et al., 2007).

The Swiss wine-growing tradition is certainly not as famous as its French counterpart but remains deeply entrenched in local customs. Swiss winemakers have developed their own know-how throughout centuries since the Roman Empire brought vineyards to the region. The steep slopes created during the formation of the Alps have led local winemakers to develop specialized techniques, of which dry-stone wall-building. An example of this tradition are the thousand-year-old walls supporting more than 10,000 terraces in Lavaux, nowadays considered UNESCO's world heritage. Vines are plants requiring very different production techniques depending on the setting in which they are grown (geological, weather-related, etc.). Thus, each wine-producing region has specific features making it, up to some point, unique. James Baldwin (2012) provided a vivid description of the region's natural landscape: 'The landscape is absolutely forbidding, mountains towering on all four sides, ice and snow as far as the eye can reach.' This bucolic description stands in stark contrast with the harsh agricultural work undertaken in the vineyards.

Swiss wine production distributes itself unevenly across the country. Canton Wallis, on which this piece focuses, takes the lead with 33% of total production. The neighbouring Canton Vaud stands second with 25% and shares some features of Wallis' terroir. Genève's Canton accounts for an additional 10% of total production. In geographical terms, while Canton Vaud surrounds Lake Geneva, between Genève and Lausanne, Wallis stands further south, in the middle of the Alps. Another region with a significant wine-growing tradition – although a limited production – is the region of the Three Lakes, between Neuchâtel and Biel. Here, the region is under the influence of the Jura mountains. Linguistic borders are blurry, but the aforementioned French-speaking cantons roughly account for 73% of total wine production. Italian and German-speaking cantons represent 7 and 19% respectively. Threatened by imports, the Swiss wine industry is compelled to strive for viability, and only represents 35% of the country's wine consumption. Swiss wines are drunk almost exclusively in Switzerland, showing the population's willingness to support the local industry, notwithstanding higher prices.¹

Agriculture is a sector characterized by difficult working conditions, low prestige and meagre pay, where work is mainly seasonal. On-demand foreign workers must be available on-call, can easily be dismissed, work under adverse conditions, and have little possibility of opposing this dreadful framework. This is not only true in Switzerland. The agricultural sector suffers intense market pressures, pushing for productivity and industrialization. Weather conditions set the pace, and workers need to keep up. Vines can grow 20 centimetres a day when optimal conditions are met. If they are not taken care of, they brake and the grapes they carry are lost. The harvest also necessarily implies a high workload concentrated in very little time, first in the vineyards, and immediately afterwards in cellars. During those periods, it is unrealistic to expect work to take place orderly. Every day comes with unexpected challenges. The mounting pressure is balanced by the fact that everyone knows that it will soon come to an end. Most workers – and in any case, virtually all seasonal workers – tend to prefer working long hours. What makes Switzerland different in this regard are very loose regulations allowing companies to dispose of their employees until exhaustion. There is very little room for complaints in Swiss vineyards.

Contracts last for three months with a three-month trial period. The employer can terminate them depending on weather conditions. Forty-five hours long of workweeks are taken to be the average, and no overtime is recognised. Although it is forbidden to work on public holidays, the cantonal authorities grant special permits for working without machines. Almost all workers in Swiss vineyards are foreigners. One-fourth of the workforce employed in the busiest periods resides permanently in Switzerland, although they have compulsory unpaid holidays for three or four months per year. The stability and experience of residents are challenged by seasonal workers. These are less costly for the employer and do not struggle with accumulated fatigue. As in most countries, the agricultural sector provides extremely low wages. But in Switzerland, the wine production sector is known for providing the worse remuneration – starting at 10 € net an hour. The average gross wage of Lake

¹ Figures produced by Swiss Wine Promotion (SWP), the official promotion body for Swiss wines. SWP is mandated by the Interprofession de la Vigne et du Vin Suisse (IVVS). The data is available online at swisswine.ch.

Geneva region (including Geneva, Vaud and Wallis) stood around 7000 € in 2020.² Working 60 hours a week in vineyards makes a total of around 250 hours a month, representing a gross wage of 3500 €. That is to say, barely half of the average gross wage for 50% additional working hours.

The tension between displaced and permanent seasonal workers is mitigated by a recruitment system based on word-of-mouth. Those who have been with the company for a long time refer family or friends, thus strengthening their position. This also implies the formation of clans along ethnic lines. In the company at stake, the bosses are Slovak, most workers are Polish, the garage managers are Portuguese, and the machine drivers are Macedonian. As teams and nationalities mix on a day-to-day basis, each family or clan controls the others and competes for the boss' recognition. The company in which fieldwork was undertaken is relatively big, managing a total of 100 hectares of land. The current owner inherited the family domain in the early 2000s. Besides owning over 40 hectares and vinification infrastructures, he also owns a restaurant, a small bar, a luxury hotel and several residential and industrial properties that he rents to his employees. Only part of the permanent workers rent on the regular market, while almost all seasonal workers stay with the company. Dwelling spaces are often precarious and expensive. Rent represents between 10 and 20% of net income. On arrival, the keys are exchanged against a deposit and a signature of compliance with a list of obligations – but no tenant rights. The document is not signed by the company and no copy is provided. The owner is known to have accused workers of damages to keep their bail.

The company's headquarters is located between Sion and Visp, right on the linguistic border between French and German-speaking regions. The presence of Walliser Deutsch – the Swiss German dialect spoken in Canton Wallis – is remarkable, as it strongly deviates from official languages and other Swiss German dialects. Seasonal workers further increase linguistic complexity. At the peak of the season, the company hires over 40 people from different language communities. Colleagues from Slavic countries tend to learn German, while those from Latin countries prefer French. The young also mobilize English to communicate. Switching between languages and groups was a key resource, as I had no friends on which to rely. At first, having a Portuguese father allowed the Portuguese to take me in as one of them. Later, my interest in Slavic languages would convince the Macedonians and Polish to favour the fact that I have a French mother. As for myself, I claimed to come from Barcelona and benefited from the city's aura among the young. This flexible identity allowed me to distance myself from ethnic rivalry.

In the following, I share further details about myself and the context to allow the reader to interpret the distance separating the researcher from the field. A relevant example of this approach is a brief text written by James Baldwin (2012) after a short stay in Leukerbad, in which he critically describes a mountain village located less than 30 kilometres away from where the data for the current piece was collected. Written in 1955, Baldwin shares the amazement of the town's residents as they are confronted with his Blackness. Their staggering reactions led the author to elaborate a broader critique of

2 Figures from the Federal Statistical Office, available at: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/work-income/wages-income-employment-labour-costs/wage-levels-major-regions.html>

structural racism in the US, in what could be categorized as an undisciplined self-ethnography. The description of the residents' traditional mindset is complemented by the corresponding examination of the author's belonging to modernity. Wide-reaching political reflections are then developed departing from a partial, subjective, explicitly biased testimony. In other words, the simultaneous presentation of the ethnographer and the 'Other' allows the reader to understand not only our methods but also our positionality (Holmes, 2013).

5. Trespassing Unspoken Pandemic Borders

As the pandemic came about and draconian measures were applied overnight, I was left without work and faced rent default. Two days after being told about a work opportunity in Switzerland, I hastily packed my stuff and walked to the train station. An empty train took me to Portbou, the last village before the Spanish-French border. After being told that no train would take me across, I started walking uphill towards the border. It was a sunny spring day; flowers were blooming and the sight of the sea was appeasing. I felt relieved to be outdoors after a month and a half in lockdown. A long-abandoned border control infrastructure located on top of the hill had been re-opened. A smiling officer, visibly unconcerned with contagion, took my French ID card. French nationals were allowed to return to their country, and I thus kept on walking, this time downhill, toward Cervera de la Marenda. A special bus line had been set up to replace trains. A first bus took me to Banyuls, a few kilometres up north. A second bus headed to Perpinyà, I walked in with my mask on and took a sit.

Not all passengers were so lucky. First, the bus driver started messing with two young lads who wanted to hop on the bus. An old man took their defence, causing an anger outburst. Things got worse at the next stop, where an elderly man was waiting. Although holding the piece of paper required to leave one's household, the driver stood up and started shouting at him that he had seen him already and he was not allowed to leave his home. Some passengers intervened, leading to further screaming and threatening. The one-hour-long itinerary to Perpinyà was riddled with such incidents. The driver terrorized the passengers, both with his purposes and his driving. He made it clear that he was an essential worker: 'you are the ones who need me, not the other way around.' This made him the sovereign on board. Accordingly, 'to be admitted or not in his bus was his most sacred right,' and 'not even the president or the prime minister or the police' could force his hand. When facing objections, he threatened to abandon the planned itinerary to hand over those who opposed him to the police. He summed up that 'on this bus, I am the prison guard, and you do what you are told.'

The bus driver's authoritarian stance was in line with the ethos of executive powers across Latin countries. Spain and Italy were particularly hit by Covid-19 and faced extreme lock-down measures coupled with moralizing discourses about individual responsibility (Costabile, 2022). Anxiety and fear were the dominant affects of sanitary exceptionality, widely enforced through emergency measures. By late April, Swiss authorities remained relatively unconcerned with the epidemic. Switzerland considered it was not yet experiencing a sanitary crisis, and I felt a tremendous relief to be unaffected by the global shutdown.

Overall, Switzerland remained relaxed about the virus throughout the summer of 2020. Lockdowns would end up taking place in winter, which means the population had more time to adapt before mobility restrictions were fully deployed. Coming from Barcelona and after travelling through France, I welcomed this unconcerned mood and being outdoors.

Interestingly, there was no recognition whatsoever of the pandemic in the vineyards. Even if I found it convenient, the denial of the sanitary crisis in Swiss vineyards is in itself a discrete display of exceptionality. There was no praise and applause for the work we were doing, and our employers denied the gravity of the epidemic. As there was no crisis, there was no need to change anything.

The pandemic was only acknowledged as a source of disruption to production. Optimal conditions for vines' development came early, and the sunny summer of 2020 was coupled with regular rain episodes. With vines growing at high speed, companies had no interest to indulge workers' needs and claims. In fact, if sanitary measures altered work conditions, they made them worse. Newcomers such as myself needed to be trained, adding more stress upon companies dealing with enormous workloads. And it didn't get any better. Bosses were unable to sell and pushed for an early end of the work season.

Working 60 hours a week prevented us from taking part in normal social life. Although physically located in Switzerland, I remained detached from society, subsumed as we were to the sub-world revolving around the vineyards. In Swiss vineyards, one endures ten hours of work 6 days a week at an altitude of 600 metres, on the southern slopes of the Rhine Valley. Including transport and lunchtime, one spends 12 hours a day away from home, exposed to the constant climatic changes caused by the 4000-metre-high summits surrounding the valley. The work conditions imposed on agricultural workers illustrate well the discardable nature of so-called essential workers. Swiss landowners have the law on their side and can apply many sorts of sanctions to discipline workers. Brakes can be shortened or eliminated; contracts are shortened without previous warning; rent prices can be augmented, dwellers can be accused of causing damage and lose their bail. Permanent workers are left without work several months a year and struggle to sum up enough months to access unemployment benefits. Precarious contractual conditions are such that work can be suspended whenever necessary. Swiss seasonal workers are exposed to a permanent state of exception, in which their rights can at any time be revoked or delayed.

An example of these disciplinary mechanisms was enacted during my first season. As the boss was not pleased with my behaviour, I was delivered a new contract with the guarantee that no changes were contemplated. I just needed to sign again for administrative reasons. Having translated the German text, I found out that the duration of the contract had been shortened. I got back to my team leader and asked why he concealed this fact. I added that there was no need to lie, as the contract allows them to throw me out anytime. He replied that if it doesn't make any difference, then there is no reason for me to be unhappy about what just took place. The same happened with 'voluntary work' on holidays. No one is obliged to work, but those who chose to remain at home would soon be sent back to their countries. Disciplinary mechanisms remained rudimentary. Employees are not required to embrace the values of the company, like with neo-liberal management strategies. On the contrary, workers displaying an excessively joyful attitude would be disciplined. Sadness remained the dominant affect, and team leaders rewarded resignation over

enthusiasm. Only those showing reverence and submission were included as passive listeners of the cheerful monologues of the team leaders and their close subordinates. But being close to the team-leaders implied being designated as a snitch by the remaining workers. With good reason: teams are often dispatched far away from each other, turning faithful workers into information sources.

Another telling example of how rules can arbitrarily be suspended is the exposure to phytosanitary treatments. Swiss law obliges pesticide companies to hire someone to come and warn the workers that an area will be sprayed by a helicopter. On other occasions, pesticide workers suggested removing the company vehicles, as the chemicals cause damage to cars' paint. It was then up to the team leader to decide whether workers keep working or to move to another parcel. This time, the team leader agreed to move to the adjacent parcel. But the helicopter was delayed, and by the time it finally arrived, we had finished the nearby parcel and had returned to the one where spraying was taking place. While the sand spun around us, someone showed the middle finger to the pilot. The employee who had warned us came by, exasperated, arguing that pilots need to stay focused and that, anyway, the copper contained in the pesticides is a natural element. As it is a biological product, it poses no harm to human health, and thus there was no reason to complain about being covered up with white-greenish chemical dust. Among workers, only women showed concern for exposure, alleging fertility risks. Men's sexist behaviour made them deaf to these risks. Gender roles simultaneously prohibit women from operating machines and relegate the spraying to men.

This sort of situation caught me by surprise for quite some time, just as other sorts of abuses that were committed around me. At some point though, it started becoming the new normal and being handled as such. Once it became clear to me that the exception was the rule, I started looking differently at my colleagues' behaviour. Little by little, I began to be trusted with the personal stories behind those hard-working profiles, as well as the hardships they endure. Some made informal agreements with the boss to obtain advantageous positions while others were obliged to take bad deals to compensate for their shortcomings. Some were allowed to initiate nationality requests against extra, unpaid, responsibilities; others became snitches in exchange for better dwelling spaces. It took time for my colleagues to recognize that my efforts to learn the trade were not only intended to secure my position in the company but were in fact grounded in a deep respect for their work and a genuine wish to learn how to produce good grapes.

6. I Heard It Through the Grapevine

Pandemic discourses on essential workers provided the underclass with a recognition that it usually lacks. For a short moment, we were allowed to believe that the political was being reconfigured to restore some sense of appreciation of use value, care work and solidarity. Significantly for the current piece, the agricultural sector was rightly identified as crucial for our survival. The shortage of workers turned the otherwise normal exploitation of migrants into a matter of political and ethical debate. But the tale of courage and heroism about essential workers ended up being nothing more than a discursive strategy to keep the rest of the population at home. No significant improvements to the

work conditions of migrant workers in the agricultural sector were made. They were celebrated as heroes for just as long as it was needed to return to the previous exploitative framework in which essential workers are simply the underclass. Even when considering essential workers' temporary visibility as a positive outcome, exceptional measures exposing them to sanitary risks remain a very negative reconfiguration of the political.

The bus driver is a good example of how exceptionality summoned each citizen to become a police officer. Everyone was encouraged to collaborate to ensure that rules are respected and to take part in the moral condemnation of irresponsible subjects. Simultaneously, the police officers at the Spanish-French border were seemingly enjoying a special sort of holiday. No traffic jams, no street patrolling, no court cases to attend. There were certainly a lot of fines being handed out to sanction the disrespect of sanitary measures, but otherwise, the police were discharged from most of their work, as the population took on the function of controlling each other. The deployment of large-scale interventions on most of the population caused a dominant affect of anxiety, fear and for some, of terror. The extended reach of the police state implied simultaneously a feeling of *toute-puissance* in those used to carry the uniform and an urge to regain control by those who otherwise lack the authority to enforce sanctions. Two parallel worlds inhabited the discourse of sanitary exceptionality: that of responsible subjects and that of essential workers.

The early measures against the pandemic undoubtedly had an exceptional character. But it is troublesome to use the framework of exceptionality when observing stable and normalized frameworks regulating so-called essential work. Where should one draw the line between 'normal' and 'exceptional' exploitation? How does one gauge the feeling of terror among workers? How much must workers' bodies and minds suffer so that one can talk of exceptionality? I find these questions difficult to answer, especially when considering the magnitude of nazi horror inspiring the theory on exceptionality. Still, the spaces of lawlessness described by Agamben became patent on a few occasions during fieldwork. The episodes of the helicopter and the contract illustrate the helplessness of workers against unjust decisions. If rules get in the way of the owners' interest, they are suspended. Likewise, opposing whatever aspect of the production process is immediately sanctioned, and in fact, discouraged by the threat of severe punishments. Punishments were suspended only when it became clear that a worker was not rebelling but instead merely suffering a generalized breakdown.

Spivak's (2023) reflections on whether we are dealing with an extreme case scenario of normality or an exception brings us back to the tension between the concepts of exceptionality and emergency, as articulated by Agamben (1999, 2004) and Neocleous (2008). Agamben's (1999, 2004) theory works well to pinpoint the characteristic 'normalized exceptionality' experienced by essential workers; while Neocleous' pragmatism allows us to avoid seeing the sanitary exceptionality employed during the pandemic as a unique phenomenon. There is nothing exceptional about this emergence of new rules, as Neocleous (2008) points out, except for the way they are – brutally – enacted. This is also true for everyday negotiations in Swiss vineyards. In practice, deals are renegotiated whenever it becomes necessary. New informal situations bring about the need to formalize new agreements. These situations can be tied to relational conflict, weather conditions, production needs and so

forth. Still, the question remains: where should one locate the reference point guiding normative considerations?

The research at hand suggests that words lack wherever exceptionality becomes the norm. The discursive strategy employed by actors trying to describe it often relays on journalistic-like descriptions of the horror they have been through. Might it be Eichmann's remarks inspiring Arendt's reflections on the banality of evil, or Primo Levi stories on death camps inspiring Agamben's reflections on the limits of testimonies, the most stubborn fact concerning exceptionality is the unspeakable nature of sheer violence. The ethnographic material shared in this article has provided some examples of the discursive contradictions incurred by actors in Swiss vineyards. What remains hard to verbalize without extensive descriptions is the pain endured by migrant manual workers in agriculture. These pains remind us of what exceptionality does to the bodies they are subjected to. As Holmes (2013) points out, these are broken bodies, destroyed by unbearable workloads and a myriad of work accidents coupled with daily moral abuses. As violence is measured by another scale, the parole of those affected by exceptionality should be heard accordingly. Here, the silence of the work colleagues who refused to talk about their work might well speak louder than the superficial experiences I could share in this piece.

Nonetheless, a pragmatical interpretation of my position within the field can in fact be used to share a final reflection on exceptionality. Coming from countries where sanitary exceptionality was all-encompassing, I welcomed Swiss exceptionality, notwithstanding the dreadful amount of physical pain it implied. This shows that exceptionality is unevenly distributed across space and populations, and it might well be that the interconnection between different sorts and layers of exceptionality is a crucial aspect of its workings as a technique of government. This uneven distribution implies a choice for those who are not condemned to be a part of targeted populations. If it matters to go beyond the general outlook of a growing encroachment of exceptionality in our societies, it is precisely because it will imply a selective targeting of certain spaces and populations, directly controlling some, while disciplining the remaining. The exceptional measures being applied to others should not be seen as directed to them only, but also to us, in a cruel reminder of what will happen if we allow the border separating both of us to vanish.

Notes

1. See the author's Crisis Discourse blog post for a discussion on the concept of crisis applied to the Covid-19 pandemic (Debelle dos Santos, 2022).

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors for their constructive feedback and for organizing the authors' workshop. Both provided me with critical insights which proved useful. This article also benefited from Allegra Laboratory's editorial work. Following the submission of a short piece, Agathe Mora provided me with an instructive non-anonymous review from Alexandre Grandjean. Métissa André made substantive and stylistic editing to the final version of the manuscript, for which I am very grateful.

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