

**To the wanderers — on the current
uprooting of the dispossessed**

Contents

Publisher's note	3
The creation of the undocumented, the creation of the enemy	5
The welcome of a <i>Lager</i>	7
A new uprooting	8
Civil war	9
Two possible ways out	10
A machine that can be broken	11

Publisher's note

To the Wanderers is a text put together by some Italian comrades and the details about detention centers and immigration laws refer to the situation in Italy, but the conditions under which undocumented aliens are forced to live and the universal uprooting of which these conditions and this forced wandering are a symptom are universal. I think this text provides an important analysis for all of us who are seeking to take back the capacity to determine our lives.

We asked for labor powers, men came.

Max Frisch

No one emigrates for pleasure — this is a very simple truth that many want too hide. If someone willingly leaves their land and their loved ones, we wouldn't describe them as migrants, but simply travelers or tourists. Migration is a forced displacement, a wandering in search of better living conditions.

At the moment there are a 150 million foreign immigrants around the world, due to wars, ecological disasters, famine, or simply the functioning of industrial production (the destruction of countryside and forests, mass lay offs, and so on). All these aspects form a mosaic of oppression and misery in which the effects of exploitation themselves become more or less direct causes of suffering and uprooting, in a never ending spiral that makes every distinction between “displaced”, “migrants”, “asylum seekers”, “refugees”, “survivors” a hypocritical distinction. Just think about how social these so called *ecological emergencies* (lack of water, growing desertification, sterility of fields) are: the explosion of an oil refinery, together with the destruction of all local autonomy over which it was built, can sometimes change the fate of an entire population.

Contrary to what racist propaganda would have us believe, only 17 percent of the world's immigration is to the rich North. Indeed, it involves all continents (in particular, Asia and Africa); that means that for every poor country there is an even poorer one from which immigrants are running away. The *total mobilization* imposed by the economy and the States is a planetary phenomenon, an undeclared civil war that crosses every national border: millions of exploited people roam through the hell of the commercial paradise, shoved from border to border, forced into refugees camps surrounded by the police and the army, managed by the so called charity organizations — accomplices in tragedies the causes of which they don't denounce simply so that they can exploit the consequences — piled up in “waiting zones” in airports or in stadiums (macabre Roman circuses for those who don't even have bread), locked up in *Lagers*¹ called “detention centers”, and ultimately wrapped up and expelled in the most total indifference. For many reasons we can say that the face of these undesirables is the face of our present — and that's also why we're afraid of them. We're scared of immigrants because in their misery we can see the reflection of our own, because in their wanderings we recognize our daily condition: that of individuals that feel more and more like strangers both in this world and to themselves.

¹ *Lager* was the German word for concentration camps for those who had committed no specific crimes, but were considered undesirable and a threat to the state by the Nazi authorities, i.e., Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and radicals.

Uprooting is the most widespread condition in our present society — we might call it its center — and not a menace coming from a terrifying and mysterious *elsewhere*. Only by looking deeply into our daily lives can we understand what gets all of us involved in the conditions of immigrants. First though we have to define a fundamental concept: the one of the undocumented.

The creation of the undocumented, the creation of the enemy

[...] what are you? [...]

You are not of this castle, you are not of this village, you are nothing.

But you are something too, unfortunately, you are a foreigner, someone that is always inopportune and in the way, one that brings a lot of troubles, [...] whose intentions no one knows.

F. Kafka

An undocumented alien is simply someone who doesn't have regular papers. And certainly not for the pure pleasure of risk or illegality, but rather because, in the majority of cases, to possess such papers he or her must be able to give those same guarantees the possession of which would have made them not aliens, but simply tourists or a foreign students. If the same standards were to be enforced on everybody, millions would have been thrown overboard. Which Italian who is unemployed, for instance, could give the guarantee of a legal wage? What might all the precarious people who were born here do who work for temporary job agencies, the contracts of which are not worth a visa for the immigrants? And besides, how many Italians are there who live in a 60-square-meter flat with no more than two other people? Let's read all these decrees (both from the left and the right) about immigration, and then it will be clear that illegalization is a very precise project of the State. Why?

An illegal immigrant is more vulnerable to being blackmailed, brought to accept even more hateful conditions of work and existence (precariousness, endless wandering, makeshift accommodations, and so on) under the threat of being expelled. And this threat is of value even for those who have visas, but know quite well how easy it is to lose them when one is not agreeable to the bosses and police agents. With the specter of the police, bosses obtain tame wageworkers, or rather true and proper forced labor.

Even the most reactionary and xenophobic right wing parties are perfectly aware that hermetically closed borders are not only technically impossible, but

also not even profitable. According to the United Nations, in order to keep the present “balance between active and inactive population”, from present to 2025, Italy would have to “welcome” inside its borders a quantity of immigrants five times the present yearly fixed amount. *Confindustria*, in fact, continuously suggests doubling the quantity fixed so far.

The granting or rejection of year-long or season-long permits contribute in creating a precise social hierarchy among the poor. The same distinction between immediate forced repatriation and expulsion (or the obligation, for an irregular immigrant, to show up at the borders to be sent back home) allows the choice — based on ethnic standards, economic-political agreement with the governments of the countries where the immigrant is coming from and the needs of the work market — of who to make a illegal or who to expel right away. In fact, the authorities are perfectly aware that no one will ever spontaneously show up at the border to be expelled; surely not people who have spent all that they owned — sometimes even more — to pay for their trip here. Businessmen define the features of the goods that they buy (*immigrants are goods*, like everyone after all), the State records data, the police carry out the orders.

The warnings of politicians and mass media, the anti-immigration proclamations create imaginary enemies, to drive the exploited who were born here to unload the growing social tension on an easy scapegoat and reassure themselves, letting them admire the spectacle of poor people even more precarious and more subject to extortion than they are, and to make them finally feel that they are part of a phantom called Nation. Making “irregularity” — that same irregularity that they create — a synonym for crime and dangerousness, States justify an increasingly insidious police control and criminalization of class conflicts. It is in this context, for example, that the manipulation of consensus after 11 September, synthesized in the despicable slogan “illegal alien=terrorists” — a slogan which, if read both ways, unites racist paranoia to the demand of repression towards the internal enemy (the rebel, the subversive) — finds its place.

They thunder, from the right as well as from the left, against the racket that organizes the trips for undocumented aliens (described by the mass media as an invasion, as a scourge, as the advance of an army), when their laws promote it. They thunder against “organized crime” that exploits so many immigrants (a fact that’s true but still partial), when they are supplying it with desperate raw materials that are ready for anything. In their historical symbiosis, State and mafia stand united by the same liberal principle: business is business.

Racism, a tool of economic and political necessity, finds room to spread out in a context of generalized massification and isolation, when insecurity creates fears that can be opportunely manipulated. It’s of very little use to morally or culturally condemn racism, since it is not an opinion or an “argument”, but a psychological

misery, an “emotional plague”. It is necessary to seek the reason for its spread and then, at the same time, the power to fight it in the present social conditions.

The welcome of a *Lager*

To call the detention camps for immigrants waiting for expulsion — centers introduced in Italy in 1998 by the left wing government by mean of the Turco-Neapolitan law — *Lagers* is not rhetorical bombast, as most of the people using this formula ultimately think. It is a precise definition. Nazi *Lagers* were concentration camps where people that the police considered dangerous for State security were locked up, even in absence of indictable criminal behavior. This precautionary measure — defined as “protective detention” — consisted in taking all civil and political rights away from some citizens. Whether they were refugees, Jews, gypsies, homosexuals or subversives, it was up to the police, after months or years, to decide what to do. So *Lagers* were not jails in which to pay for some crime, nor an extension of criminal law. They were camps where the Rule established its *exception*; in short, a legal suspension of legality. Therefore a *Lager* is not determined by the number of internees nor the number of murders (between 1935 and 1937, before the start of Jewish deportations, there were 7500 internees in Germany), but rather by its political and juridical nature.

Immigrants nowadays end up in the Centers regardless of possible crimes, without any legal process whatsoever: their internment, ordered by the police superintendent, is a simple police measure. Just like it happened in 1940 under the Vichy government, when prefects could lock up all those individuals considered a “danger for national defense and public security” or (mind this) “surplus foreigners with respect to national economy”. We can refer to the administrative detention in French Algeria, to the South Africa of apartheid or to the present ghettos for Palestinians created by the State of Israel.

It is no coincidence if, in regard to the infamous conditions of the detention centers, the good democrats don’t appeal to the respect for any law at all, but to the respect for human rights — the last mask in front of women and men to whom nothing is left but belonging to the human species. It’s not possible to integrate them as citizens, so the pretense is made of integrating them as Human Beings. Everywhere, the abstract equality of principles hides real inequalities.

A new uprooting

Immigrants that landed on Battery Park for the first time soon realized that what they had been told about the marvelous America wasn't true at all: maybe land belonged to everybody, but the first to come had amply served themselves already, and there was nothing left to the rest other than to crowd together in groups of ten in the windowless hovels of the Lower East Side and work fifteen hours a day. Turkeys didn't fall roasted directly into the dishes and the streets of New York weren't paved in gold. Rather, most of the time, they weren't paved at all. And then they realized that it was precisely to get them to pave these streets that they were allowed to come. And to dig tunnels and canals, to build streets, bridges, big embankments, railroads, to clear forests, to exploit mines and caves, to make cars and cigars, rifles and clothes, shoes, chewing gum, corned-beef and soap, and to build skyscrapers higher than the ones that they discovered when first arrived.

Georges Perec

If we go back a few steps, it will become clear that *uprooting* is a crucial moment in the development of state and capitalistic domination. At its dawn, industrial production drew the exploited away from the countryside and villages to concentrate them in the city. The ancient *know-how* of peasants and artisans had thus been replaced with the forced and repetitive activity of the factory — an activity impossible to control, in its means and its purposes, by the new proletarians. Therefore, the first children of industrialization simultaneously lost their ancient *spaces* of life and their ancient knowledge, which had allowed them to autonomously provide for the greater part of their means of subsistence for themselves. On the other hand, by imposing similar life conditions (same places, same problems, same knowledge) upon millions of men and women, capitalism unified their struggles, made them find new brothers and sisters in the fight against the same unbearable life. The 20th century marked the apex of this productive and state concentration, the symbols of which had been the factory-district and the *Lager*, and at the same time the apex of the most radical social struggles for its destruction. In the last twenty years due to technological innovations, capital has replaced the old factory with new productive centers that get smaller and smaller and more thoroughly scattered across the territory, also breaking up the social fabric inside which those struggles had grown and creating in this way a new *uprooting*.

There's more. Technological reorganization has made trade faster and easier, opening the whole world to the most ferocious competition, overturning the economies and ways of life of entire countries. So in Africa, in Asia, in South Amer-

ica, the closure of many factories with mass lay offs, in a social context destroyed by colonization, by the deportation of inhabitants from their villages to the shantytowns, from their fields to the assembly lines, produced a crowd of poor people who became useless to their masters, the *unwanted children of capitalism*. Add to this the fall of self-styled communist countries and the debt racket organized by the International Monetary Fund and by the World Bank and we will get quite a faithful cartography of migrations and of ethnic and religious wars.

What we now call “flexibility” and “precariousness” is the consequence of all this: a further progress in the submission to the machines, a greater competition, a worsening of material conditions (labor contracts, health, etcetera). We’ve seen the reason why: capitalism has dismantled the “community” that it had created. It would be partial, however, to conceive of precariousness only in an economic sense, as the absence of a steady job and of the old pride in the profession. It is isolation within massification, i.e., a fanatic conformism *without common spaces*. In the distressing void of meaning and prospects, the unfulfilled need of community reappears in mystified form, giving birth to new nationalistic, ethnic or religious oppositions, the tragic re-proposition of collective identities just where all true mutuality among the individuals has faded away. And it’s precisely in this void where the fundamentalist argument finds its place, the false promise of a redeemed community.

Civil war

All this leads to a scenario that is more and more one of an ongoing civil war, with no distinction between “time of peace” and “time of war”. Conflicts are no longer declared – as the military interventions in the Balkans have shown – , but simply administered to guarantee the maintenance of the World Order. This endless conflict permeates the entire society and individuals themselves. Common spaces for dialogue and struggle are replaced by the adherence to the same commercial trademarks. The poor go to war against each other over a fashionable sweater or hat. Individuals feel more and more irrelevant, ready then to sacrifice themselves to the first nationalist blunderbuss or for some ragged flag. Abused everyday by the State, here they come to zealously defend some Padania (desolated and polluted, with factories and mall everywhere – would this be the “land of the forefathers”?). Tied to the mirage of ownership that is left to them, they are scared to expose themselves for what they really are: interchangeable gears of the Megamachine, in need of psychotropic drugs to get to the end of the day, increasingly envious towards everyone who even just looks happier than them. To an ever colder, more abstract and more calculating rationality, correspond ever more brutal and unspoken com-

pulsions. So, what better place to let out one's resentment than on someone with a different skin color or religion? Like a man from Mozambique said, "people have taken war inside of themselves". A few external conditions are enough for all this to explode just like in Bosnia. And these conditions are being carefully prepared. Ethnic particularism is opposed to the capitalist Universalism in a tragic game of mirrors. Under institutional order, with increasingly anonymous and controlled places, the implosion of human relationships lies hidden. It all looks like the same quicksand from which the *totalitarian man* arose in the 30's.

Two possible ways out

Why have we talked so much about immigration and racism up to this point, since at the moment we are not *directly* touched by problems of wandering and expulsion? The same capitalism increasingly brings our lives together under the standard of precariousness and the impossibility of determining our present and our future: that's why we feel like brothers, in action, with all the exploited that land on the shores of this country.

In the face of a feeling of despoliation that millions of individuals feel towards a commercial imperialism that forces everybody to dream the same lifeless dream, there can be no appeal to dialogue or to a democratic integration. Whatever the legalistic antiracists might say, it's too late for hypocritical civic education classes. When everywhere — from the shantytowns of Caracas to the suburbia of Paris, from the Palestinian territories to centers and stadium where aliens are locked — the *camps* in which misery is confined are growing; when the *state of exception* — i.e., the judicial suspension of every right — becomes the rule; when millions of human beings are literally left rotting in the reserves of the capitalist paradise; when entire neighborhoods get militarized and armored (Genoa, does it tell you anything?), it is a despicable joke to talk about integration. From these conditions of desperation and fear, from this planetary civil war, there are only two ways out: fratricidal clash (religious and ethnic in all its variations), or the social storm of class war.

Racism is the tomb of every exploited individual's fight against the exploiters; it's the last trick — the dirtiest — played by those who would like to see us killing one another. It can only evaporate in the moments of common revolt, when we recognize our real enemies — the exploiters and their henchmen — and we *recognize ourselves* as exploited individuals who no longer want to be so. The social struggle that took place in Italy during the 60's and 70's — when the young immigrant workers from the South met those from the North on the field of sabotage, of the wildcat strike and of absolute disloyalty to the bosses — demonstrated this.

The disappearance of the revolutionary struggles after the 70's (from Nicaragua to Italy, from Portugal to Germany, from Poland to Iran) has shattered the basis of a concrete solidarity among the dispossessed of the World. This solidarity will only be conquered again in revolt, and not in the powerless words of the new Third-worldists and the democratic antiracists.

So, either religious and ethnic slaughter, or class war. And only at the bottom of the latter can we catch a glimpse of a world free from State and money in which one will not need permission to live or to travel.

A machine that can be broken

In the 80's there was a slogan that said: "Today, we should not be scared so much by the noise of the boots, as by the silence of the slipper". Now they're both coming back. With a language of holy war (the police as the "army of the good" that protect the citizens from the "army of the evil", as the Prime Minister recently said), day after day the State is organizing raids at the expense of the immigrants. Their homes are devastated, undocumented aliens are rounded up in the streets, locked up in *Lagers* and expelled with the most utter indifference. In many cities new detention camps are already under construction. The Bossi-Fini law, worthy continuation of the Turco-Neapolitan law, wants to limit the number of visas according to the exact length of the work contract, blacklist immigrants, change the lack of documents into a crime and strengthen the machinery of expulsion.

The democratic mechanism of citizenship and rights, however much expanded, will always presuppose the existence of excluded people. To criticize and try to prevent expulsions means to realize a critique in action of racism and nationalism; it means to seek a common space for revolt against the capitalistic uprooting that involves us all; it means to obstruct a repressive mechanism that is as hateful as it is important; it means to break the silence and indifference of the civilized who stand by watching; it means finally to confront the concept of law itself on the basis of the principle "we are all illegal aliens". In short, it means an attack against one of the pillars of the state and class society: the competition between the poor people, the substitution, nowadays more and more menacing, of ethnic or religious wars for social war.

In order to function, the mechanism of expulsion needs the help of many public and private structures (from the Red Cross that cooperates in managing the *Lagers* to the companies that supply services, from airline companies that deport aliens to the airports that put up waiting zones, through the self-styled charity associations that collaborate with the police). All those responsible are quite visible and easily attacked. From actions against detention camps (as happened a couple of years ago

in Belgium and a few months ago in Australia, when some demonstration ended up with the liberation of some undocumented immigrants) to those against “waiting zones” (like in France, at the expense of the Ibis hotels chain, that supplies the police with rooms) to the obstruction of the flights of infamy (in Frankfurt, the sabotage of fiber-optic cables some years ago put all the computers of an airport out of order for a couple of days) there’s thousands of activities that a movement against expulsion can carry out.

Today as never before it’s in the street that it’s possible to rebuild class solidarity. In the complicity against police raids; in the struggle against the military occupation of the neighborhoods; in the restless rejection of every division that the masters of society want to impose on us (Italians and foreigners, legal immigrants and illegal aliens); aware that every outrage suffered by any dispossessed on Earth is an outrage to all — only in this way will the exploited people of a thousand countries finally be able to recognize themselves.

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