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Introduction

Opening

“The landscape is absolutely forbidding, mountains towering on all four sides, ice and snow as far as the eye can reach. In this white wilderness, men and women and children move all day, carrying washing, wood, buckets of milk or water, sometimes skiing on Sunday afternoons. All week-long boys and young men are to be seen shovelling snow off the rooftops or dragging wood down from the forest in sleds. (...)

Everyone in the village knows my name, though they scarcely ever use it, knows that I come from America though, this, apparently, they will never really believe: black men come from Africa – and everyone knows that I am the friend of the son of a woman who was born here, and that I am staying in their chalet. But I remain as much a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived, and the children shout ‘Neger! Neger!’ as I walk along the streets. (...)

I say that the culture of these people controls me – but they can scarcely be held responsible for European culture. America comes out of Europe, but these people have never seen America, nor have most of them seen more of Europe than the hamlet at the foot of their mountain. Yet they move with an authority which I shall never have; and they regard me, quite rightly, not only as a stranger in the village but as a suspect latecomer, bearing no credentials, to everything they have – however unconsciously – inherited. (...)

These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it.”

James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village” (1955)

When James Baldwin wrote these words during a winter stay in the remote village of Leukerbad, Switzerland, he unknowingly penned one of the earliest and most incisive reflections on race and whiteness in the Swiss context (Purtschert, Fischer-Tiné 2015, 14). His jarring experience as a Black man in an isolated Alpine village – where he was perceived not merely as foreign, but as utterly outside the villagers’ worldview, hyper-visible as an object of curiosity, yet invisible as a human subject with history, voice, and political presence – reveals

the foundational structures of racial imagination in a place often deemed politically neutral, racially homogenous, or even outside global colonial histories.

Baldwin's reflection on the villagers' authority, their unshaken sense of belonging, and his own racialisation speaks to more than a moment of cultural shock. It unearths the implicit power of whiteness in a European context, long before terms like 'white innocence' were theorised (Wekker, 2016). The myth of Switzerland as a land detached from histories of race, empire, and colonial violence is powerfully challenged by Baldwin's account. His presence in Leukerbad – and the villagers' response – lay bare the constructed boundaries of whiteness and the global reach of racial hierarchies, even in seemingly 'innocent' or 'apolitical' landscapes.

More than forty years later, Baldwin's insights remain unsettlingly relevant as Switzerland continues to project an image of neutrality and exceptionalism while promoting a vision of multicultural harmony. In 1994, the country ratifies the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and revises its penal code to include Article 261bis, criminalising racial hatred and incitement to discrimination. These legal reforms are presented as signs of progress and international alignment. Yet not long after, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), responding to an official Swiss report, offers a telling observation: "It may be necessary to dismantle certain stereotypes about Swiss society – for example, the idea that it is inherently open and multicultural" (Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 113).

This statement points to a broader dissonance between Switzerland's self-image and its structural realities, highlighting the gap between official narratives of tolerance and the persistent challenges of naming and addressing racism. At the heart of this tension lies the absence of race as an explicit category and acknowledged reality in Swiss public discourse. While cultural diversity is often nominally celebrated, race remains largely unspoken – unspeakable, even. And indeed, there is some truth to this selective openness: research points to a general acceptance of certain forms of cultural difference – such as culinary traditions, foreign languages, or private religious practices. However, as the report on Switzerland as a multicultural society demonstrates, this openness has sharp limits. Cultural expressions perceived as threatening core societal values – like gender equality or secularism – frequently trigger discomfort or outright rejection (Grin et al. 2015; Gianni 2013). Strikingly, the boundary between what is considered 'tolerable' and 'intolerable' remains relatively consistent across language regions and political affiliations, suggesting a deeper consensus on the limits of acceptable difference.

This selective embrace of diversity points to a deeper issue: the tendency to depoliticise racial dynamics in Swiss public life. As the 2022 Report on Structural Racism highlights, discussions of racism are often confined to individual prejudice or extremist acts, while systemic and institutional dimensions remain largely overlooked (Mugglin et al. 2022). The findings of such reports raise a crucial question: How can racism be meaningfully addressed if naming it continues to provoke deflection, discomfort, or moral defensiveness?

This research takes this disconnect as a starting point to investigate how racism has been challenged within militant and institutional spaces in Switzerland, with a particular focus on trade unions. As historically significant actors in the organisation of labour and social justice struggles, trade unions provide a valuable lens through which to examine how race structures the labour market and shapes the broader conditions of migrants' insertion into the national space. After a first part dedicated to analysing the articulation of race in the Swiss context – both in discourses and policies – from the late 19th century to the post-Second World War era, the study then turns to investigate how, from the mid-1960s to the present, different moments of migrant labour struggles have intersected with shifting practices and discourses around race and racism. By tracing the responses of spaces traditionally aligned with left-wing, progressive, and internationalist politics, it seeks to understand how processes of racialisation have been acknowledged – or not – and to interrogate how anti-racism has been articulated, practiced, or resisted in contexts where solidarity is often framed primarily through class. Rather than assuming a fixed stance, the research aims to explore how racism is made visible, silenced, or contested within these evolving political and institutional terrains.

Understanding these responses requires attention to the specific history of racialisation in Switzerland. Throughout the 20th century, large waves of migrant workers from Southern Europe – most of whom were seasonal workers with specific permits – were subjected to precarious legal statuses and exclusionary social structures. At the time, their whiteness, was neither fixed nor guaranteed. These workers occupied an ambiguous position, often viewed as culturally inferior and racially suspect (Weill-Levy et al. 1999, 16-7). Over time, some of these groups – Italians, Spaniards – were gradually incorporated into the national fabric, their difference recast as a matter of integration rather than race, thus masking the continued operation of racial hierarchies beneath a language of cultural adaptation. This process was never neutral: as newer migrant populations arrived from non-European countries, the boundaries of Swiss whiteness shifted. Some were eventually included; others were to remain on the margins. The contours of racial belonging have evolved in ways that reflect broader global hierarchies,

while retaining uniquely Swiss characteristics – steeped in ideas of order, neutrality, and moral respectability.

This shifting landscape sets the stage for the central inquiry of this research: not only how racism has been addressed within leftist and institutional spaces in Switzerland, but also what conditions have made it possible – or difficult – for it to become a legitimate object of political struggle. In particular, this study explores how actors within spaces such as trade unions have developed their understandings of racial dynamics and the forms of action they have undertaken in response. What kinds of narratives, practices, or silences take shape in these contexts? And how do these dynamics influence the possibilities and limits of anti-racism as a collective and transformative project?

To address these questions, the study takes a pluridisciplinary approach, bringing together theoretical insights and methodological tools from discourse, visual, and policy analysis alongside ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, and interviews with workers, activists, and unionists. It traces how race has emerged, disappeared, and re-emerged in Swiss public and militant discourse – from its partial recognition in the 1970s, to its erasure during the 1990s, and its cautious reappearance in more recent years. The analysis focuses particularly on moments of tension: when racialised workers have taken to the streets to make visible the racist structures underpinning migrant labour management, and to demand recognition on their own terms; when institutional responses have tended to preserve existing frameworks rather than transform them; and when new reflections on its historical and global roots have begun to circulate in activist and institutional spaces. These moments serve as key sites for understanding how political solidarity is constructed, constrained, and contested in a context where race remains an uneasy and often marginalised issue.

Baldwin's words in the final lines of "Stranger in the Village" (1955) – "This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again" – still resonate with unsettling clarity. In contemporary Switzerland, that truth lingers just beneath the surface – felt in everyday encounters, in shifting demographics, in the voices of racialised workers – but rarely spoken aloud in political or institutional discourse. This thesis takes Baldwin's provocation as both a warning and an opening: a call to interrogate how whiteness continues to structure spaces imagined as progressive, and to ask what becomes possible when race is no longer deflected, but named, confronted, and reimagined as central to the struggle for justice.

> I arrived at the meeting without knowing exactly what to expect. I did not know anyone, but I immediately recognised the group I would be joining for this walking tour through the streets of Geneva. The meeting point was on Rousseau Island at 4:00 PM. It was cold, but a pleasant atmosphere quickly developed. Almost all of us were women, ranging in age from thirty to eighty. Leading the group was a Geneva-based historian and archivist, accompanied by a retired trade unionist.
>
> I was aware of the theme of this tour, but I was also curious to discover or rediscover corners of the city through a path dedicated to the memory of seasonal workers. At each stop, a theme was displayed on a sign, similar to road signs, with a historical source to illustrate it. In the bottom right corner, a QR code allowed us to listen to testimonies from workers who had "built this city", as stated in the exhibition flyer.
>
> One moment particularly struck me: the last stop. When we arrived in the historical centre, we stood in front of the building housing the headquarters of the SIT, the Intercategorial Union of Workers. The worker's voice we heard was not from the past; it was from the present.
>
> (Geneva, Novembre 2024)

This encounter, where the past and present collide, encapsulates one of the central concerns of this research. As I moved through the city, it became clear that engaging with these histories is essential – not only to understand the struggles and lived experiences of past generations of migrant workers, but also to question how these histories are remembered, selectively acknowledged, or obscured in ways that disconnect them from the present realities of racism.

This research is situated at the crossroad of migration studies, labour history, critical race theory, intersectionality, and feminist politics. It builds upon a multidisciplinary body of work that examines both historical and contemporary processes of racialisation in Switzerland – focusing in particular on struggles around migrant labour and the responses these have elicited from trade unions, as well as other militant and institutional actors.

While the history of immigration in Switzerland has been extensively examined – especially regarding its socio-economic, legal, and demographic dimensions – the intersection between migrant workers' struggles, trade union practices, and the articulation of anti-racism remains underexplored. This thesis seeks to address that gap by analysing how trade unions and

militant groups have responded to migrant workers' struggles – struggles that, as we will see, extended beyond workplace issues to encompass broader questions tied to the migrant condition in Switzerland. It also explores how these responses have, in turn, challenged the trade unions' own structures, practices, and understandings of their role in confronting racism and engaging with anti-racist politics up to this day.

The historiography cited here does not aim to be exhaustive, but rather to highlight the major themes in existing scholarship, while underscoring the weaknesses and shortcomings that arise from studies which, more often than not, overlook an intersectional perspective. These studies tend to treat issues such as class, gender and migration in isolation, rather than examining how these dimensions intersect in the lived experiences of migrant workers and in the political practices of trade unions and other leftist organisations.

A substantial body of scholarship has documented the waves of labour migration to Switzerland, particularly from Southern Europe during the 20th century. Scholars such as Etienne Piguet have traced the evolution of immigration politics in the country, while others – like Paolo Barcella and Morena La Barba – have offered valuable insights into the lived experiences of migrants, especially within the Italian community (Piguet 2017; Barcella 2018; La Barba et al. 2013; La Barba 2018). Complementing these accounts, Toni Ricciardi's *Associazionismo ed emigrazione* (2014) investigates how Italians built autonomous associations as both a response to marginalisation and a tool for political agency. Further enriching this body of work, Rosita Fibbi has made foundational contributions to the sociology of migration. Her research provides essential reflections on integration processes, exclusionary attitudes, and the experiences of the *secondos* – second-generation individuals from migrant backgrounds, particularly those of Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese descent (Bolzman et al. 2003). These authors have shaped crucial literature that traces how migrants were incorporated into the Swiss economy, often through temporary and precarious labour arrangements – highlighting the specificity and diversity of post-World War II migrant experiences, with particular attention to selected communities.

As will be further elaborated, while this research examines multiple waves of migration – particularly from the perspective of immigration management – key moments of tension, such as the 1970s, will serve as focal points. This is why scholars who have focused on the Italian and Spanish communities have been prioritised: their experiences align closely with the struggles identified in this inquiry. These studies underscore how cultural differences were

often redefined through the shifting notion of 'foreignness' – a flexible category shaped by political and economic imperatives.

In parallel, the history of the Swiss labour movement provides essential context for understanding how issues of race and class have been managed within institutional frameworks and in militant collectives. For understanding the context in which these struggles unfolded, the contributions of the *Cahiers du mouvement ouvrier* have been essential. These works have helped uncover the complexity of Swiss labour history – one often overlooked or downplayed in mainstream historiography, which has long contributed to the national myth of Switzerland as a conflict-free society. By bringing to light neglected histories of mobilisation and dissent, these texts challenge that narrative and open space for a more nuanced understanding of the country's social and political past (Valsangiacomo et al. 2012; Valsangiacomo et al. 2013).

In this broader landscape of labour history, the 1970s stand out as a particularly rich period for the emergence of critical texts produced within militant spaces – texts that directly engaged with the conditions of migrant labour and the internal contradictions of solidarity-based politics. Authors such as Sergio Agustoni (1974) and Delia Castelnuovo Frigessi (1978) offered both historical documentation and theoretical reflection that remain central to this project. These works serve both as archival sources and analytical tools, allowing us to trace how trade unions in that era negotiated their role in internationalist struggles while often reproducing national and racist hierarchies. This tradition of militant historiography – which foregrounds memory, collective struggle, and political subjectivity – illuminates how resistance has been articulated within the labour movement and highlights the voices of those who have shaped it.

Building on this foundation, recent historical research by Frédéric Deshusses and Francesco Garufo revisits past labour struggles, offering fresh perspectives on the experiences of migrant workers and the militant contexts that shaped activism in the 1970s (Deshusses, Giancane 2013, Deshusses 2014; Garufo 2015). Through the re-examination of archival materials, their work sheds light on the strategies, conflicts, and solidarities that characterised this formative period, highlighting both the achievements and the persistent challenges in trade union agendas. Complementing this renewed historiographical interest, the 2024 volume *Compañeros de la emigración! Lavoratori emigrati!*, authored by Alain Mélo and coordinated by Alda Degiorgi, turns the focus to the years 1968 to 1974. This study expands the analytical scope by providing detailed morphological and sociological analyses of migrant labour networks and the alliances that crystallised during this politically charged era (Mélo 2024).

Together, these works underscore the significance of transnational solidarities and the complex dynamics that shaped labour activism in Switzerland and beyond.

Despite some valuable contributions, the literature on Swiss trade unionism remains relatively limited, particularly in relation to the intersections of race, class, and power. Valérie Boillat and colleagues' 2006 historical study *La valeur du travail* (2006) offers a foundational understanding of the development of Swiss trade unionism, yet it pays limited attention to the participation and struggles of migrant workers. Similarly, the 2019 volume *Le métier et la vocation de syndicaliste* by Fillieule, Monney and Rayner provides a nuanced sociological and gendered analysis of the actual trade unions' world in Switzerland, focusing on who enters union careers and how individuals reconcile militant engagement with salaried work. By drawing on biographical data and statistical analyses, the study traces the professional, militant, and family trajectories of union activists. It also sheds light on key dynamics such as the tensions between volunteerism and professionalisation, the sexual division of labour, and the barriers women face in accessing leadership roles despite formal promotion policies. While this work offers a valuable compass for understanding the internal organisation of unions it notably lacks engagement with questions of racism and migration – two dimensions that remain crucial to a fuller picture of the Swiss labour movement.

In a similar vein, Sarah Kiani's study *De la révolution féministe à la constitution* (2019) offers an important perspective for understanding the broader historical evolution of political struggles in Switzerland, particularly in relation to feminist movements. By exploring the tensions between institutional and non-institutional spaces and analysing the legislative developments in women's rights, Kiani brings to light often-overlooked processes such as the formation of new collective spaces and shifting alliances. Her attention to life histories and militant trajectories offered crucial historical coordinates for engaging with archival materials and oral history. Yet, as with other texts in this field, the study stops short of adopting a fully intersectional perspective. The role of migrant women in feminist mobilisations remains largely unexamined, inadvertently reinforcing a homogenised narrative of participation and obscuring the differentiated experiences that shaped these movements.

This gap in the literature has made more targeted works crucial for critically understanding the complex and often ambivalent relationship between trade unions and migrant labour. It is important to emphasise that Swiss trade unions have historically functioned as both spaces of solidarity and arenas of exclusion. Foundational studies – such as the analyses by Agustoni in the 1970s – document early attempts to integrate migrant worker concerns into

broader class struggles (Agustoni et al. 1973; Agustoni 1974). More recent contributions, such as the 2000 report *L'apport de l'immigration au syndicalisme suisse depuis 1945* by Malik von Allmen and Jean Steinauer, offer interesting insights into how immigration has reshaped union strategies, institutional practices, and political discourse, thereby illuminating the structural tensions that continue to shape trade union engagement with migration and racial justice.

Together, these works shed light on the evolving and often contested dynamics between class, migration, and political activism within Swiss political landscape. However, a notable blind spot persists: even the most recent and methodologically rich contributions tend to foreground issues of gender and professional identity, while consistently overlooking racialised forms of exclusion. This absence is not merely incidental; it reflects a broader epistemological tendency within both academic and union discourses in Switzerland to operate within a framework of solidarity that often renders racial difference invisible or irrelevant.

> I have been invited to sit at the table of the organisation's upper leadership. A few people looked at me with curiosity, and eventually someone asked what I was working on. I mentioned racial discrimination and anti-racism, though I didn't have the time to elaborate on the reasons behind my presence.
> One of the senior members responded with genuine enthusiasm. She said:
> "*Yes, it is so important to study gender discrimination – when I first joined the union, the men used to leave the congress and go to the brothels. Things have really improved.*"
>
> In less than a second, race had disappeared.
>
> (Locarno, November 2023)

This brief yet telling encounter reveals a recurrent pattern in institutional and political spaces, where discussions of race and racism are swiftly displaced by more socially accepted discourses – such as gender equality. The speed and ease with which race is erased from the conversation points to the deeper issue cited above: the inability or unwillingness of many organisations, particularly in predominantly white contexts, to grapple with racial dynamics in a substantive way. It is precisely this erasure that critical race theory and whiteness studies seek to address, enabling a deeper interrogation of how racial hierarchies are produced, sustained, and naturalised.

This work draws on the theoretical contributions of various authors who provide a structural interpretation of racism – viewing it not as an anomaly of the past or a matter of individual ignorance, but as a deeply embedded system shaping all dimensions of social life: economic, political, ideological, and psychological. Notably, Bonilla-Silva's concept of 'racialised social systems' helps to understand how race persists as a social structure through shifting forms, narratives, and institutions (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2021). Within this theoretical landscape and central to this project is the work of Alana Lentin, whose analysis anchors the study in the historicity of racism and its continuous rearticulation across contexts (Lentin 2008; 2020; 2025). Of particular importance is her engagement with Cedric J. Robinson's theorisation of racial capitalism (1983), which illuminates the ways in which racial hierarchies function as a technology within economic and social systems – not as deviations from capitalism, but as constitutive of it. Lentin's framework thus provides the analytical lens through which this study examines how state policies and migration regimes deploy race as an instrument of governance, making her work the guiding reference for the project's core arguments.

Two works on the Swiss context similarly resonate with broader debates in critical race theory while offering detailed historical analyses: *Suisse: un essai sur le racisme d'État* (1999; 2003) by Anne Weill-Lévy, Karin Gündberg, and Judith Isler. These studies trace how the Swiss state has historically reproduced racial hierarchies through its management of labour and immigration, following the evolution and adaptation of legislation. They provide a rare and systematic account of how state mechanisms produced and regulated racialised categories, offering a critical lens on the formation of what can be understood as state racism in Switzerland. In this sense, these works also illustrate the articulation of race and capital in a Swiss setting: labour control and migrant regulation were central to upholding economic hierarchies and shaping access to rights, resources, and social recognition.

To interrogate how race operates – and how it is denied – the concept of whiteness, understood as an unmarked position of structural advantage and epistemic normativity, is central here. Key contributions in this field include the work of David Roediger, whose analysis builds on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of the psychological and material advantages conferred by whiteness, even among exploited white workers (Roediger 1991). His work, along with Guglielmi and Salerno's *Gli italiani sono bianchi?* (2006), though focused primarily on the North American context, offers a critical lens for understanding how racialised privileges become embedded within class identities and labour politics. Complementing these perspectives, the recent study by Solène Brun and Claire Cosquer, *La Domination blanche* (2024), brings this analysis into the European context, offering crucial insights into how

whiteness operates as a dominant yet invisible norm that shapes both institutional structures and individual subjectivities.

These frameworks enable us to analyse how racial meanings are produced, transformed, and silenced – and how whiteness, while often rendered invisible, functions as a central axis of power. In the Swiss context, dominant discourses of national identity have historically constructed a culturally white subjectivity, despite the country's multi-ethnic composition. This underscores how racial hierarchies and exclusions can persist even when race is not openly acknowledged. Building on this, scholars such as Sara Ahmed and David Theo Goldberg highlight how institutional assertions of neutrality can conceal ongoing racial hierarchies (Goldberg 2002). Ahmed's concept of 'non-performativity' is particularly illuminating: it captures how symbolic commitments to diversity or anti-racism often fail to translate into substantive structural change (Ahmed 2006). Her reflections on racism, institutional life, and the politics of inclusion are highly relevant in this sense. While Ahmed's analyses focus on the UK and Australian contexts, the theoretical tools she provides are valuable in broader settings, including Switzerland (Ahmed 2012). They help to critically interrogate institutional language around 'diversity', 'equality', and 'inclusion' – terms that are widely used yet often disconnected from transformative practice. In Switzerland, where legal and political discourses tend to sideline the concept of race altogether, these theoretical insights are crucial for understanding how racial inequality is reproduced through silence, evasion, and bureaucratic neutrality.

An intersectional approach is also central to this work, particularly for analysing the multiple and layered forms of violence that migrant workers endure – both in the labour market and within institutional spaces such as trade unions. Rather than treating categories of identity as additive (e.g., gender 'plus' race 'plus' class), intersectional and Black feminist frameworks offer a way of thinking through the simultaneity and co-constitution of forms of oppression. Texts such as Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) provide essential tools for analysing how subjectivities are formed at the intersection of multiple systems of power. These perspectives are particularly important in contexts like Switzerland, where one of the most overt forms of racism takes the shape of Islamophobia – targeting Muslim communities, and especially Muslim women, through culturalist narratives and exclusionary state practices. In this regard, Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013) offers a vital critique of the ways in which Muslim women's lives are often instrumentalised in public discourse, reinforcing colonial logics under the guise of liberal and democratic concerns. Her work

challenges us to resist simplistic portrayals and to attend instead to the political and structural forces that shape women's lives globally. These perspectives are crucial for challenging the limitations of mainstream feminist and labour discourses, which too often isolate single axes of oppression. By foregrounding relational and intersecting forms of power, they offer a framework that both centres marginalised experiences and resists reductive understandings of structural violence. This brings us back to Sara Ahmed reflections on how institutions respond to feminist demands (2012). As the fieldnote above illustrates, gender equality has become an increasingly prominent theme within Swiss institutions and political organisations, including trade unions. While this shift reflects certain advances, it also carries the risk of incorporating the experiences of migrant and racialised women into a dominant feminist discourse that fails to account for the multiplicity of violences they face. When institutional feminism is shaped primarily by white, middle-class norms, there is a danger that structural racism, economic precarity, and migration-related exclusions are rendered invisible or secondary. In this regard, Ahmed's reflections on the institutional life of feminism, as well as her critique of how inclusion often comes at the cost of political radicality, are highly relevant.

Equally important to this analysis are the contributions of Judith Butler, whose work on vulnerability, performativity, and alliance formation offers essential tools for thinking about political resistance. Butler's reflections on visibility and invisibility, especially in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), help illuminate how certain lives and struggles are rendered invisible, and how collective action can emerge from shared conditions of exposure and interdependence. This framework is particularly useful for analysing the ways in which, today, migrant women organise within and beyond institutional structures, challenging norms of recognisability and reclaiming political agency from positions often perceived as marginal or fragile.

Bell hooks' extensive body of work also informs this reflection on resistance, care, and political action. Her writings insist on the transformative potential of love and community as sites of radical possibility, while never losing sight of the systemic nature of oppression. In tandem, Elsa Dorlin's philosophical engagement with violence and self-defense – especially in *Se défendre: une philosophie de la violence* (2017) – provides a powerful counterpoint to narratives that equate vulnerability with passivity. Dorlin's work invites us to consider how marginalised subjects develop embodied strategies of protection and resistance, and how these practices intersect with histories of colonialism, policing, and survival.

Together, these texts help conceptualise resistance not as a singular or heroic act, but as a web of situated practices grounded in care, interdependence, and collective struggle. They offer critical insights for understanding how migrant people navigate and contest the overlapping structures of gendered, racialised, and economic violence – often through forms of alliance and solidarity that defy the limits of institutional recognition.

By weaving together these theoretical strands, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how racism has been historically produced, managed, and contested – particularly within spaces that often perceive themselves as progressive. It positions trade unions not only as historical actors but also as dynamic sites of ideological negotiation, where questions of race, labour, gender, and belonging are continuously reframed in response to shifting political and institutional landscapes. In doing so, the thesis frames a reflection not only on theory but also on practices of resistance and critically interrogates the spaces – both institutional and informal – where these actions emerge, are shaped, and at times constrained.

Notes on Methodology

My methodological practice emerges from a constellation of theoretical and experiential positions – critical race theory, post-colonial studies, and Black feminism form its foundational bedrock. These epistemologies have long challenged the presumed neutrality and universality of Western knowledge production, foregrounding instead the importance of situatedness, embodiment, and relationality. To this foundation, I bring a sustained engagement with decolonial studies, especially the contributions of thinkers such as Walter Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Catherine Walsh and Laura Quintana, who offer compelling critiques of epistemic coloniality and the violence of modernity's totalising narratives. Their work has reoriented my understanding of methodology not as a linear sequence of techniques, but as an ethico-political gesture (Mignolo 1999; Quijano 2000; Walsh 2007; Quintana 2023).

Drawing from this hybrid theoretical background, my approach refuses rigid disciplinary borders. It instead embraces a pluridisciplinary (and at times chaotic) methodology – a mode of inquiry that recognises the fragmentary, contradictory, and polyphonic nature of knowledge, particularly when produced in contexts of struggle, resistance, and marginality. This methodology is not a pre-given framework to be applied; it is something that emerges through the research encounter, through the rhythms and silences of fieldwork, and through a

commitment to epistemic disobedience, that is, the act of delinking from dominant regimes of knowing in order to make space for other ways of sensing and narrating the world (Mignolo, Escobar 2010).

The practice of ethnography, central to my work, is approached not as a neutral tool but as a historically situated and power-laden methodology that must itself be decolonised. It has taken place not only in the expected spaces of labour politics – such as trade unions – but often in more liminal, peripheral, and affectively charged zones. Gaining access to institutionalised structures like trade unions proved difficult and exposed the layered dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, legitimacy and illegibility. This redirected my attention to what Rosi Braidotti calls micro-narratives: fleeting, situated, and often informal stories that resist grand totalising schemes (Braidotti 2014). These micronarratives, found in everyday conversations – on trains, in cafés, at bus stops after conferences, in kebab shops, or during shared moments in living rooms – became vital methodological sites. They allowed me to access minor knowledges, the small stories that are often left out of dominant accounts yet profoundly shape collective and political subjectivities.

Braidotti's conceptualisation of nomadic subjectivity resonates deeply with my methodological orientation. Like the nomad who resists fixity and territoriality, my research has moved through and between institutional boundaries and spatial-temporal scales (Braidotti 1998). My ethnographic journey has traversed from the institutional 'inside' to the affective 'outside', often dwelling in spaces of in-betweenness – what Gloria Anzaldúa might call "borderlands" (Anzaldúa 1987). These spaces include feminist and anti-racist collectives that operate at the edges of, and in dialogue with, formal trade union structures. They are counter-power formations, actively reshaping the terrain of labour politics by foregrounding intersectionality, care, and resistance to racialised and gendered precarisation.

Drawing on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks, this project understands the margin as a site of radical openness (hooks 1989) – a vantage point from which to see, speak, and theorise differently. Marginality is not merely exclusion but a location of critical possibility, where language, experience, and analysis converge to unsettle dominant frameworks. As Walter Mignolo asserts, "I am where I think" (1999, 235), emphasising that thought is always situated in geography, history, and power. Border thinking thus becomes both a critique and a refusal of colonial epistemologies: it demands questioning who is authorised to speak, from where, and in what language, and it insists on interrogating the very foundations of established disciplines rather than merely incorporating marginal voices into them (Mignolo 1999, 241; 2011). In this

sense, as Josh Myers (2023) argues in dialogue with Sylvia Wynter, the task is not to reform or diversify existing disciplinary frameworks but to reimagine study itself as a praxis that emerges from and is accountable to marginalised epistemic locations – an effort to unsettle the colonial terms of knowledge and the category of the human that underwrites them.

In this light, the research problematises the spatial and social binaries of centre and margin by tracing the tensions, silences, and resistances that emerge within sites of institutional power – trade unions, leftist collectives and even archives –, as they are traversed by contradictory logics, historical exclusions, and unfinished struggles. Margins emerge and are negotiated within these structures, not located 'elsewhere'. To study racialisation and structural inequality within these spaces is not to speak 'from' the margin, but to interrogate how margins are produced, inhabited, and negotiated from within the structures of the centre. Resistance is therefore understood not only as rupture but as the slow, everyday practices of negotiation, survival, and refusal. Methodologically, this commitment manifests in attention to narrative form, microhistories, fragmentary materials, and the reflexive use of fieldnotes.

Thinking with Laura Quintana, I approach positionality not as a static identity but as a situated, affective relation – something shaped by history, power, and embodiment. Quintana's work reminds us that emotions are not just personal experiences but also political forces: they bind us to systems of injustice while also serving as catalysts for resistance. Her notion of "affective spaces" offers a valuable lens for understanding how institutions and social practices are imbued with feelings that regulate inclusion and exclusion (Quintana 2023). In this way, fieldwork was not defined by static spatial coordinates but by relational geographies – emergent connections between bodies, places, and stories. These fluid, often unexpected encounters challenged the conventional ethnographic desire for coherence or representativity, and instead demanded a methodology that could hold multiplicity, ambiguity, and rupture.

My methodological approach thus emerged as a layered and responsive practice: grounded in in-depth interviews – approximately 40 –, militant narratives, participant observation, informal and unrecorded conversations, and a steady accumulation of fieldnotes. These notes were never merely documentation; they became spaces of reflexive engagement, where I attempted to trace the rhythm, texture, and contradictions of everyday political work – including its silences, affective resonances, and incompleteness. They also prompted me to constantly rethink how I translated lived realities onto the page. Fieldnotes became a tool of interpretation and accountability, helping me to navigate the epistemic tension between proximity and representation, immersion and analysis.

Alongside this immersive ethnographic engagement, my work also integrates historical ethnography as both method and sensibility. In this sense, I see historical ethnography not as a retrospective reconstruction of a vanished past, but as a dialogic practice, one that allows the voices of the past to resonate with those of the present:

> To the extent that historiography is concerned with the recovery of meaningful worlds, with the interplay of the collective and the subjective, it cannot but rely on the tools of the ethnographer. It must be more than a little bit anthropological. By the same token, however, no ethnography can ever hope to penetrate beyond the surface planes of everyday life, to plumb its invisible forms, unless it is informed by the historical imagination – the imagination, that is, of both those who make history and those who write it. (Comaroff, Comaroff 1992, xi)

By moving between the archive and the field, and by pairing written documents with oral histories, I sought to build poly-temporal narratives that expose the continuities and ruptures of racialised and gendered labour struggles. This approach is aligned with what Nathan Wachtel calls a "regressive strategy" – the critical movement from present traces to historical configurations, foregrounding memory as a site of resistance (Watchtel 2014).

In the archives, I encountered voices that denounced racial violence and exclusion in the past – voices that seemed to speak directly to the contemporary challenges I was witnessing on the ground. These were not mere echoes; they were living memories, insurgent temporalities that called into question linear understandings of time and progress (Tamboukou 2014; 2016). This is what Charles Stewart and Stephan Palmié term the "anthropology of history" – an approach that centres historicity as a plural, culturally embedded, and often contested experience of the past. Historical ethnography in this sense becomes a way to map relational worlds across time, to trace how certain narratives survive, mutate, or are erased – and how they continue to shape struggles in the present (Palmier, Stewart 2016; 2019).

Extending this logic, militant ethnography (Koensler et al. 2020) has been central to my work – both in the field and in the archive, including sites such as the militant archives in Geneva. The historical dimension of my research, which seeks to illuminate continuities that have long been ignored or actively silenced, converges with the present through a shared focus on minor, often overlooked, stories. These minor narratives do not simply complement the dominant historical record; they challenge and reconfigure it, offering counterpoints to official

discourses that tend to erase dissent and marginalise subaltern voices. Drawing on traditions of militant research (Juris 2007; Shukaitis, Graeber 2007), I understand this practice as a co-constitutive process – one that traces the lived, affective, and epistemic dimensions of struggle across time. Militant ethnography here is an ethical commitment to hold space for fragmented and contested knowledges. In both historical and contemporary registers, this approach allows for the construction of what Avery Gordon (2008) might call "ghostly matters" – the lingering presence of unresolved injustices that continue to haunt the present and animate political action.

To synthesise, my methodology is multi-sited, multi-temporal, and multi-vocal. It operates at the intersection of critical theory and empirical immersion, of archival fragments and embodied narratives. Rather than seeking a fixed point of objectivity, it moves with and through the uncertainties, the interruptions, and the intensities of the research process. It is a methodology of entanglement, one that acknowledges that the researcher is always already implicated, embedded, and accountable.

This methodological stance, though at times uncomfortable or destabilising, is not accidental. It is a deliberate epistemological choice – to stay with the trouble (Haraway 2016), to embrace the chaos not as failure but as a space of generative possibility. In doing so, I aim not to represent the struggles I study but to remain attuned to their complexity, to their unfinishedness, and to their potential for transformation.

Structure of the Text

This study is divided into three parts, each composed of two chapters. The first part establishes the conceptual and historical groundwork by tracing how race was articulated in Switzerland from the late 19th century to the post-Second World War era, and how these articulations were applied by the state through the regulation and management of foreign immigration.

The opening chapter begins by defining what is meant by 'post-colonial' Switzerland, situating the country within broader global histories of empire, race, and exclusion despite the absence of formal colonies. It then turns to the racist policies of the Swiss state in the early 20th century, identifying both the populations that were targeted and the ways in which Switzerland aligned with wider European patterns of racial exclusion while maintaining its distinctive image of neutrality. Here, the introduction of the concept of the 'post-racial' makes it possible to distinguish between racism and xenophobia, and to show how discourses of fear have operated – and been instrumentalised – throughout Swiss history.

The second chapter focuses on the post-World War II period, highlighting how immigration and labour policies in Switzerland were structured by racialised logics. It foregrounds the immediate postwar years to revisit and complicate the chronology of migration, showing how early administrative and policy frameworks shaped labour migration up to the 1960s. Italian migrants, in particular, are examined as testing grounds of this system, providing a case study through which broader hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion can be understood. The chapter also explores the lived experiences of these migrants, demonstrating how legal precarity translated into social exclusion, family separation, and vulnerability to multiple forms of violence. In doing so, it shows that whiteness in Switzerland was not fixed but produced through a conditional and often violent process of integration via labour. By tracing these patterns, the chapter opens a broader reflection on the role of racial capitalism in shaping the Swiss labour market and the hierarchies it continues to reproduce.

This first section shows that even in the absence of formal colonies, Swiss racial hierarchies were deeply intertwined with state policies and public discourse, setting patterns that structured migration and inclusion for decades to come.

The second part of this study explores how racism has been contested over time, focusing on the forms of resistance that emerged across different social and political arenas. It centres on the period from 1964 to the 1990s, with particular attention to the decade between 1964 and 1978 – a moment marked by growing anxiety over the so-called 'overforeignisation' (*Überfremdung*) of Swiss society, as reflected in the popularity of the Schwarzenbach initiatives[1]. While mainstream discourse during this period was shaped by exclusionary rhetoric, it was also a time of intense mobilisation by those directly targeted. Seasonal workers, in particular, played a central role in challenging not only their precarious labour conditions but also the broader discriminatory structures that governed their lives. Their struggles extended beyond the workplace and formed connections with broader political movements, including women's collectives, communist organisations, and transnational solidarities.

These forms of militant engagement led to significant structural shifts. One of the most notable was the evolution of trade unions, which – after initial resistance – began to incorporate migrant workers more directly into their organisational structures and political agendas. At the same time, local associations and activist networks took on the role of exposing injustices and

[1] The period of the Schwarzenbach initiatives in the 1960s and 1970s, marked by rising racist discourses and political efforts to restrict foreign immigration, represents a pivotal moment in Switzerland's racist history and will be examined in greater detail in the following chapters.

advocating for foreign workers' rights, helping to create the groundwork for a broader anti-racist politics. These developments culminated in the 1980s and early 1990s in a more institutionalised approach to anti-racism, marked by a growing emphasis on integration and tolerance discourses. However, this shift also contributed to the depoliticisation of racism itself: the term began to disappear from public language even as structural inequalities persisted. Chapter Four explores this paradox, tracing how efforts to challenge racism became increasingly embedded in institutions while often losing their critical edge – a process that unfolded just as new waves of migration, particularly from the Balkans and beyond, began to reshape the demographic and political landscape once again. This analysis demonstrates how moments of grassroots resistance reshaped institutional practices, even as they revealed the limits of progressive politics in confronting entrenched racism.

The final part of this research presents an ethnographic investigation into how racism is produced, negotiated, and challenged in contemporary Switzerland. Chapter Five examines how recent shifts in migration policy have reshaped the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, producing new hierarchies of belonging. It explores how racism has adapted to changing global and national dynamics by integrating certain groups – gradually assimilating them into forms of 'Swissness' or 'whiteness' – while constructing others, such as Muslims, Black people, and racialised migrants from the Global South, as enduring outsiders. Within this evolving landscape, the chapter analyses how trade unions have responded to racism, tracing their official commitments, practices, internal debates, and the limits of their anti-racist engagement. This part of the analysis illustrates that contemporary Swiss racism is adaptive, producing hierarchies that mirror both historical patterns and global racial logics.

Chapter Six builds on this analysis by exploring how trade unionists and activists navigate beyond the constraints of institutional frameworks. It examines how they engage with alternative spaces – such as the Feminist Strike Movement – to articulate forms of anti-racism that are more intersectional, flexible, and responsive to lived experience. These spaces, situated at the margins or in tension with traditional structures, become laboratories for reimagining solidarity and resistance. By centring the voices and practices of workers and activists, the chapter highlights how anti-racism is not only contested within institutions but also actively redefined through everyday struggles and creative forms of political engagement.

This study offers a critical reflection on the evolving articulations of race and racism in Switzerland. It does so by examining the spaces, actors, and discourses involved in migrant

workers' struggles, tracing how processes of racialisation have shifted over time and adapted to changing political, institutional, and social contexts. By analysing both public narratives and institutional practices, the research sheds light on how the figure of the 'foreigner' has been continually redefined – through mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion, and conditional belonging. Ultimately, this work contributes to broader debates on migration and integration in Switzerland. It demonstrates that national identity in Switzerland is actively sustained through the performance and reproduction of whiteness, and that anti-racist struggles – both within and outside institutions – offer insights into how these dynamics can be contested and reimagined.

Part I

1.Talking Race

At the end of a conference on the instrumentalisation of antisemitism, a young man stood up to speak during the Q&A session. His voice was clear, his tone deliberate.
"Hello, hello", he began.
He prefaced his remark with a firm stance: "*I condemn violence, of course. I am neutral and apolitical*". Then, almost playfully, he added: "*That's why I'll ask a neutral and apolitical question, though still a little personal*".
He introduced himself: Swiss, raised in Switzerland. He described a childhood that had been joyful, marked by a sense of belonging.
"*I was told we were good, not like the racist French*".
His Moroccan father had reassured him: "*We are lucky. Here, colonial logics were left behind*". Switzerland, in his father's eyes, was a place apart.
"*So yes, I had a happy childhood*".
But then, he grew up and saw beyond the familiar narratives of Swiss innocence.
"*Today, I am sad*".
He paused. The room waited.
"*I ask myself, will I ever be happy again?*"

His words hung in the air, an invitation, a provocation. A challenge to the narratives of Swiss exceptionalism, neutrality, and detachment from the past and the persistent and pervasive violence of our world. His sadness was not just personal, it was political, historical. And it demanded a response.

(Lausanne, February 2025)

After the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, thousands of protesters took to the streets of cities around the world, bringing racism and the systemic violence associated with it back to the centre of public discourse. In Switzerland, protests followed one another (dos Santos Pinto et al. 2022, 11), and in Geneva, a demonstration held in June opened with a banner stating, "Racism exists in Switzerland too, it is only neutral". This statement highlights a critical tension between Switzerland's self-perception and the issue of racism within the country, particularly in relation to the concept of neutrality.

Neutrality is a central element of Swiss national identity and public discourse. As a semi-direct democracy, geographically positioned at the heart of Europe yet remaining outside the European Union, Switzerland hosts some of the most prominent international institutions that uphold the principle of neutrality, such as the United Nations and the Red Cross. Hannan Salamat (2024) notes that when Swiss citizens are asked what defines their national identity, neutrality is one of the most frequently cited characteristics[2]. This perception is not a recent phenomenon; already in the mid-20th century, historian Edgar Bonjour (1963) described Swiss neutrality as a "national myth" with almost religious significance. This strong association between neutrality and national identity contributes to an image of Switzerland as an impartial and harmonious state. Neutrality also plays a significant role in shaping Swiss collective memory. Historical events, particularly those involving conflict or complicity, are often framed in ways that do not challenge dominant national narratives. Switzerland's history thus unfolds through the coexistence of an idealised self-representation and the systematic disavowal of colonial entanglements, wartime compromises, and antisemitism (Purtschert; Fischer-Tiné 2015; Weill-Lévy et al. 1999).

More broadly, this selective engagement with the past echoes what Max Czollek (2023) describes as a "theater of reconciliation", in which public reckoning with history functions less to unsettle power relations than to reaffirm a morally coherent national self-image. Drawing on this framework, Salamat characterises the Swiss case as a "theater of neutrality": a mode of historical narration that acknowledges difficult episodes while preserving the image of Switzerland as stable and impartial. Rather than prompting structural critique, such performances of reflection tend to delimit the scope of responsibility and contain the political implications of the past (Salamat 2024, 70).

This chapter will explore how this 'theater of neutrality' has played a significant role in shaping conceptions of both a post-colonial and post-racial Switzerland. Engaging with Alana Lentin's work (2004; 2008; 2020) on post-racial Europe, this discussion will examine how the idea of race has been discursively managed and, at times, obscured in Swiss public discourse. By putting this perspective into conversation with more recent studies on post-colonialism in Europe, the section will highlight how neutrality has functioned as a discursive tool that has shaped national self-perception.

[2] Although recent geopolitical developments, including Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, have prompted renewed discussion about the principle of neutrality, research – such as a 2023 survey by ETH Zurich – indicates that neutrality continues to be a core element of Swiss national identity. (Salamat 2024)

First, we will focus on Switzerland's colonial entanglements and their lasting legacies. Informed by Quijano's concept of coloniality (2000), we will examine not only the economic and political impacts of these engagements but also how they shaped social and collective imaginaries. Building on Christelle Maire's work (2023) in visual studies, we will analyse political campaign posters to understand how national discourses were constructed through the representation of multiple 'Others'. This analysis will highlight how Switzerland's colonial history has often been overlooked or misrepresented, particularly in the ways it contributed to imagining a national identity, following Benedict Anderson's theoretical insights (2006), and how these processes continue to shape contemporary understandings of race and belonging.

Next, we will interrogate the terms 'racism' and 'xenophobia', analysing the linguistic and conceptual frameworks that have historically concealed racism within Swiss discourse. In this sense, we will look at the concept of *Überfremdung*, which can be translated as 'foreign overacceleration' (Weill-Levy et al. 1999), as its historical trajectory provides a crucial lens for understanding the deep and persistent entanglement between xenophobic discourse and the evolution of the Swiss state racism. This history not only underscores the adaptability of exclusionary narratives over time but also highlights their enduring influence on contemporary political and social structures, from the end of the 19th century to the present day. In this context, it is important to recognise that racism is inherently political. As Lentin argues, it "relies on particular political conditions in order to function". More specifically, "racism is political in the sense that it has become inherent in the structures of our political apparatus: the nation-state" (Lentin 2008, 13).

1.1 No Colonies, no Racism: Structural Racism and Historical Amnesia

> Eloquence contest: In a room full of people, five young jurists presented their pleadings.
> The theme: "Racial and Ethnic Discrimination and the Law".
> Organised by the Association of Progressive Jurists, the event featured a diverse, all-female jury, including a lawyer, an actress and stage expert, a jurist and activist against Islamophobia in Switzerland, a researcher in post-colonial studies, and a professor specialising in migration issues.
> Each competitor explored a different subject, revealing the complexity of the theme – ranging from police violence to barriers in the labour market.

One of them challenged the following statement: "*We have no legacy of slavery here, so there can be no systemic discrimination in Switzerland!*"
No legacy of slavery, they say?
With his words, he took the audience through the city. He forced us to stop, to reconsider the weight of the names – of streets, parks, buildings, statues.

"*Here lies our colonial, racist heritage,*
Hidden in plain sight,
Celebrated in the names we speak
Without knowing. We must know from now".

His plea won.

(Geneva, March 2022)

Far from being a passive observer, Switzerland actively participated in colonial economies, knowledge production, and racialised structures that continue to shape its society today. James Baldwin's recollection in "Stranger in the Village" (1955) of Swiss villagers encountering a Black man "for the first time" could be interpreted as evidence of Switzerland's detachment from global racial histories. Yet, as Purtschert shows, the image of a secluded Alpine community untouched by modernity is less historical reality than national myth. Leukerbad was long integrated into international trade and tourism networks, and its inhabitants were not strangers to encounters with non-white visitors. What Baldwin captures, then, is not a literal first encounter but the persistence of a "colonial matrix" of perception (Purtschert, Fischer-Tiné 2015, 3-4): a way of imagining Switzerland as innocent, marginal, and racially unmarked, what Gloria Wekker (2016) calls "white innocence", the disavowal of racial knowledge that allows Europe to sustain an untroubled self-image despite its colonial entanglements.

A post-colonial theoretical framework is essential for unpacking this contradiction. It situates Baldwin's experience within broader structures of knowledge and power that continue to sustain Switzerland's racial imaginaries. Central here is the notion of racelessness: the belief that, because Switzerland had no formal colonies, it stands outside colonial history (Michel 2020). As Goldberg (2002) argues, such disavowal operates as a neoliberal strategy to deny race altogether, to gesture toward a post-racial ideal while eliding the enduring inequalities and historical injustices on which contemporary racial formations are built. Baldwin's encounter thus exposes the paradox at the heart of Switzerland's "theater of neutrality" (Salamat 2024): a

stage on which innocence is performed through imaginaries of Alpine remoteness and first encounters, while the country's deep entanglements with colonial economies and racialised knowledge production are systematically forgotten.

A striking example of the workings of racelessness in Switzerland emerged in 2007 with the Swiss People's Party (SVP) sheep poster campaign, launched in support of the popular initiative "*pour le renvoi des étrangers criminels*" – "for the deportation of criminal foreigners". The initiative proposed the automatic expulsion of non-citizens convicted of certain crimes, casting migration primarily as a matter of public safety. The accompanying poster depicted a white sheep kicking a black sheep out of Swiss territory, under the slogan "*Pour plus de sécurité*" – "For more security". Framed as a question of law and order, the campaign transformed the migrant figure into a criminal threat to the Swiss nation. The poster sparked one of the country's most significant public debates on racism: while critics denounced its discriminatory imagery, supporters insisted it merely visualised the need for security. As Stuart Hall and his colleagues argued in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), the language of security frequently masks racialised exclusion, recoding it as a commonsense defense of social order. The SVP campaign illustrates precisely this mechanism: its racial content was made socially acceptable because it was presented as a rational response to insecurity.

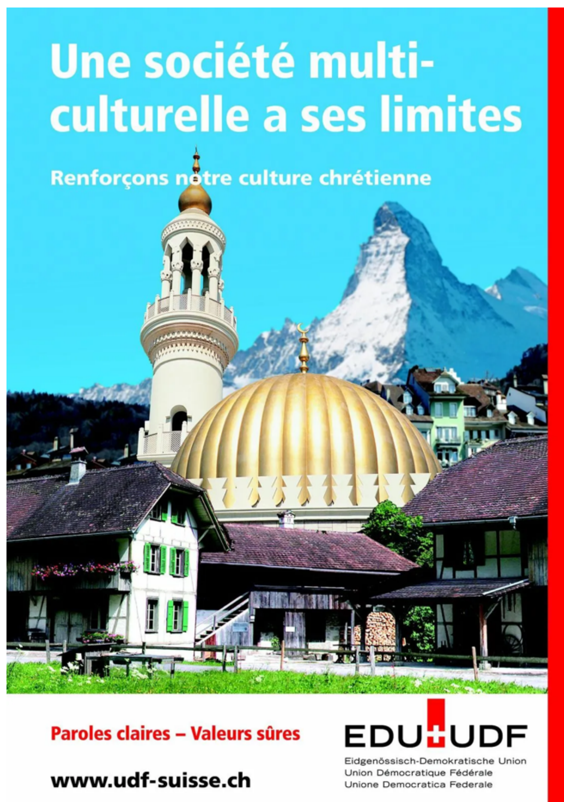
Counter-campaigns sought to challenge the SVP's imagery but often reproduced the same underlying logics. For example, alternative posters reimagined Swiss national identity as plural and inclusive. The "*Vivre Ensemble*" ("Living Together") campaign replaced the black sheep with multi-coloured ones, symbolising diversity and coexistence. At first glance, these interventions appear to oppose racist exclusion with a message of tolerance. Yet, as Sara Ahmed (2012) argues, the politics of diversity frequently function as a form of non-performativity: they allow institutions to present themselves as inclusive while leaving the structures of racism intact. In Switzerland, these celebratory images of multicultural coexistence often reinforced the national myth of inclusivity, sidestepping the deeper question of how racial hierarchies are maintained. Scholars of post-colonial Switzerland have underlined how this episode illuminates the structural logic of racelessness (Michel 2015). The refusal to name the poster as racist reflects not the absence of racial meaning but the entrenchment of a discourse that naturalises exclusion while disavowing race.

This mechanism resurfaced two years later during the campaign for the 2009 federal referendum to ban minarets. The most infamous poster depicted a veiled woman in front of a

Swiss flag bristling with black minarets resembling missiles. The visual rhetoric was unmistakably Islamophobic, portraying Muslim presence as a military-style invasion of the Swiss nation (Eskandari, Banfi 2017). And yet, as in the sheep campaign, the poster's defenders insisted that it was not racism: it was about protecting national culture, security and women against the extremist threat of Islam. Here again, we see the logic of "moral panic" at work. As Hall et al. (1978) theorised, moral panic constructs the figure of the threatening outsider, whose alleged danger justifies exceptional measures. In this case, the Muslim 'Other' is cast as a civilisational threat, an enemy within whose visibility – embodied by the minaret – had to be suppressed.

The referendum elevated the question of banning minarets into a national concern, transforming cultural anxieties into both a symbolic and constitutional matter. The paradox becomes more apparent when we consider that Switzerland has only three minarets – and more strikingly, that one of them was not part of a mosque at all, but the so-called 'Minaret Suchard' in Neuchâtel. Built in 1868 by chocolatier and entrepreneur Philippe Suchard after his travels in North Africa and the Middle East, the structure is an orientalist belvedere blending Ottoman, Mughal, and Hispano-Moorish motifs (Radwan 2022). Far from signalling Muslim presence, it embodied 19th century European fantasies of the 'Orient'. That one of the country's very few minarets is itself a product of Swiss entrepreneurial orientalism underscores the irony of the ban and highlights Switzerland's embeddedness in global colonial imaginaries (Eskandari, Banfi 2017).

Other posters that circulated during the same campaign were perceived as less offensive because they avoided such overtly aggressive imagery. One image emphasised the protection of Swiss alpine traditions and landscapes against the foreign intrusion of minarets and mosques.



UDC, "*Une société multiculturelle a ses limites, renforçons notre culture chrétienne*", 2013[3].

At first glance, this version seems less violent, but it is no less racialised: it relies on the same imaginaries of pristine alpine life, purity, and cultural authenticity, now presented as under siege. By mobilising bucolic Swiss symbols, this poster naturalises the idea that national identity is a fragile heritage needing protection from Muslim presence. What makes such representations appear more acceptable is precisely their subtlety: Islamophobia is repackaged into the language of cultural preservation, displacing racial exclusion onto ostensibly neutral concerns about tradition, cohesion, and continuity, rather than articulating it through overt hostility.

The dynamics of moral panic in Switzerland resonate with broader European discourses on Islamophobia. Scholars such as Meer (2014) or the contributors to *Global Islamophobia: Muslims and Moral Panic in the West* (2012) have shown how fear of Muslims has become the privileged site where anxieties about diversity are expressed, often in the name of security. In Switzerland, both the missile poster and the softer alpine variant condense this dynamic: fear is

[3] https://www.swissinfo.ch/fre/politique/l-%C3%A9tranger-intarissable-source-d-inspiration/35925548

presented as rational. The fact that the most aggressive image was banned in cities such as Lausanne but allowed to circulate elsewhere further demonstrates the ambivalence of Swiss responses. Public authorities recognised its inflammatory nature but still hesitated to name it as racism – while simultaneously tolerating less violent alternatives that drew on the same exclusionary imaginaries (Cheng 2015).

Alana Lentin's (2014) critique of the "culturalisation of politics" helps illuminate this narrative. Across Europe, the supposed "failure of multiculturalism" has been narrated in cultural rather than racial terms. The poster displayed above makes this logic explicit, declaring: "*Une société multiculturelle a ses limites, renforçons notre culture chrétienne*" – "A multicultural society has its limits, let us strengthen our Christian culture". This phrasing exemplifies what Lentin describes:

> Solutions to societal problems said to emanate from an excess of culture of the 'wrong kind', are themselves proposed in culturalised terms. Rather than interpret the problems that have been attributed to permissive multiculturalism and excessive ethno-racial diversity as political, economic or social in origin […] they have been overwhelmingly regarded as cultural and therefore resolvable only through culture (Lentin 2014, 1271).

The poster thus reveals how exclusion is framed as cultural incompatibility rather than racism, legitimising discrimination under the guise of cultural preservation. This framing is politically consequential because it renders racism unspeakable: exclusion is no longer justified through claims of superiority or hierarchy, but through appeals to cultural limits, thereby normalising unequal treatment while denying its racial character. The reference to "Christian culture" is particularly revealing as well. By invoking Christianity as a unified cultural heritage, the poster projects an imagined homogeneity that erases internal divisions between Protestant and Catholic cantons and suggests a continuous national history. Islamophobia is thereby justified as the protection of a supposedly authentic Christian identity, even though that identity is itself a retrospective construction. As Balibar (1988) argues, the nation is never simply a neutral political form; it rests on the construction of what he calls "fictive ethnicity" – a fabricated sense of homogeneity that excludes those cast as "foreign". Exclusionary imagery is legitimised through appeals to cohesion, culture, tradition and security, or – in this context – neutrality, allowing racism to be recast in cultural and civilisational acceptable terms. Yet, in Switzerland, race has not disappeared; it has been rendered unspeakable (Michel, 2015). This raises a pressing question: how long can the politics of racelessness endure?

At the 2001 UN World Conference against Racism in Durban, the Swiss delegate Jean-Daniel Vigny denied the country's involvement in slavery, the transatlantic trade, and colonialism. When asked how Switzerland intended to address demands for reparations related to its historical role, Vigny asserted that the matter was a dispute between industrialised and developing nations and that Switzerland, as a state, was not directly involved. Consequently, he argued that Switzerland was in a position to act as a mediator rather than a participant in these discussions. According to this perspective, the question of reparations did not concern Switzerland because, in Vigny's words, the country had no direct connection to slavery, the transatlantic slave trade, or colonialism (Kreis 2024, 43). By adopting this stance, Switzerland distanced itself from historical responsibility. The Swiss government reaffirmed this view in 2003 when confronted with evidence suggesting a deeper Swiss connection to the transatlantic slave trade than previously acknowledged. In response to inquiries on the subject, the Swiss Federal Council stated that addressing the legacy of the slave trade was an international issue requiring a collective approach. Switzerland, it emphasised, sought "to play a mediating role between African states and former colonising powers" (David et al. 2005, 188). Again, rather than confronting the historical role of Swiss actors in colonial enterprises, the Swiss Federal Council maintained a position of neutrality, placing the country between former colonial powers and colonised nations. This perspective sustains the idea that Switzerland remained detached from colonial histories while benefiting from the economic and ideological structures shaped by colonialism.

However, these narratives neglect the significant economic, military, and religious engagements of Swiss individuals in colonial enterprises. Despite official claims of non-involvement, Swiss actors played key roles within global colonial networks. Many Swiss individuals accumulated wealth through economic activities linked to colonialism and later reinvested these profits domestically. Additionally, Swiss mercenaries served in various colonial armies, Swiss religious missions contributed to the ideological justification of colonial rule, and Swiss entrepreneurs engaged in businesses directly tied to slavery and colonial economies. This "colonialism without colonies" challenges the notion that only imperial states bear responsibility for colonial legacies (Purtschert et al. 2016) and the statements made in 2001 and 2003 became a focal point for critics who viewed it as evidence of Switzerland's selective and historically incomplete understanding of its colonial entanglements (Kreis 2024, 44).

The perception that Switzerland was never a colonial power has shaped its national discourse and set its post-colonial debates apart from those in neighbouring countries. Unlike France, where discussions on colonial legacies have often been marked by tension – such as the controversial 2005 law highlighting the so-called positive effects of colonialism – Switzerland has largely framed itself as an outsider. Similarly, while Germany and Italy have historically downplayed their colonial pasts, Switzerland's stance of neutrality has reinforced the idea that it was never an active participant in colonialism (Triulzi 2006; Lombardi-Diop, Romeo 2012). Austria, another country with a neutral political tradition, shares Switzerland's selective amnesia regarding colonialism, the slave trade, and racism (Purtschert et al. 2016, 288-9).

Scholars have drawn comparisons between Switzerland and the Nordic countries, which also maintained the perception of being colonial outsiders while simultaneously engaging in colonial economies and ideologies. The concept of "colonial complicity", developed by Nordic researchers, applies well to the Swiss case, highlighting how nations that were not formal colonial powers still played crucial roles in supporting and benefiting from colonial structures (Loftsdóttir 2010). Furthermore, the notion of "exceptionalism", explored by Loftsdóttir and Jensen (2012), illustrates how certain nations, including Switzerland, have leveraged their supposed detachment from colonialism to obscure their involvement while positioning themselves as moral authorities in the post-colonial era (Purtschert et al. 2016, 290).

Historical analyses further dismantle the myth of Swiss non-involvement in colonialism. Switzerland consistently profited from colonial enterprises without assuming military responsibilities, positioning itself as a beneficiary rather than a direct participant. Political figures as early as the mid-19th century acknowledged the country's economic entanglements with European imperial powers, particularly through trade and financial investments. Scholars such as David and Etemad (1998; 2005) have gone so far as to describe Switzerland as a "part-time colonial power" or a practitioner of "Swiss imperialism"[4]. They emphasise the ambiguity of Switzerland's position – on one hand, maintaining a neutral and humanitarian image, and on the other, reaping economic and ideological benefits from imperial networks. According to them, Switzerland's humanitarian engagement also served to enhance its international standing,

[4] The book *La Suisse et l'esclavage des Noirs* (2005) by David, Etemad and Schaufelbuehl presents a comprehensive examination of Switzerland's historical connections to slavery, countering the long-standing narrative of Swiss neutrality in colonial and transatlantic affairs and revealing the active participation of Swiss individuals and institutions in the transatlantic slave trade, plantation economies, and slavery itself. Through the analysis of previously overlooked archival sources, the authors highlight key figures who played critical roles in shaping Swiss economic and social structures. These include merchants engaged in the slave trade, administrators who facilitated colonial operations, Swiss soldiers and mercenaries involved in the repression of enslaved people in the Americas, shareholders profiting from plantation economies, and bankers who financed colonial enterprises.

demonstrating how colonialism and neutrality were not opposing forces but rather interconnected aspects of Swiss foreign policy (Purtschert et al. 2016, 291-2).

Long neglected or outright ignored, debates on Switzerland's colonial entanglements have gained increasing attention (Tonella 2024, 9). In recent years, Swiss museums have begun to engage more actively with the country's colonial history, reflecting a broader shift in public discourse. The complexity of these discussions was reflected in museum exhibitions that aimed to provide historical context while fostering informed reflection on Switzerland's role in colonial structures. One such initiative was the *Colonialisme – Une Suisse impliquée* exhibition at the Swiss National Museum, which ran from September 2024 to January 2025. This exhibition sought to explore the country's colonial past through a nuanced and polyphonic approach. The exhibition spanned from the late 15th century to contemporary issues related to colonial legacies, including the persistence of colonial thinking in language, memory, and consumption habits in Switzerland (Ibid., 10). In this context, the museum collaborated with artists and researchers who collectively authored a text addressing many of these themes. One notable example is the article "Argent et violence: les dimensions globalisées des mercenaires suisses" by Philip Krauer, which offers an interesting analysis of the role played by Swiss mercenaries in colonial violence. In fact, the prevailing narrative tends to emphasise Swiss soldiers' service in European conflicts, neglecting their direct involvement in imperial expansion and oppression abroad. Swiss mercenaries played an active role in European colonial violence from the early modern period to the 20th century. Thousands served in the Dutch and British East India Companies, the French Foreign Legion in North Africa and Southeast Asia, and the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army in Indonesia. These soldiers directly participated in colonial massacres, contributing to systems of oppression and exploitation (Krauer 2024, 143-158).

This growing institutional interest in colonial history is also linked to a broader project of decolonisation within museums themselves. Exhibitions such as the one mentioned above not only examine themes like missionary societies, mercenary activity, the transatlantic slave trade, and Swiss economic ties to colonial enterprises but also critically assess the role of museums in shaping colonial imaginaries. The Swiss National Museum, founded in 1898, has historically incorporated colonial narratives in its displays, acquisitions, and public presentations, often reinforcing racialised and Eurocentric perspectives (Amrein 2024, 25). Recent efforts to re-evaluate museum collections include revising databases to address racist and discriminatory terminology, inviting external perspectives, and engaging in discussions on

the ethics of exhibiting colonial-era artifacts. These initiatives recognise the urgent need to reflect on the enduring effects of colonialism and the ways in which its mechanisms continue to manifest today.

Exhibitions like *Colonialisme – Une Suisse impliquée* demonstrate that colonial imaginaries were deeply embedded in Swiss society, shaping perceptions of race and belonging long before contemporary discussions on structural racism emerged. This challenges the enduring myth of Swiss isolationism and provincial innocence, what Purtschert (2015) calls a "colonial naïveté": a cultural disposition that enabled Switzerland to claim detachment from colonialism while simultaneously internalising and reproducing its racial hierarchies. What appears as unfamiliarity with racial difference is, in fact, a manifestation of this deeply rooted mindset, one that continues to shape contemporary understandings of national identity and belonging.

From the late 19th century onward, Swiss leaders deliberately shaped a nationalistic vision that emphasised a unified, racially homogeneous nation-state. Central to this vision was the idea of a 'pure' Switzerland – one that was not only geographically united but also culturally and racially distinct. This narrative was reinforced through national institutions, including museums, cultural organisations and public exhibitions which celebrated Swiss heritage while subtly constructing an imagined national community defined against foreign 'Others'.

Swiss national identity was actively shaped through grand national exhibitions, which reinforced a self-image of modernity juxtaposed with traditional alpine heritage. The first national exhibition in Zurich (1883) celebrated technological progress while reaffirming Swiss resilience against its mountainous geography. The Geneva exhibition of 1896 further advanced this narrative, showcasing Swiss technical advancements in electricity and refrigeration while also staging a 'Swiss Village' that glorified rural alpine life. However, a stark contrast was constructed through the inclusion of a so-called 'Negro Village', which presented 227 individuals from West Sudan as an exoticised and inferior counterpart to Swiss identity. These ethnographic displays aligned Switzerland with broader European colonial ideologies. By the time of the 1914 Berne national exhibition, such logics had become more firmly entrenched: staged amid rising anxieties about the growing number of migrants, the exhibition reinforced an image of Switzerland as a racially and culturally homogenous nation, implicitly threatened by foreign and racialised others (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 30-1).

Beyond public exhibitions, Swiss anthropology and ethnography played a crucial role in reinforcing racialised hierarchies. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw the establishment

of the Swiss National Museum and anthropological societies that sought to trace the origins of the Swiss people, often through skull studies and the collection of human remains (Bancel et al. 2014). Prominent figures in Swiss anthropology, such as Rudolf Virchow, framed early Swiss lake-dwellers as an advanced civilisation, implicitly positioning them against so-called 'savages'. Swiss universities, particularly the University of Zurich, became key sites for racial science, producing research that classified populations according to pseudo-scientific racial categories. Even as late as 1986, exhibitions in Zurich displayed medieval populations based on cranial measurements, perpetuating racist frameworks within academic and public discourse (Amrein 2024, 29). Indeed, as Pascal Germann shows in his article "Race in the making" (Germann 2015, 50-72), Swiss racial science was deeply entangled with colonial power structures. Anthropologists from the Zurich school actively sought to exploit colonial territories as 'laboratories' for research, using these sites to refine their measurement techniques and programs. By the early 20th century, racial science in Switzerland was not only shaped by domestic concerns but was also embedded in global colonial networks of knowledge production. Research conducted in colonial settings directly influenced racial-anthropological studies within Switzerland itself, demonstrating the ways in which colonial discourses and power relations shaped Swiss understandings of human difference. After World War I, these frameworks increasingly aligned with eugenic theories, reinforcing a knowledge system that drew legitimacy from colonial encounters. In this way, Swiss racial science mirrored broader European patterns, where colonial experiences informed domestic policies on race, population control, and national identity.

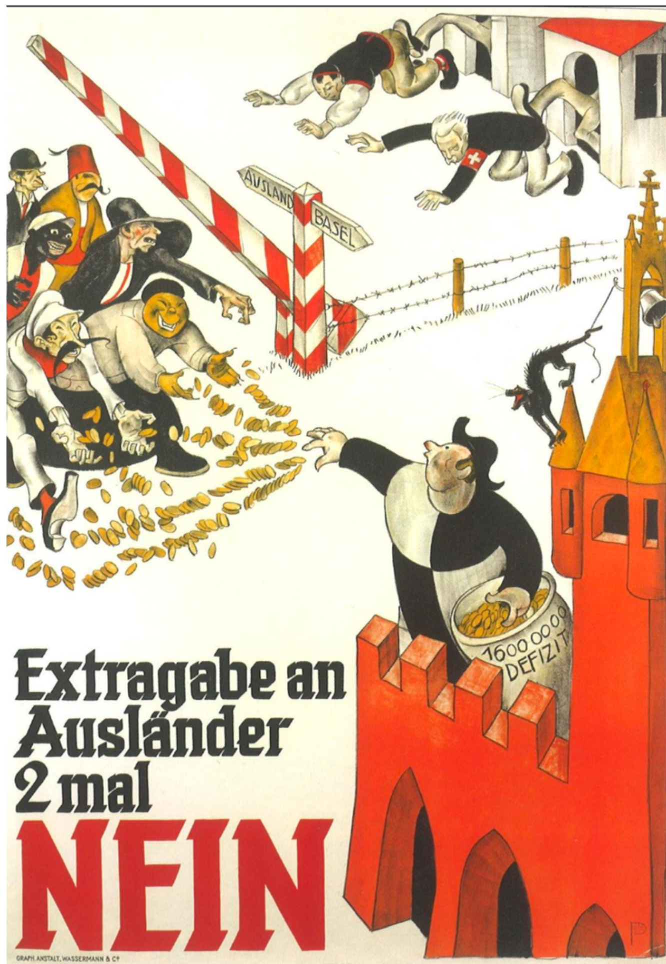
One striking example of other enduring structures is commodity racism, a term coined by Anne McClintock to describe how racialised colonial ideologies became embedded in everyday consumer culture (1994). Unlike scientific racism, which remained largely within elite intellectual circles, commodity racism operated through advertisements, product packaging, literature, film, and exhibitions, making racialised imagery a pervasive part of daily life. The expansion of consumer culture around 1900 facilitated the mass circulation of colonial imagery, reinforcing hierarchical racial distinctions through the consumption of goods. These representations, often aimed at mass audiences, associated whiteness with purity, hygiene, and progress while linking blackness to primitivism and exclusion. As Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné (2015) and Michel (2015) demonstrate, this dynamic was particularly evident in marketing campaigns by the department store *Globus*, which played a major role in shaping bourgeois consumer culture. A 1933 advertisement by Globus mobilised colonial tropes to sell household

goods, portraying non-European figures as exotic backdrops to white domestic order. The persistence of such visual codes is evident decades later: in 2004, Globus ran a controversial campaign that nostalgically evoked "the good, old colonial times", revealing the lingering appeal – and normalisation – of colonial fantasy in Swiss advertising.

Patrick Minder's extensive study of popular visual and consumer culture in Switzerland between 1880 and 1939 demonstrates how the country's cultural production can be understood through the lens of a "colonial imaginary" (2009). This concept captures the circulation of racialised hierarchies, exoticism, and civilisational narratives that were constitutive of European imperial modernity, even in states without formal overseas colonies. As Aníbal Quijano (2000) has argued, coloniality does not depend on direct colonial rule, but functions as a global matrix of power that structures race, labour, knowledge, and political belonging across modern societies. In this sense, Switzerland's supposed neutrality did not place it outside imperial modernity but enabled a form of historical distancing that rendered colonial entanglements less visible and less politically contested. As Nadine El-Enany's work (2020) invites us to recognise, empire must be traced not only in overseas domination but also in the internal organisation of European societies themselves. Similarly, Mbembe argues that:

> The colonial world was not the antithesis of the democratic order. It was always its double, or rather its nocturnal face. There is no democracy without its double, its colony, whatever its name or structure. The colony is not external to democracy. It is not necessarily located beyond its walls. Democracy carries the colony within itself, just as the colony carries democracy, often in the guise of a mask. (Mbembe 2018, 47-8)

Read through this lens, colonial logics in Switzerland were not dismantled but sedimented into administrative policies, cultural forms, political imaginaries and visual regimes – a dynamic clearly visible in a 1922 poster by Plattner, produced for a Basel campaign, which mobilises colonial tropes to dramatise fears of foreigners overwhelming and exploiting the city (Maire 2023).



Extragabe an Ausländer 2 mal nein, Otto J. Plattner, 1992.

In her recent work *Afficher les étrangers!* (2023), Christelle Maire critically examines this 1922 poster. The image presents six figures crossing the border: three are clearly colonialised others, while the remaining three are white. Among the latter, one is a migrant from Alsace, identifiable through stereotypical traits and traditional costume, while the other two are not explicitly analysed, leaving room for interpretation. Maire identifies the three colonialised figures as an Asian man with yellow-toned skin, slanted eyes, and a rigid smile; an African figure with dark skin and broad lips; and another figure with a curved nose and attire evoking Turkey. For the two other white figures, visual clues allow us to hypothesise their identities: one, exaggerated physiognomically with hooked hands, most likely represents a Jewish person, while the other, depicted with a cigarette and a hat, could plausibly symbolise an Italian migrant.

This composition constructs a visual narrative in which outsiders – both colonial and European – are represented as a heterogeneous yet threatening mass, crystallising anxieties about greed, moral corruption, and the perceived threat to Swiss society. Maire's analysis of

numerous posters over time shows how visual representations both construct narratives and sustain exclusionary policies in Switzerland, revealing a clear continuum in which visual culture, policy, and public opinion are mutually constitutive. By situating these images within their broader social and political context, Maire demonstrates how colonial imaginaries and racialised fears have been woven into Swiss public life.

This is evident in more recent times, as in the 2007 Swiss People's Party (SVP) sheep poster, which employed a stark white/black dichotomy to depict racialised exclusion framed as a matter of national security. Similar to colonial era advertisements, which used anthropomorphised animals to symbolise racial and national differences in an innocent or playful manner, the poster's spatial composition – where the white sheep remains within the Swiss flag while the black sheep is expelled – mirrored the spectacles of racialised exclusion staged in Swiss exhibitions, fairs, and ethnographic displays. From the 'Negro Village' of 1896 to the human zoos of the early 20th century, Swiss audiences were invited to view racial difference as both foreign and inferior (Brändle 2002). This fostered a racialised gaze that positioned Swiss identity in opposition to the 'exotic other', a distinction that still reverberates in contemporary nationalist rhetoric (Michel 2015). The SVP's use of the term 'security' in its poster campaign invokes older anxieties, framing racialised bodies as threats to national integrity – a strategy that reproduces the same exclusionary logic underpinning historical immigration and citizenship policies.

From the racial science of the early 20th century to the visual codes of commodity racism and political propaganda, Swiss identity was constructed through exclusionary discourses that, while aligning the nation with white Europeanness, simultaneously produced a distinctive Swiss form of whiteness, positioning it above even broader European norms, while casting racialised others as external threats. The persistence of such narratives, whether in national exhibitions, scientific research, or political campaigns, underscores the enduring legacies of colonial and racial ideologies in Switzerland's self-conception.

This colonial imaginary also shaped Swiss national identity in more indirect but powerful ways. As Patricia Purtschert (2015) argues, Switzerland's postwar mountaineering exploits, particularly in the Himalayas, mobilised colonial logics despite the country's formal non-colonial status. Swiss expeditions framed their encounters with Nepalese Sherpas through paternalistic tropes of guidance and cooperation, echoing the power dynamics of empire under the guise of neutrality. These narratives positioned Switzerland as both heir to a European civilising mission and a benevolent actor in the post-colonial world – what David Theo

Goldberg (2002) and Alana Lentin (2020) describe as a historicist and progressive approach to racism: one that disavows structural violence while continuing to benefit from its logics.

These dynamics reveal how colonial imaginaries have been embedded in Swiss national identity, shaping both cultural perceptions and institutional practices. Historical representations of non-European peoples as exotic or threatening continue to intersect with contemporary anxieties about immigration, influencing policies and discourses that mark newcomers as outsiders. Tracing the continuity between past and present shows that Switzerland's claims to exceptionalism coexist with deep entanglement in global networks of racial and economic power. In Switzerland, anti-immigration rhetoric and colonial imagery mutually reinforce one another, creating a self-sustaining cycle of exclusion.

1.2 *Überfremdung:* A Historical Genealogy

> At the end of the tour, I walked toward the tram stop in the company of the historian and the trade unionist. They asked me: why 'racism'? Why not 'xenophobia', a term widely used to describe the Schwarzenbach years?
>
> (Geneva, Novembre 2024)

While post-colonial analysis exposes the persistence of racialised logics beneath the surface of Swiss exceptionalism, public and political debates rarely name these dynamics as racism. Instead, they are more often described in terms of 'xenophobia' – a framing especially prominent in discussions of anti-immigrant politics, both today and during the infamous Schwarzenbach years. This linguistic shift is not incidental. Whereas racism and xenophobia both designate forms of exclusion, they emerge from different historical trajectories, operate through distinct mechanisms, and carry different implications. Conflating the two risks obscuring the structural dimensions of racialisation and the ways in which fear is mobilised to regulate belonging.

At a definitional level, 'xenophobia' – from the Greek *xénos* (stranger, foreigner) and *phóbos* (fear) – refers to hostility towards people perceived as foreign. It is often understood as an irrational fear or suspicion of outsiders, leading to exclusionary practices. In contrast, 'racism' is a system of power and domination that classifies people into hierarchical categories

based on perceived racial differences. While xenophobia may manifest as an aversion to foreigners, racism entails deeper structural and historical dimensions (Celikates 2025; Bonilla-Silva 2021).

Attending to this distinction is crucial for understanding the Swiss case. From the late 19th century through the Second World War, state discourse produced a specific narrative of the 'Other' that was increasingly couched in the language of cultural difference and national protection. Xenophobia thus became more than a description of sentiment: it was institutionalised in law, embedded in nationalist policies, and deployed to define the boundaries of Swiss identity. This history laid the groundwork for the post-war articulation of the post-racial – a discourse that denies the presence of racism while reproducing its effects under the guise of cultural incompatibility and demographic threat.

Ronald Sundstrom's work is instructive here. He defines xenophobia as a form of civic ostracism, a practice of excluding individuals or groups from full membership in the polity by casting them as "perpetual foreigners" (*Ausländer*) (Sundstrom 2013, 71; Kim, Sundstom 2014). In his framework, racism and xenophobia overlap but are not identical: racism produces hierarchies of superiority and inferiority, while xenophobia regulates belonging and national membership. Importantly, Sundstrom shows how U.S. political discourse shelters xenophobia by limiting racism to the Black-White binary, thus excusing anti-immigrant hostility as mere "fear" rather than racial domination. Yet, from the perspective of the Swiss case, Sundstrom's account has limitations. His emphasis on belonging and civic membership foregrounds the 'morality' of exclusion but pays less attention to the structural embedding of racial imaginaries in state policies and institutions. By conceptualising racism primarily as a moral wrong of prejudice or hierarchy, his analysis risks underplaying the material dimensions of racialised governance (Lentin 2020): immigration law, labour market regulation, asylum procedures, and surveillance practices that concretely shape who counts as a full member of the Swiss polity. Here, Robinson's historical account of racialism helps illuminate these structural dimensions:

> Racialism, as I have tried to show, ran deep in the bowels of Western culture, negating its varying social relations of production and distorting their inherent contradictions. The comprehension of the particular configuration of racist ideology and Western culture has to be pursued historically through successive eras of violent domination and social extraction that directly involved European peoples during the better part of two millennia. Racialism insinuated not only medieval, feudal, and capitalist social structures, forms of property, and modes of production, but as well the very values and

> traditions of consciousness through which the peoples of these ages came to understand their worlds and their experiences. Western culture, constituting the structure from which European consciousness was appropriated, the structure in which social identities and perceptions were grounded in the past, transmitted a racialism that adapted to the political and material exigencies of the moment. (Robinson 1983, 66)

In his account of racialism, the very categories that organise inclusion and exclusion in Western societies are themselves racialised – historically forged through the entanglement of capitalism, colonial expansion, and the invention of European "civilisation" (Robinson 1983). From this perspective, xenophobia cannot be neatly separated from racism: both emerge from the same historical matrix of racial differentiation and capitalist order. While Sundstrom distinguishes xenophobia from racism in contemporary discourse, Robinson reminds us that these categories are historically intertwined: exclusionary categories like 'foreigner' are racialised and economically functional, embedded in long-term structures of Western capitalism and colonial expansion.

This dynamic is starkly illustrated in the 1922 anti-immigration poster previously analysed, which depicts foreigners as greedy figures draining Swiss wealth, captioned with the slogan "*Extragabe an Ausländer – 2 mal NEIN*". The very use of the term *Ausländer* exemplifies how Sundstrom's category is operationalised in practice, but the image also reveals what his framework misses: the convergence of xenophobic fears with racialised depictions of inferiority, uniting white immigrants and racialised colonial 'others' into a single threatening mass. In this context, anti-immigrant discourse and racialised imaginaries are inseparable; xenophobia acts not merely as fear of foreigners but as a material and symbolic device that legitimises exclusion while concealing structural racism. The poster demonstrates that in the Swiss case, civic categories like *Ausländer* were deeply racialised, economically functional, and embedded in both public discourse and administrative practice, fusing fear, hierarchy, and governance into a single, powerful mechanism of exclusion.

This example underscores a crucial distinction between xenophobia and racism. While Sundstrom's conceptual separation – xenophobia regulating belonging, racism producing hierarchies – is analytically suggestive, the Swiss case reveals the limits of this distinction. In practice, xenophobia functions as a firewall: a socially and legally sanctioned mechanism that masks the deeper operations of racial hierarchy. Anti-immigrant discourse, visually represented in media and codified in immigration law and administrative policy, obscures the structural, material, and economic dimensions of racialised governance, while presenting exclusion as

neutral, procedural, or civic-minded. In Switzerland, xenophobia is not simply fear or moral prejudice; it is a strategic tool that both enables and conceals race as a powerful technology (Lentin 2020, 5).

To understand why the distinction between racism and xenophobia has become so prominent in Swiss discourse, it is essential to examine the historical evolution of these terms within the national context. Xenophobia gained particular traction in Switzerland during the late 20th century, amid intense debates over immigration, national identity and European integration. Public memory often points to the Schwarzenbach years (1970-1977), when fears of so-called 'foreign overpopulation' dominated political debate and led to a series of nationwide referendums. Yet the deeper historical roots of these anxieties, and their entrenchment in Swiss legal and institutional structures, remain underexplored. As demonstrated in the essays by Weill-Lévy, Grünberg, and Glaus (1999; 2003), anti-immigrant sentiment in Switzerland has a long history. Their analysis of historical documents reveals that such attitudes have often been articulated through narratives of cultural difference rather than explicit racial hierarchy, highlighting a persistent – though frequently reframed – resistance to immigration.

This convergence of xenophobia and racism in Swiss discourse has been taken up by recent scholarship, most notably in the collective volume *Un/doing Race: Racialisation en Suisse* (dos Santos Pinto et al. 2022). The avoidance of race in discourse does not negate its structuring effects. Rather, it risks reinforcing racialised hierarchies by leaving unexamined the processes through which social distinctions are produced and maintained (dos Santos Pinto et al. 2022, 13-4). The concept of racialisation is key here, as it moves beyond essentialist understandings of race and instead foregrounds the historical and social attributions that shape power relations. In this sense, recognising how language both reflects and constructs racialised realities is crucial for critically engaging with Switzerland's ongoing negotiations of belonging and exclusion.

In contrast to the individualised and psychological framing of racism, many scholars have defined racism as a structural phenomenon. Étienne Balibar and Stuart Hall have shown that racism is not simply a matter of personal prejudice but a mode of social organisation that naturalises hierarchies between groups. If racism is seen merely as an emotional reaction – fear of the other – then the distinction between racism and xenophobia collapses, obscuring the structural dimensions of racialised inequality. David Theo Goldberg (2002) and Alana Lentin (2006; 2020) likewise emphasise the ways in which racism operates through state legal, economic, and political structures that maintain exclusion and inequality. These perspectives

are crucial in understanding why the term ‘xenophobia’ is often used to depoliticise discussions on race.

A striking example can be seen in a statement made by Swiss politician Thomas Stettler (Swiss People’s Party, UDC) during a televised debate on October 25, 2023: “We are not racist, but maybe we are xenophobic. We are afraid of foreigners, and yes, it is true, there are images that scare me. But being xenophobic is not a political flaw”. This statement reflects a broader tendency in Swiss political discourse to distinguish ‘xenophobia’ from ‘racism’, with the former often presented as a legitimate or even natural response to migration and cultural diversity. This discursive strategy minimises racism’s systemic and historical dimensions, shifting the focus to individual emotions and perceptions rather than institutional policies or structural inequalities.

In this context, there is an urgent need to interrogate the language and frameworks that sustain these dynamics. The way history is told and the vocabulary used to describe power relations play a crucial role in shaping collective memory and political discourse. As Braidotti argues,

> ethics is the other way around the vicious circle of language. It consists in unveiling this complex and paradoxical political economy and exploring its complexity and inner contradictions. To the extent that a text enacts the nexus of power and meaning, power and discourse of which it is composed, it both exposes and holds them to accountability. (Braidotti 2014, 165)

Interrogating language is not merely an academic exercise but a political necessity – one that allows us to unravel the interpretative frameworks that legitimise exclusion and invisibilisation. In the case of Switzerland, the dominant discourse surrounding race reflects this complexity. The use of terms like ‘xenophobia’ to address issues of exclusion and discrimination, particularly regarding racialised people, migrant workers, asylum seekers, or the Muslim community, reflects broader European tendencies to frame racial dynamics through civilisational decline (Lentin, Titley 2011). The persistence of such fear-based discourse has helped obscure the historical roots of these social divisions. This occurs even as Switzerland’s demographic composition has rapidly evolved: today, over 40% of the population has a migratory background, and in cities like Geneva, this proportion exceeds 65%.

Unlike other European nations engaged in colonial expansion during the 19th century, Switzerland, as a neutral state, could not define itself through military conquest or territorial claims. Instead, Swiss nationalism emerged through ideological and political mechanisms, many of which were racially charged.

Between 1850 and 1890, as Europe expanded its imperial reach, Switzerland struggled with its own national identity (Arlettaz, Arlettaz 2004, 56-8). Swiss elites, eager to assert the country's presence on the international stage and counter rising socialist movements, sought to create a unified nationalist ideology (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 9). However, Switzerland's small size and cultural diversity posed challenges. Unlike neighbouring nations, which could define themselves through shared ethnicity or historical rivalries, Switzerland had to craft its identity through other means. This process unfolded through two key narratives. First, Switzerland was depicted as a small, isolated nation whose survival depended on maintaining a distinct identity. This led to myths of the Alpine race and the idea of Switzerland as a defensive confederation, protecting itself from foreign threats such as the feudal Austrian Empire and the Holy Roman Empire. Second, the threat to Swiss identity was framed not as a military invasion but as the gradual dilution of the nation through migration. This fear was embodied in terms like *Überfremdung* – 'over-population' or better translated 'excessive foreign influence' – and *Überflutung* – an overwhelming flood of outsiders (Ibid., 10). These discourses on national preservation became deeply embedded in Swiss political thought, influencing attitudes toward migration well into the 20th century.

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Switzerland's relationship with migration shifted dramatically. Historically a country of emigration, sending Swiss workers abroad, the country began experiencing increasing immigration by 1850 (Arlettaz, Arlettaz 1991; Arlettaz, Arlettaz 2004, 10-6). By the early 20th century, immigrants outnumbered emigrants, transforming public perceptions of foreign presence. This demographic change stoked anxieties, giving rise to the concept of *Überfremdung*, which became central to Swiss nationalism (Jost 1999). Over time, these anxieties coalesced around the foreign worker, especially those seeking long-term settlement.

This discourse evolved in response to distinct waves of immigration, each provoking varying social and political reactions. In the mid-to-late 19th century, German migrants, many of whom settled in border cities and held influential positions in the labour market, fuelled nationalist fears of foreign dominance. Their presence, tied to the broader currents of Pan-Germanism, played a role in shaping early anxieties about Switzerland's autonomy. However, the arrival of Italian workers intensified these concerns (Arlettaz, Arlettaz 2002). Unlike the

Germans, Italians were primarily low-wage labourers, and their numbers surged – from 1.4% of the population in 1888 to 5.4% by 1910 (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 36). Many lived in poor conditions, forming isolated communities, such as Zurich's Aussersihl district, which became a symbol of fears that Switzerland's urban centres were being transformed by an impoverished foreign proletariat. By the early 20th century, migration anxieties expanded beyond Italians to include French-speaking migrants, Eastern European Jews, Roma[5], and other groups perceived as culturally or politically disruptive. The fear of Jewish Bolshevism – the idea that Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe might bring radical leftist ideologies – became especially prominent, as concerns about communism intersected with longstanding antisemitic stereotypes. By World War I, over 15% of Switzerland's population was foreign-born, further intensifying nationalist fears of an irreversible demographic shift (Piguet 2017, 13).

The concept of *Überfremdung* was significantly shaped by Carl Alfred Schmid, a key figure in Swiss nationalist and immigration debates. As secretary of Zurich's welfare organisation and a leading member of the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique*, Schmid framed immigration not only as an economic burden but as a spiritual and cultural threat. In his 1900 work *Unsere Fremdenfrage*, Schmid argued that the degree of *Überfremdung* was so severe that "the existence of the country was a miracle". He viewed immigration as a "real invasion" and insisted that only those who were genuinely Swiss in spirit should be allowed citizenship, to preserve the *Schweizertum* (Swissness). Schmid and others emphasised that naturalisation was not just a legal process but required a deeper spiritual assimilation. For them, immigration was a 'patriotic question' about safeguarding Switzerland's national identity (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 36-7). Schmid's concerns extended beyond Italy, as he echoed German nationalist fears that German-speaking Switzerland was becoming a "dominion" of the German Empire, further reinforcing the idea that Swiss identity was at risk of being absorbed by its larger neighbours. His rhetoric helped shape early immigration restrictions and expanded the Swiss immigration control system, ensuring that *Überfremdung* remained a central theme in Swiss nationalism throughout the 20th century.

[5] Racism against the Roma (Tsiganes) in Switzerland is a significant yet often overlooked aspect of the country's history of racial discrimination. Although this issue will not be the central focus of the present analysis, it is important to recognise that Switzerland has followed a specific path of racism that targeted this group. In the early 20th century, Roma people were subjected to expulsions and Swiss authorities took several initiatives to address what they termed the "Gypsy plague". This historical racism adds an important layer to Switzerland's broader legacy of exclusionary and discriminatory practices against marginalised groups. (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 48-9)

In addition to fears of cultural dilution, *Überfremdung* also manifested in discriminatory attitudes towards certain ethnic groups. For example, Walter Burckhardt, a prominent legal figure, argued in 1913 that Switzerland must urgently adopt policies to combat the threat of foreign invasion, particularly from Slavs, Semites, and Mongols – groups he viewed as racially undesirable (Ibid., 47). These views were reflected in concrete measures, such as the systematic denial of entry to Polish Jews, who were seen by Swiss authorities as inherently undesirable.

By 1914, these fears had moved beyond intellectual debates and were codified into state policy, becoming embedded in Swiss immigration law and police practices. This institutionalisation illustrates how nationalist and racial ideologies were not just socially pervasive but also structurally enforced. In 1914, the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique* was founded by individuals who feared the country's "peaceful foreign invasion". This sentiment found expression in the rise of nationalist movements, such as the extreme-right *Ordre et Tradition*, which became the *Ligue Vaudoise* in 1934 (Andersson 2011). These movements promoted the idea of racial purity, using terms like 'schweizerisch' (Swiss) and 'unschweizerisch' (un-Swiss), and celebrated the 'Homo alpinus', an idealised image of the native Swiss. This rhetoric promoted the notion of racial superiority, drawing on earlier ideas like the Aryan racial classification introduced by the Swiss Federal Council in 1884 (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 39).

During this time, the fear of *Überfremdung* became particularly pronounced, often manifesting as anxiety over the so-called 'Jewification' of Switzerland. This fear was not simply about religious or cultural differences but reflected a deeper nationalist anxiety over a group perceived as stateless and unassimilable. The growing racialised perception of immigrants, particularly Jews, became central to the development of Swiss thought, reinforcing broader European trends of racial exclusion (Picard 2000). As European nationalism sought to construct nations as organic and rooted in territorial belonging, the Jewish people, seen as cosmopolitan and mobile, were cast as eternal outsiders who could never truly integrate. Their perceived detachment from territorial nationalism reinforced antisemitic narratives, portraying them as powerful yet dangerously unrooted, linked to finance, the press, and intellectual life in ways that nationalists viewed with deep suspicion (Lentin 2020, 126-8).

As antisemitic movements gained traction in Germany, similar sentiments began to emerge in Switzerland, especially by the late 19th century. A key manifestation of this shift was the 1893 ban on ritual slaughter (*shehita*), a measure explicitly targeting Jewish communities. The prohibition heightened anxieties about foreignness in Switzerland, suggesting that certain migrant communities were unassimilable and thus posed a perceived risk to the integrity of the Swiss national body. Erlanger explains:

> It was thought that Jews would not want to live in a country where the supply of kosher meat was not guaranteed. In the first use of the new democratic right of "initiative and referendum", a majority of the Swiss voted to ban *shehita* in 1893. This was not only made law but added to the constitution, where it remained for eighty-five years until in 1978 it was incorporated into the Law for the Protection of Animals following two popular referendums on the issue. (Erlanger 2006, 72)

This ban marked a turning point in Swiss discourse, intertwining antisemitism with nationalist and xenophobic ideologies, reflecting "the rise of antisemitism all over Europe at the turn of the 20th century (Ibid., 72). These ideas were embedded not only in political rhetoric but also in legal frameworks that systematically excluded certain groups from full citizenship. For instance, in 1912, Zurich imposed a 15-year residence requirement for Jews, compared to 10 years for non-Jews, a measure approved by the Grand Council in 1920 and later extended at the federal level in 1926. This marked the beginning of institutionalised antisemitism in Switzerland, with the 'J' stamp as a clear symbol of this racial discrimination (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 54). The practice reinforced antisemitic sentiments, revealing the deep connection between nationalism, racial purity, and state power. Ultimately, the rise of antisemitism in Switzerland laid the groundwork for systemic exclusionary policies that would persist throughout the 20th century, underscoring how deeply racism was embedded in the nation's identity and legal structures.

The institutionalisation of racism in Switzerland took a significant step forward with the creation of the *Polizei der Ausländer* (Police of Foreigners) in 1917, a key body that would regulate immigration and criminalise foreign nationals (Moor 1982). This marked a critical moment in the formalisation of exclusionary policies, as it institutionalised the racialisation of migration and introduced legal mechanisms to monitor and restrict foreign nationals based on their perceived threat to Swiss identity.

The rise of this racialised discourse was accompanied by a push for greater centralisation of immigration controls. Cantonal authorities, traditionally autonomous, were now required to submit their decisions regarding foreign nationals to the Central Office, which had growing control over the process. The federal government increasingly shaped migration policies to align with nationalist and racial ideologies, emphasising the protection of Switzerland's cultural purity and economic interests. In 1920, the Swiss Federal Council outlined a vision for

immigration that prioritised individuals with a "good reputation", and those whose presence was seen as economically beneficial, such as domestic workers and skilled labourers. By 1921, the federal government required employers to register foreign workers with the police, further tightening restrictions on migrant labour (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 57-8).

This shift to centralisation reached its peak with the 1925 constitutional amendments that transferred authority over foreign nationals' rights to the federal level. The Police of Foreigners became an instrument of exclusion, targeting not only economic migrants but also anyone perceived as a threat to the nation's national integrity. Figures like Heinrich Rothmund, a key architect of this policy, played an instrumental role in shaping the enforcement of these laws, advocating for a strict control system and even overseeing the expulsion of foreign nationals seen as undesirable. As Weill-Lévy and colleagues (1999) argue:

> There is no doubt that Heinrich Rothmund 'ruled' as the master of the Police of Foreigners for thirty-five years. During this time, he surrounded himself with collaborators who shared his views and sought to embed them in both the law and the practice of foreign policy. He was the man who created the framework, the apparatus of the Police of Foreigners, whose spirit remains unchanged today. It was he, along with others, who prepared the legal texts and final decisions, the consequences of which would be the death of tens of thousands of people. Just like Max Ruth, Heinrich Rothmund embedded his ideas into the law and its practice. He always believed that the LSEE (Law on Foreigners' Stay and Settlement) allowed too much latitude for the cantons. He never hesitated to reduce it by centralising everything related to the Police of Foreigners. This opportunity was quickly given to him, as the Federal Council was granted full powers from September 1, 1939, until 1951, and its weakness allowed Heinrich Rothmund to implement 'his' Police of Foreigners. Convinced of his righteousness, incapable of any introspection, he built and applied a murderous policy based on exacerbated racist nationalism, his visceral fear of anything coming from the East, and his virulent antisemitism – a battle that would lead him to close the doors of Switzerland to Jews persecuted by the Nazis. (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 77)

By the late 1920s, Rothmund and others had created a permanent infrastructure for controlling immigration, centralising power, and ensuring that cantons became mere executors of federal orders. This shift culminated in a deeply entrenched system of exclusion, shaped by fears of *Überfremdung* and *Verjudung* (Jewification), which influenced Switzerland's policies toward

Jews and other foreign nationals. This racialised vision of Swiss identity, grounded in the belief that the nation must remain 'pure' from external influences, was not unique to Switzerland but reflected European trends. As Lentin notes,

> Racism and the specific ideas of antisemitism were used as arguments for building strong 'race nations' that could resist infiltration from the Jewish 'enemy within'. Jews were seen as having too much wealth and power despite the fact that the majority were clearly far from being either wealthy or powerful. Nonetheless, their influence was imagined everywhere; in both rapacious capitalism and subversive Marxism, as both robbers and revolutionaries. (Lentin 2020, 76)

Such perceptions, which painted Jews as a dangerous, omnipresent force in both economic and political spheres, reinforced the justification for their exclusion from Swiss national life.

Rothmund's policies contributed to a deadly legacy, as Switzerland, under his guidance, refused entry to many Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution. This exclusionary system was deeply entwined with racialised and ultranationalist ideologies that shape Swiss political and social life. Discourses of racial purity and national strength were not merely abstract notions: they produced tangible effects, systematically denying refuge to those most in need and reinforcing a broader culture of structural discrimination.

The interwar years saw the further entrenchment of state-led racial discrimination, particularly with regard to Jewish refugees. The Swiss administration's response to Nazi persecution was not simply a reaction to wartime pressures but rather the culmination of longstanding policies rooted in racism and nationalism. The 1930s and 1940s in Switzerland saw the rise of ultra-nationalist ideologies (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 81-4), which heavily influenced the country's immigration policies, particularly regarding Jewish refugees: The Law on Foreigners' Stay and Settlement (1931) was enacted explicitly to prevent "infiltration" (Erlanger 2006, 74).

As Nazi persecution intensified, Switzerland tightened its restrictions. The Police of Foreigners, under Rothmund and colleagues, developed legal instruments to limit Jewish immigration, including temporary stay permits and prohibitions on economic activity (Erlanger 2006; Parini 1997). From 1938 to 1944, roughly 22,500 refugees managed to enter Switzerland. According to the 1931-1933 law, they were expected to "transmigrate" – leave Switzerland as soon as passage to a third country could be arranged.

> With France's occupation in 1940, however, this became nearly impossible. Hence, in 1940 the Swiss government decided to intern most of the refugees who were unable to leave. First the men were put in labour camps; from 1942 women, younger children, and the elderly were sent to 'homes'. These were mainly old houses, unused hotels, or vacation compounds where the people lived in slightly better conditions that the men in the labour camps. Older children were distributed among Swiss families; hence families could stay separated for years.
>
> To build and administer the new system of labour camps and internment homes, a special agency was created, the Central Administration of the Labour Camps (ZL). It operated within the framework of the federal Department of Justice. By 1943-1944, the ZL was one of the largest government agencies in operation.
>
> Although camps were used to alleviate labour shortages in constructing fortifications and military roads, whereas the homes were supposed to be responsible for repairing uniforms and equipment, both the camps and the homes actually served the aim of preventing the refugee integration into the society and labour market and ensuring transmigration. (Erlanger 2006, 74-5)

Beyond these economic aims, the camps and homes were also a mechanism for racialised and nationalist governance: the state identified certain bodies as 'undesirable' and regulated them through a combination of spatial, legal, and labour instruments. As Agier (2008) has argued, camps operate not merely as sites of containment but as administrative technologies that render populations precarious and socially disposable.

Throughout the war, Switzerland's policies became increasingly restrictive. In 1942, the government implemented a Jewish registry, categorising individuals as 'Aryan' or 'non-Aryan', embedding racial criteria into administrative practices (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 221). Measures such as the *Ruthschenkategorien* further institutionalised exclusion (Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 48-50). Despite some opposition, the Swiss state maintained an image as a neutral and humanitarian refuge. Yet slogans like "the boat is full" revealed the contradiction at the heart of Swiss policy: while projecting neutrality, Switzerland systematically closed its doors to Jewish refugees (Ludi 2014, 578-580).

By integrating longstanding racialised policies with wartime administrative practices, Switzerland demonstrated a form of exclusionary nationalism that, while distinct from Nazi

Germany's genocidal program, reflected broader European trends of controlling migration and defining national belonging along racial lines.

Switzerland's immigration policies after World War II were marked not by a rupture with the past, but by a continuity of exclusionary logics embedded in law. The anxieties that had shaped pre-war attitudes – particularly fears of Jewish immigration – were translated into legal frameworks that sought to distinguish between 'desirable' and 'undesirable' migrants. Instruments like permits were designed to select the 'better immigrant', while limiting the stay of those deemed socially or politically dangerous. This regulatory apparatus emerged from a context where antisemitism and anti-migration sentiments were deeply intertwined.

The roots of these policies can be traced back to June 1929, when the Swiss Federal Council proposed a law to regulate the stay and settlement of foreigners. This culminated in the 1931 Law on Foreigners' Stay and Settlement (LSEE), which would govern immigration throughout the 20th century. It introduced a system where residence and work rights were fused into a single permit, and foreigners were categorised into three hierarchical groups: seasonal, annual, and settlement permit holders. This structure formalised a system of selective inclusion and temporary labour.

Although the revision of the Foreigners' Stay and Settlement Act in 1948 marked a reluctant recognition that the 'foreign threat' had diminished[6], it preserved its foundational logic. Driven in part by the post-war economic boom, which led to an influx of migrant labour, the focus officially shifted from Jewish immigration to new targets of suspicion: workers from Southern Europe, especially from Italy. The Swiss government, in collaboration with unions, sought to prevent Italian immigrants from undermining the nation's economic stability and cultural identity. After World War II, the ideological foundations of Swiss nationalism and its racialised policies evolved in response to changing social and political landscapes. The shock of Europe's wartime destruction, coupled with the survival of Swiss neutrality, helped stabilise national values and institutions, creating a political environment in which both the working class and social movements found new opportunities within the established system. This 'magic formula' of governance provided a new political space for trade unions and socialist

[6] The Swiss Federal Council's report from 1948 recognised the success of the *Police des étrangers* and the reduction of foreign populations as a proportion of the national demographic. In 1910, foreigners accounted for about 14.7% of Switzerland's population; by 1945, that number had dropped to approximately 5%, indicating the effectiveness of policies aimed at reducing foreign influence (Weill-Lévy et al., 1999, 17-8).

movements, yet it was simultaneously shaped by the nation's racialised vision of its identity (Weill-Lévy et al. 1999, 17). Switzerland now managed immigration in a way that prioritised protecting the Swiss workforce from the perceived competition posed by foreign labour. This new form of racial nationalism, bolstered by trade unions and leftist organisations – such as the Labour Movement –, contributed to the stabilisation of a racist order under the guise of economic necessity. In this context, workers' rights and national identity became closely intertwined, reinforcing a system of discrimination that continued to affect foreign nationals long after the war's end.

This period saw a new form of racism take shape, where the state began to institutionalise the surveillance and management of foreign workers. The revision of the LSEE, indeed, marked a transition from wartime exclusion to a more systematic management of migration, centred on protecting the nation's economic and cultural integrity against the so-called threat of *Überfremdung* (Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 59-70). This post-war redirection of suspicion and exclusion was the result of a deliberate recalibration by institutions such as the Federal Police of Foreigners. This continuity underscores how Swiss immigration policy remained rooted in a racialised vision of the nation, even as its targets evolved.

As Colette Guillaumin observed in 1972, while 'race' may not exist as an essential biological fact, its consequences are deeply embedded in social structures and power dynamics. Her work has since been foundational, shaping a broader critique of social science objectivity and the denial of racial structures in modern societies (dos Santos Pinto et al. 2022, 17). In Switzerland, however, racism is often externalised, framed as a problem belonging to colonial empires or to fascist regimes abroad. Through selective memory, the country has positioned itself as innocent, distancing itself from events such as the Second World War and from broader histories of colonial and racial violence. This 'move towards innocence' (Tuck and Yang 2012) underpins Switzerland's ongoing refusal to confront its entanglements with racism.

The narrative of a 'post-racial' society – particularly the belief that racism disappeared with the fall of fascism (Catlin 2023) – has been central to this self-image. Yet, as Lentin (2011) argues, post-racial discourse does not mark the end of racism but its transformation into covert and institutionalised forms, often masked by appeals to culture, legality, or, in this case, neutrality. In Switzerland, the national myth of wartime innocence has reinforced this stance, allowing racism to be framed as either a foreign import or an individual aberration. This denial

obscures the racialised foundations of Swiss legal and political frameworks, especially in the governance of migration, citizenship, and belonging.

The analysis has also demonstrated that antisemitism, far from disappearing after 1945, was translated into new forms of exclusion. The very mechanisms once deployed to surveil and restrict Jews were later redirected toward migrant labourers and other 'foreign' populations. What appears as historical rupture is instead a continuity: racism adapts and reformulates itself through discourses of otherness, national purity, and cultural incompatibility. In this process, the language of xenophobia has played a crucial role. By substituting racism with "fear of foreigners", Swiss authorities have been able to diminish the violence of their own history, casting exclusion as a defensive reaction rather than a structural project. Yet discourses of fear – *Überfremdung*, *Überflutung* – function as more than rhetoric: they are structural tools that, through law and policy, translate anxieties about Jews and other migrants into the concrete production of racial hierarchies.

These discourses, rooted in late-19th-century anxieties about the purity of the national body and consolidated during the interwar and wartime periods, continue to reverberate in contemporary Switzerland. The racialised management of migration, the targeting of Muslim communities, and the silencing of minorities illustrate the persistence of older logics of exclusion within a post-colonial context. Switzerland's self-perception as detached from the violences of the Holocaust – and by extension from racial issues – has allowed racist legal and political structures to persist into the postwar era. As Lentin (2020) argues, strategies of denial and deflection are central to post-racial discourse; read through the Swiss context, these strategies can be seen in the country's efforts to obscure both its colonial entanglements and its participation in racial and economic hierarchies. Crucially, these hierarchies operate not only globally but also internally, structuring governance within Switzerland itself. In this sense, the narrative of "white innocence" (Wekker 2016) fosters a collective amnesia: a myth of Switzerland as an innocent bystander, which allows the country to sidestep accountability for its historical and ongoing participation in racialised systems of power.

2. Race at Work

Wir riefen Arbeitskräfte, und es kamen Menschen.

Max Frish

For many, racism is imagined as something that happens elsewhere, tied to the legacies of overseas colonialism, directed at visibly non-white populations and conceived as an exceptional occurrence rather than as a durable system embedded in institutions and everyday governance. It is precisely through this discursive displacement that the language of 'xenophobia' comes to function as a firewall, allowing discrimination to be acknowledged while insulating the national order from the charge of structural racism. This reluctance to name racism as such is reinforced by Switzerland's self-image as a neutral and non-colonial country (Purtschert et al. 2016), and by the historical fact that, for much of the 20th century, the groups most targeted by immigration laws – Jews, Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, and Eastern Europeans – were themselves white, making racialisation appear incompatible with the nation's own imaginary.

The words of Max Frisch, written as a new wave of Italian immigration was reshaping Switzerland's labour market, offer a powerful entry point for thinking about race and its articulation in the post-World War II era. The sentence – cited here in German – has circulated widely and has been translated in multiple ways. Yet the subtleties of the German original are often lost. The most common English version renders *Arbeitskräfte* simply as "workers". A more precise translation, however, would be "workforce". This nuance matters: whereas "workers" retains a sense of human individuality, "workforce" stresses the reduction of human beings to an abstract mass, a resource to be managed.

The French translation is even more revealing: "*Nous voulions des bras, nous avons eu des hommes*". The choice of *des bras* ("arms") makes the underlying dehumanisation explicit. Through metonymy, the worker's humanity disappears; only their physical capacity for labour remains. The body is fragmented, instrumentalised, and disposable.

The citation is striking for another reason: its pronoun *we*. It forces a reckoning with the collective responsibility of the Swiss population, the state, and the economic order. In just a few words, the sentence confronts us with the contradiction at the heart of the country's migration policy: between the demands of capitalist growth and the irreducible reality of human lives. The men and women who arrived in Switzerland did not merely "work". They

experienced labour, but also built forms of sociability, created communal spaces, organised collectively, and lived full lives – despite a political economy that sought to extract their labour while denying the transformative presence of their humanity.

At the same time, Frisch's sentence functions as a warning. In the decades after WWII, Switzerland's immigration regime operated as a kind of laboratory, where discourses and policies developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were reapplied and adapted to a new productivist order. Italians, in particular, became the subjects of this experiment – not passive victims, but nevertheless positioned as test cases for modes of labour control, regulation, and exclusion.

In this analysis, the Italians must not be understood as a homogeneous group or identity. Rather, the goal is to highlight their specific experience as symptomatic of broader modes of political management of migration, which continue to resonate today. As Robin D. Kelley reminded in a lecture at the Simpson Center in Seattle in 2018[7]:

> Race isn't simply or primarily about an identity. We confuse sometimes race with identity. It is a structure of power, a mean to structure power through difference. So, skin colour is not an essential feature of racism (…) The central story of race in the making of the capitalist order isn't always the most obvious story. (…) The story of race and the making of the global capitalist order is also about the capacity of capital and the state to capture the white working class and tie its identity to race: that is whiteness and masculinity.

This chapter takes up the question of how race works in Switzerland, a question that complements the first chapter's exploration of why naming and understanding race matters in this context. My central hypothesis is that racism in Switzerland has historically functioned through the management of migrant labour, adapting to the country's economic needs and political imperatives. Swiss immigration policies have continuously shifted to accommodate industrial growth while limiting the social integration of the foreign workforce, producing a form of selective inclusion that is both racialised and instrumental. By placing race and its local articulations at the centre of the analysis, I argue that contemporary forms of racism and anti-racism in Switzerland can only be understood through the historicity of these processes.

[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REo_gHIpvJc

The conceptual framework guiding this chapter is racial capitalism, as developed by Cedric Robinson (1983), which illuminates the ways in which capitalism and racism are deeply intertwined. Capitalism did not emerge as a race-neutral system but as one that has continually relied on racial differentiation to justify economic exploitation and social hierarchies. As Robinson argues,

> The tendency of European civilisation through capitalism was thus not to homogenise but to differentiate – to exaggerate regional, subcultural and dialectical differences into 'racial' ones. (Robinson 1983, 26)

Race, in this sense, is not a fixed category but a malleable and historically contingent construct, mobilised to sustain labour regimes and patterns of accumulation. Its effects are enduring:

> Racialism and its permutations persisted, rooted not in a particular era but in civilisation itself…as an enduring principle of European social order, the effects of racialism were bound to appear in the social expression of everyday strata of every European society no matter the structure upon which they were formed. None was immune" (Ibid., 28).

Racialism, in this sense, operates as a pervasive logic that shapes social hierarchies, institutions, and labour relations, rather than as a collection of isolated prejudices. This adaptability is evident across Swiss immigration history: from early targets like Jews and, in some cantons, Germans, to the post-World War II focus on Southern Europeans, notably Italians. Each group was framed according to the period's prevailing concerns – sometimes as existential threats, other times as economic necessities yet socially undesirable.

Since the 1990s, immigration regimes have changed in form – shaped by new models such as the Three-Circles Model and by the EU free-movement agreement – but they have consistently organised migrants through hierarchies of cultural proximity. Refugees from the Balkans, highly skilled 'third-country' nationals, or more recently Ukrainian asylum seekers were all positioned differently within this framework. The tools shifted, yet the underlying racialised logic of differentiation remained. These successive migrations show that racism in Switzerland has functioned less as a reaction to immutable difference than as a flexible technology of governance, calibrated to the demands of capital and state power.

In the first chapter, we reflect on the broader history of immigration in Switzerland, drawing in particular on Etienne Piguet's chronology. Building on this, the first part turns to the discourse of *Überfremdung* introduced earlier and focuses on the elaboration and concrete implementation of the work permit system. This means giving particular attention to the immediate post-World War II years. While discussions of *Überfremdung* often begin in the mid-1960s, culminating in the well-known Schwarzenbach initiatives of the 1970s, here we argue that the postwar period is crucial: it marks the implementation of the administrative and policy framework that would structure labour migration and racialising processes for decades. In this context, Italian migrants occupy a central place, serving as a testing ground for these policies and for the broader hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion that would later affect other groups.

The second section of the chapter examines the lived experiences of migrants during this formative period. By combining institutional history with oral testimonies, we can understand how legal precarity translated into social exclusion, family separation, and vulnerability to multiple forms of violence.

This chapter therefore makes three key contributions. First, it revisits and complicates the chronology of migration in Switzerland by foregrounding the postwar years. Second, it traces how earlier discourses and policies were reconfigured into a systematic regime of labour management, with Italian migrants at the centre as the first subjects of this experiment. Third, it brings into focus the lived realities of these migrants, whose presence illuminates how racism in Switzerland operated through and beneath whiteness, shaping both policy and everyday life. Understanding this chapter is fundamental for the next stage of the study, where we will examine the development of racist discourses, how they were contested, and by whom.

2.1 Immigration and Labour Management: Italians as a Testing Ground

> "*You know, I don't have much memory, and let's admit it, you need a good memory to keep certain things in your head, don't you? I've always had little memory, what can I do? But listen, here's something: see this street here? There are sixteen houses. Not a single Swiss person lives here. All foreigners, all foreigners*".
> He pauses.
> "*I was in the hospital once because I had broken my femur, and there was a Swiss man there, a patient like me. We talked and he told me that he had bought a house in France. And he said: 'They all accepted me very, very well'. So, I replied that I had bought my*

house in Switzerland, and that I too had been accepted very, very well. And I added: on the street where I bought my house, there isn't a single Swiss person".

(Oscar)

Oscar leans back in his chair and laughs, his wife smiling beside him, as the memory of this encounter comes alive. Both are now in their nineties. Their lives tell a story that echoes that of many Italian migrants in Switzerland. He first arrived in the 1950s, one of countless young men drawn by the postwar economic boom and the demand for flexible labour. Shortly after his arrival, he met Maria, the woman who would become his wife. She had also come from northern Italy[8], hired as a live-in domestic for a wealthy Genevan family. Together, they slowly built a life in Switzerland, first as precarious foreign workers and eventually as homeowners.

As his wife joins the conversation, the geography of their street takes shape: Italians and Spaniards, French neighbours who had come during the Algerian war to avoid conscription, a Tunisian family, Germans, a woman from Trieste, and even British residents. Over time, the 'foreign' became the everyday fabric of this neighbourhood, a microcosm of a wider history of migration in Switzerland.

This anecdote offers a living illustration of broader demographic realities. Switzerland today is often described as a country of immigration: in 2025, foreign nationals represent roughly 27% of the total resident population, one of the highest proportions in Europe, and this share climbs above 40% in cantons such as Geneva, Basel, and Zurich (OFS 2025). Geneva in particular, where this research mainly focuses, has long been the country's most 'migrant' city, hosting communities from across Europe and beyond. Yet understanding the dynamics of foreign populations in Switzerland is complex. Switzerland has experienced multiple migration waves whose legacies are unevenly visible today. Some migrants – initially Italians and later Spaniards – arrived primarily as 'guest workers' in the mid-20th century, and their second and third generations are now largely Swiss nationals, often disappearing from official statistics[9] on

[8] Most of the interviewees in this section are from northern Italy, as they belong to the older generation. After the war, seasonal Italian workers came mainly from the poorer and more remote areas of the north. Later, they arrived increasingly from the centre, and especially from the south. This shift is significant, as it also reflects broader conditions within Italy (Magnin et al., 61).

[9] Swiss population statistics distinguish between residents with a migration background and foreign residents. The category "population with a migration background" includes people born abroad or with at least one parent born abroad. In contrast, the category "foreign residents" refers only to non-naturalised individuals who hold a foreign nationality, whether permanent or temporary.

For example, about 40% of Switzerland's population has a migration background, whereas foreign residents account for roughly 27% nationally. In Geneva, this proportion is higher due to historical patterns of immigration

‘foreigners’, even though their family histories remain shaped by migration (Piguet, 2017). Portuguese migrants, by contrast, arrived later and often followed more circular or temporary migration paths[10]. Other groups, such more recent arrivals from the Balkans, Asia, Africa, or the Middle East, follow different trajectories, shaped by changes in migration governance, labour demand, asylum law, and the EU free movement agreement. Additionally, the reality of foreign labour in Switzerland today cannot be understood without accounting for the history of cross-border workers, whose presence is central to the functioning of the local economy while simultaneously fuelling contemporary anti-immigration discourse[11] (Barcella 2019).

These current dynamics are the result of a longer history of selective openness and restrictive governance. As discussed earlier, after World War I, Switzerland largely closed its borders to immigration, driven by concerns over unemployment and rising anti-foreign sentiment. This shift is encapsulated in the early discourse of *Überfremdung* (Weill- Levy 1999). Yet after World War II, economic expansion generated an urgent demand for foreign labour. Industrial and agricultural employers pressed the federal authorities to recruit workers abroad, leading to the 1948 labour agreements with Italy, later followed by Spain and other European countries. The Swiss state positioned itself as maintaining a careful balance: on the one hand, it adopted a liberal economic approach to secure flexible labour, and on the other, it reassured the public through protective and nationalist rhetoric, insisting that these workers were ‘temporary’ and would ultimately return home (Piguet, 2017). This ‘myth of return’ underpinned the guest worker system, institutionalised through the seasonal permit and strict settlement controls, themselves codified in the Federal Law on Foreigners’ Stay and Settlement (LSEE) of 1931, which remained the cornerstone of migration governance for much of the 20th century.

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and cross-border mobility. Differences between these two measures reflect naturalisations: when the overall population grows primarily through Swiss nationals rather than foreign residents – as in 2024 – this is often because of the naturalisation of long-term residents, mostly from European Union or EFTA countries, including Italians, Spaniards, French, and Portuguese. These distinctions are important for interpreting trends in immigration, integration, and the demographic visibility of migrant communities.

[10] Portuguese workers were already present in Switzerland in the 1970s, but larger waves of immigration began in the mid-1980s, motivated by both the search for better economic opportunities and, earlier, the political repression under the Salazar regime. Despite being categorised as white, Portuguese migrants still occupy lower economic positions today. Many return to Portugal upon retirement, after decades of work in Switzerland. Their experience illustrates the nuances of racialised labour hierarchies: while formally “white”, their social and economic positioning highlights how inclusion functions within Swiss society. We will later explore the Portuguese workers’ experiences in more detail, particularly to interrogate the intersection of whiteness and labour within Switzerland’s racial capitalist order (see chapter Six).

[11] This thesis does not specifically address cross-border workers. However, in the analysis of contemporary trade union activities (see Chapter Five), cross-border workers from France are among those involved in certain labour struggles in Switzerland. While this theme is only tangentially examined here, it remains closely related to the dynamics discussed. A more extensive investigation of their participation in Swiss trade unions would provide valuable perspectives on current forms of labour and mobility.

Seen in historical perspective, the evolution of Swiss immigration policy is neither linear nor neutral. The fluctuating numbers – about 16 percent foreign nationals in 1963, 19.8 percent in 2000, and 27 percent today – reflect alternating phases of recruitment, restriction, and selective integration (OFS, 2024). Yet behind these shifts lies a consistent logic: the racialised management of labour. Migrant populations were incorporated economically but positioned socially as temporary, expendable, and outside the full moral community of the nation. This tension – between economic dependence and social and political exclusion – is a central feature of what Cedric Robinson (1983) theorised as racial capitalism, in which capital accumulation relies on the differentiation and hierarchisation of human groups. In 20th Switzerland, such hierarchies were produced both through colonial narratives – though these were certainly part of the broader imaginary, as illustrated in anti-foreigner posters such as the ones studied by Christelle Maire in *Afficher les étrangers!* (2023) – and through the continuous recalibration of 'Swissness/Whiteness' as a category of belonging and moral worth, which gradually absorbed some Europeans while keeping others perpetually marginal.

In his work on Swiss migration history, Etienne Piguet outlines five major phases that characterise what he calls a logic of "*entreouverture*" – a cyclical pattern of opening and restricting access to the Swiss labour market, depending on shifting political and economic conditions (Piguet 2017). According to this framework, Switzerland's borders have never simply opened or closed; rather, immigration policy has been marked by nuanced recalibrations: moments of selective openness, followed by restrictive reactions driven by public anxiety and political debate, and economic demands. This pattern continues to shape contemporary immigration politics. In Switzerland, migration has long been among the most debated and contested issues in public discourse. The country's legal frameworks are subject to frequent popular votes and referenda, with major reforms occurring on a near-biennial basis. Policies regulating foreign labour, asylum, and naturalisation are thus not just legal instruments, but political battlegrounds – sites where concerns over national identity, economic protectionism, and social cohesion intersect.

Piguet's five phases offer a useful chronology for tracing this evolution. The first phase, from 1948 to 1962, was marked by a general openness, driven by the urgent postwar need for foreign labour – particularly from Italy, which became the main provider of workers during these years. This period was followed by a shift: from 1963 to 1973, a wave of public xenophobic discourse culminated in the rise of the Schwarzenbach initiatives, which aimed to significantly reduce foreign presence in Switzerland. Though these efforts failed at the ballot

box, they left a lasting imprint on the national imaginary. The period ended with the 1973 oil crisis, which ushered in a more restrictive economic and migration climate. Between 1973 and 1984, tens of thousands of foreign workers – especially Italians and Spaniards – lost their jobs and were either forced or pressured to leave the country. The fourth phase, from 1985 to 1992, was characterised by renewed immigration flows, although now with more varied motivations – family reunification, humanitarian protection, or long-term settlement rather than temporary labour alone. Finally, Piguet identifies a fifth phase, marked by uncertainty and contested reforms, in which political actors continue to debate how to reconcile economic dependency on foreign labour with restrictive and often criticised migration regimes (Piguet 2017).

While Piguet's chronology offers a valuable overview, it is worth recalling, as he shortly does in the first chapter of his book, that Switzerland, although primarily a country of emigration until the 18th century, began to experience significant immigration during the 19th century – especially in its second half, with industrialisation and the growing demand for skilled artisans. Many of these early migrants came from neighbouring countries such as France, Germany, and Austria. As noted in *L'immigration en Suisse*,

> from 1890 onwards, for the first time, Switzerland counted more immigrants than emigrants. The foreign population, which had been 3% in 1850, rose steadily to more than 15% by 1914. Concentrated in urban areas, foreigners accounted for 34% of Zurich's population, 38% in Basel, 42% in Geneva, and 51% in Lugano. Throughout this period, marked by economic liberalism, free movement was taken for granted by the authorities, and the Confederation concluded treaties with 21 other states in this regard" (Ibid., 13)

By the final decades of the 19th century, Italians had become a major component of the labour force, particularly in low-skilled sectors. Their presence did not mark an episodic or accidental encounter with hostility, but rather the early consolidation of a structural relationship between capitalism and racism. The 1868 Convention between Switzerland and Italy, for instance, proclaimed a "perpetual friendship" and guaranteed reciprocal rights of residence and trade. Italians were to be treated on the same footing as Swiss citizens when residing in different cantons, provided they complied with local laws. Yet such juridical universalism coexisted with differentiated forms of incorporation that positioned Italian workers as a subordinated labour force within the expanding industrial economy.

A particularly revealing example of this early Italian presence is the construction of the Gotthard railway tunnel between 1872 and 1882, one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects of 19th century Europe. Far from being a purely national undertaking, the tunnel was central to Switzerland's integration into international economic and transport networks, facilitating transalpine trade and consolidating the country's strategic position within European industrial capitalism. Hundreds of Italian workers were recruited to perform the most dangerous and physically exhausting tasks. Working conditions inside the tunnel were extremely harsh: long shifts, exposure to explosives and toxic gases, inadequate ventilation, and widespread hygienic neglect. Housing conditions were equally dire, with workers crowded into unsanitary barracks. Many labourers returned to Italy suffering from what contemporaries referred to as the "tunnel's disease", a condition encompassing silicosis, malnutrition, chronic exhaustion, and infectious illness, often leading to long-term disability and premature death (Kaestli 2004, 27). These conditions were not accidental but structural. They reflected the expendability of migrant labour within an industrial capitalist logic that prioritised speed, profitability, and national prestige over workers' lives, while externalising the human costs of industrialisation onto foreign bodies. Italian workers were thus incorporated into Swiss modernisation as necessary instruments of extraction, while being excluded from its social and political rewards. Crucially, this regime of exploitation also generated organised resistance. In 1875, Italian workers organised a strike to protest wages, working conditions, and the lack of basic protections. The response was violent. Louis Favre, the chief engineer of the project, called for police intervention; the repression resulted in the killing of thirteen workers (Ibid., 28-33).

Despite its significance, this episode remains largely absent from public memory. The Gotthard tunnel continues to be celebrated as a triumph of Swiss engineering and industrial progress, while the violence inflicted on migrant workers is marginalised. This selective remembrance is strikingly evident in contemporary commemorations: in January 2026, events marking the centenary of Louis Favre's birth are being organised by the municipality where a square bears his name, yet the organisers reportedly remain unaware of the lethal repression carried out under his authority. The deadly exploitation and repression that made the project possible are excluded from the narrative. This asymmetry underscores how Swiss industrial expansion continues to be memorialised through technological achievement and national prestige, while the human costs of capitalism are rendered invisible.

If the Gotthard experience exposes how Italian workers were positioned within a capitalist and extractivist order, events in Zurich at the end of the century illuminate another crucial dimension: the emergence of a hostile public discourse that framed their presence as a

social threat. Anti-Italian riots, such as those that erupted in Zurich in 1896 (Gatani 2004, 35-6), during which crowds attacked Italian workers and destroyed restaurants and housing, demonstrate that racialisation operated not only at the level of labour exploitation but also through popular mobilisation and nationalist imaginaries (Piguet 2017, 14). The deployment of the army to restore order underlines the intensity of this hostility. Taken together, these episodes complicate any narrative that situates Italian migration merely as a later 'problem' of integration. Long before the formal codification of migration regimes in the 20th century, Italian workers occupied a position that prefigured later forms of differential inclusion: economically indispensable yet socially stigmatised and politically marginal. Crucially, this positioning was not exceptional but part of a broader matrix of population management in which different figures of alterity were governed through overlapping logics. The violence surrounding the Gotthard project and the Zurich riots reveals an early articulation of a governing rationality that combined labour demand with racial exclusion – one that would later be extended and formalised in relation to other groups, including Jews. Anti-immigration sentiment and antisemitism were thus already embedded in the regulation of work, welfare, and belonging, anticipating the frameworks that would structure Swiss migration and refugee policies after 1945.

Historical research shows that this logic did not remain confined to isolated episodes but was progressively consolidated at the level of state policy well before and during the Second World War. The Independent Commission of Swiss Experts (CIE), established in the 1980s to investigate Swiss policies during the war, highlighted a key factor: the fear of foreign overpopulation and antisemitism was closely intertwined with economic and employment policy considerations. The authors of *Suisse: un essai sur le racisme d'État* (1999) further explain that:

> with the support of professional associations, the Department of Justice and Police also fought against 'economic foreign overpopulation' since the 1929 crisis. Refugees were forbidden to work. Consequently, they could not compete with the Swiss on the labour market, but the threat of such supposed competition was raised throughout the war. One example: Robert Grimm, organiser of the only general strike Switzerland ever experienced, intervened in September 1943 to express the concern of Swiss workers (through their unions) about the influx of Italian refugees who could disrupt the labour market and cause unemployment. The access of Jewish refugees to training programs also provoked fears of competition. 'We owe nothing to the refugees': boldly, the Young

> Radical Vaudois demanded in November 1943 the exclusion of all refugees from universities. To workers, to professionals, to each his slogan! The ideology of the 'foreign invasion' overflowed with inventions! (Weill-Lévy 1999, 47).

Concerns about the presence of foreigners in Switzerland were never confined to a single group but instead drew on overlapping and shifting discourses. As seen earlier, antisemitic narratives of the late 19th and early 20th centuries depicted Jews as a threat to the national body – accused both of spreading leftist ideas and of belonging to a people without a proper homeland. Italians, by contrast, were imagined as having a national community to return to yet were still subjected to the same logic of provisional presence and conditional inclusion. They became early test cases of how migration could be treated as simultaneously indispensable to economic growth and framed as an existential danger. What might appear as simple xenophobia was in fact part of a structured interplay between labour demand and national identity: migrants were essential to prosperity but persistently represented as socially and culturally threatening. This tension deepened in the 1930s and 1940s, when many Italians were not only labour migrants but also refugees fleeing fascism and the Nazi regime, revealing how legal, economic, and political logics combined to shape racial exclusion.

In fact, beyond economic migration, Italy's turbulent political context in the early 20th century deeply shaped Italian presence in Switzerland. Mauro Cerutti's (1991) study of Swiss responses to Italian antifascist exiles between the world wars reveals the multiplicity of local political dynamics in shaping a national migration regime. In the absence of a uniform federal policy, the decentralised structure of Switzerland allowed for varied canton-level responses to asylum seekers and political refugees, which produced uneven experiences of reception and integration. Some cantons, particularly those where socialist parties held influence in local or regional governance, employed these refugees in ways that extended social benefits. Workers' organisations and leftist municipal authorities often collaborated with expatriate networks – *fuorusciti* (Cerutti 2004, 83-89) – to channel antifascist Italians into supportive environments, sometimes facilitating access to housing, work, or community infrastructure. These solidarities coexisted with, and at times contested, prevailing racist and securitarian attitudes at the federal level[12].

[12] The cantonal divergences observed in the interwar management of Italian antifascist refugees continued to influence Swiss migration governance after 1945, particularly with the introduction of Permit A. Cantons that had previously accommodated antifascist exiles were more adept at integrating seasonal workers into local labour markets while mediating some of the social tensions that arose from short-term residency (Cerutti 1991, 319).

However, this localised capacity to mediate the effects of immigration management also generated friction. Federal authorities, concerned with *Überfremdung* and the potential infiltration of leftist ideologies, often viewed cantonal flexibility with suspicion. The very experience of politically engaged Italian refugees before the World War II had left a lasting imprint: Italians were not only economically useful but were also ideologically coded as potentially subversive (Caillat et al. 2009). Consequently, federal authorities sought to enforce uniform rotation and family separation rules as mechanisms of labour discipline and ideological containment, effectively overruling some cantonal efforts toward integration.

This dynamic produced a form of synergy and backlash: synergy in the sense that cantonal administrations could facilitate labour supply efficiently while maintaining local order, and backlash in the sense that federal policy – grounded in a racialised and securitised understanding of foreignness – constrained cantonal autonomy.

The hostility Italians experienced in the decades before the Second World War cannot be separated from the institutional frameworks that increasingly codified their status in law. The Law on Foreigners' Stay and Settlement (LSEE), adopted in March 1931, provided the cornerstone of Switzerland's migration regime for much of the 20th century. This law not only centralised authority at the federal level but also introduced a set of categories, mechanisms, and sanctions that defined how foreigners could reside and work in Switzerland. For Italian migrants in the postwar decades, the LSEE was more than an abstract legal text: it determined the conditions of their daily lives, shaping access to work, family life, mobility, and their very sense of belonging.

At its core, the LSEE produced a hierarchical system of residence statuses. Foreigners could obtain either an *autorisation de séjour* (residence permit), an *autorisation d'établissement* (settlement permit), or in some cases, mere *tolerance*. These categories were not neutral descriptors but forms of legal stratification that organised migrants into degrees of precariousness. Central to this system was the ideal of the "temporary immigrant". In the immediate postwar years, Swiss authorities welcomed the fact that Italian workers "were much more attached to their country of origin than the Germans" and therefore "had no intention of settling in Switzerland but would return on their own after a few years", which suited the goal of maintaining a flexible, seasonal workforce. The 1948 recruitment agreement with Italy further embodied this principle of temporary labour, stipulating a ten-year period before Italian workers holding an annual permit could qualify for a permanent settlement permit (Niederberger 2004, 93). To enforce this, periodic surveys by the OFIAMT tracked workers

approaching this ten-year threshold. For similar reasons, the OFIAMT advised employers to favour seasonal labour whenever possible, maintaining the flexibility of the workforce (Piguet 2017, 17).

This emphasis on temporariness was thus confirmed in these agreements while being also embedded in law. The LSEE codified the impermanence of foreign residence in formal articles. Article 5 established that residence permits were always temporary and revocable, normally limited to a year at a time. Settlement permits (art. 6) appeared more stable, but they too could be withdrawn under certain conditions, such as dependency on public welfare or prolonged absence from the country (art. 9). For those unable to produce "valid documents of legitimation", article 7 reduced their status to that of toleration, often requiring a financial deposit or guarantee. In this way, the law institutionalised insecurity as the norm for foreign workers: permanence was always conditional, and the shadow of revocation remained omnipresent.

The law also built a powerful apparatus of surveillance and regulation. Article 2 required every foreigner to declare their arrival to the Police of Foreigners within weeks, and even private hosts were obliged to report the presence of foreigners. Employers were legally bound to provide information to the authorities and could only hire workers if their residence authorisation explicitly allowed it (art. 3). Spatial mobility was tightly restricted: permits were only valid in the canton that issued them, and foreigners wishing to move had to seek prior authorisation from their new canton of residence (art. 8). In practice, this meant that migrant workers' lives were tethered not only to their employers but also to the police administration, which monitored their presence and movements with constant vigilance. The creation of the Federal Placement Office in 1946 also illustrates the Swiss state's commitment to tightly regulating labour migration. While presented as a tool for organising employment, it primarily served to control the inflow of foreign labour – especially male workers – under the logic of temporariness.

This policy was reinforced by political discourse on both sides of the border. In Switzerland, anti-immigrant rhetoric emphasised the need to protect national identity and limit foreign influence. Meanwhile, the Italian government supported labour emigration as a way to alleviate unemployment and prevent the rise of domestic labour unrest, thereby lessening the risk of a Communist rise to power. Swiss officials recognised this benefit as well as they emphasised the importance of supporting Italy to prevent communist influence from spreading along Switzerland's southern border (Caillat et al. 2009, 96). Authorities also believed that emigration might influence Italian workers' political attitudes, making them more likely to

support conservative and stability-oriented parties upon returning home. At the same time, Swiss authorities maintained strict controls to monitor political activity among Italian workers. Recruitment through the Italian Consulate allowed some Italian oversight of emigration, while Swiss officials sought to prevent workers from becoming politically active. In 1955, for example, around twenty Italian workers – members of the Labour Party and considered too radical – were arrested and expelled from Switzerland (Piguet 2017, 16).

The 1948 bilateral agreement between Italy and Switzerland formalised these dynamics: it permitted the importation of Italian labour while embedding mechanisms to limit their settlement and political engagement. That same year, the Swiss Federal Council passed a decree explicitly forbidding foreign nationals without a permit C from participating in public or private political meetings, further marginalising migrant voices (Magnin et al. 2019, 19).

Expulsion was another instrument foreseen by the law. Articles 10 and 11 specified that foreigners could be expelled not only for crimes but also for "abusing Swiss hospitality through repeated misdemeanours", for mental illness, or for the mere risk of becoming a burden on public assistance. Expulsion orders could automatically extend to a spouse and children under eighteen, unless the wife was Swiss – a provision that underscored both the patriarchal and nationalised conception of belonging embedded in the law. Article 14 even authorised internment for up to two years if deportation proved impossible, exposing migrants to a form of administrative detention without trial.

While the LSEE presented itself as a technical regulation of foreign presence, it was underpinned by an explicitly nationalist and demographic discourse. Article 16 stipulated that permits could only be granted with regard to the "moral and economic interests of the country" and to the "degree of foreign overpopulation" (*Überfremdung*). In doing so, the law translated fears of demographic imbalance into administrative practice, codifying *Überfremdung* as a criterion of governance and transforming racist rhetoric into a calculable principle of state policy. From the perspective of racial capitalism, this selective inclusion was economically functional: certain groups were admitted precisely for their labour potential, while the state simultaneously withdrew protection, rights, and recognition. In Foucaultian terms, through the biopolitical management of the nation – in which foreigners' bodies and labour were instrumentalised for the country's economic and industrial needs and prosperity – the state also enacted biopolitical withdrawal, treating these workers as external to the social body and rendering their precarity, ill-health, and social marginalisation 'normal' and unproblematic (Lichtenstein 2023). In other words, state racism and capitalist accumulation were mutually

reinforcing: the same policies that secured labour for industry also maintained hierarchies, controlled mobility, and legitimised differential vulnerability. Foreign workers were included when needed, exploited during their tenure, and simultaneously positioned outside the protections and recognition afforded to citizens, illustrating how racialised governance and economic extraction were deeply intertwined in the Swiss migration regime.

For Italian migrants in the decades after 1945, the implications were profound. Though indispensable to postwar reconstruction and economic growth, they remained bound by a legal system that defined them as disposable. The seasonal permit, which became one of the most widespread instruments of labour migration in the postwar years, derived directly from the LSEE's architecture of temporariness. Under this system, workers could be admitted for a maximum of nine months at a time (art. 18, c), after which they were required to leave the country for at least three months before being eligible to return (Piguet 2017; Mahnig 2005). Even when renewed year after year, the seasonal permit never translated into long-term security. Instead, it institutionalised enforced rotation, officially justified as a way to prevent overstaying and protect the Swiss labour market, but in practice establishing a structural barrier to integration. Workers lived with the constant knowledge that their presence was contingent on economic demand and political tolerance, rather than recognised as a durable contribution to Swiss society.

The legal architecture of Permit A tied the migrant's status to a specific employer, occupation, and locality. Any change in these conditions required explicit authorisation from cantonal authorities – a cumbersome process rarely granted. As Anderson (2010) has argued, such frameworks exemplify how labour market controls through the implementation of multiple immigration policies, producing a highly dependent and compliant workforce. The prohibition of family reunification reinforced this dependency: workers were required to live in employer-provided or approved accommodation, often in barracks or dormitories, and were denied the stabilising influence of family life. Seasonal workers were never intended to settle or integrate. There was no project of assimilation: families were kept at a distance, and housing arrangements often reinforced segregation. Although the legal provisions were formally neutral in terms of nationality, their application reflected entrenched perceptions about the desirability and 'fit' of different foreign populations. Italian workers, who made up the majority of seasonal labourers from the late 1940s to the 1960s, were routinely described in public discourse as industrious but culturally different – 'guests' rather than future compatriots. When considered through the lens of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983), this selective inclusion takes on an explicitly economic dimension: hierarchies of value are not only cultural but material, produced

and maintained by labour and migration regimes. In other words, it is the economic organisation of work, under capitalist imperatives, that structures the unequal treatment of migrant groups, while notions of culture or nationality serve as justifying discourses rather than primary causes.

Permit A was only the most precarious rung in a hierarchy of permits. Alongside it stood the annual residence permit (Permit B), which could be renewed but offered no guarantee of establishment, and the settlement permit (Permit C), which granted more durable rights after years of residence. After 1945, however, access to this coveted Permit C became even more restrictive: the required residence period was doubled from five to ten years, signalling both the state's mistrust of foreigners and the nationalist imperative to ensure that only those fully committed to long-term settlement might eventually qualify (D'Amato 2008). This extension reveals how legal time itself was weaponised to keep migrants in a prolonged state of probation. Even the so-called 'promotion of emigration' that characterised the postwar order, embedded in the 1948 bilateral recruitment agreement with Italy, did not translate into a path of inclusion. The agreement was meant to stabilise the Swiss economy within the Bretton Woods Agreement by securing a flexible supply of labour for construction, industry, and infrastructure. But it remained firmly within the logic of rotation: migrants were recruited, employed, and then expected to return, their contributions acknowledged in practice but denied in principle.

Permit A must thus be understood not only as a tool for regulating economic demand but also as an instrument to limit the right to stay, control the duration of residence, protect national identity, shield Swiss workers, and prevent political or ideological influence from abroad. As seen in Chapter One, immigration control was closely tied to anxieties over morality and 'Swissness', which were culturally and racially coded. Switzerland's notions of morality intersected subtly with racial ideals, informed not only by colonial imaginaries but also by European fascist and national-socialist discourses, and dehumanising processes during World War II further reinforced these hierarchies. Within this climate, the seasonal permit system became a site where competing levels of governance and political cultures intersected: cantonal practices could sometimes soften the rigidities of federal law, but they could not alter the structural logics of exclusion embedded in Permit A. Ultimately, the interwar experience of Italian refugees helped to shape Swiss postwar migration governance by revealing both the limits of cantonal discretion and embedding a persistent lens of ideological suspicion that intersected with racialised perceptions of Italian labourers. Historical continuities mattered: postwar campaigns against the 'permanent settlement' of Italians often drew on memories of antifascist mobilisation, casting them as both potential ideological and moral threats. Swiss trade unions and leftist parties, while occasionally voicing concern about migrants' working

conditions, were far from consistent allies (Stohr 2013); more often they prioritised the protection of Swiss workers' wages and status, and sometimes actively supported restrictions on settlement. The result was a compromise: Switzerland secured economic growth through a flexible, rotation-based workforce while preserving a hierarchical national imaginary that managed both racialised and ideological anxieties. Permit A, therefore, can be read not merely as an economic instrument, but as the continuation and formalisation of prewar strategies for controlling mobility, political affiliation, and cultural presence – an apparatus of governance rooted in exclusionary historical legacies and sustained by Switzerland's geographic dependence on neighbouring cross-border labour.

This structure of 'indispensable undesirability' reveals the entanglement of racialised governance. On the one hand, migrants were incorporated into the national economy as productive bodies; on the other, their lives were tightly circumscribed by legal frameworks that denied them stability, voice, and full social recognition. Inclusion was strictly conditional, reversible, and limited to the extraction of labour.

Although Italians were nominally 'white' Europeans, they were treated as a distinct and inferior population, tolerated only insofar as they fulfilled economic needs. Their racialisation operated through what might be called 'Swissness/Whiteness': a shifting boundary that absorbed some groups over time while marking others as perpetually foreign (Cretton 2017; Wekker 2016). The temporariness imposed by the LSEE was not a neutral legal form but a mechanism of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983), that is, a system in which capitalism and racism are mutually constitutive, with racial hierarchies structuring the extraction of labour and the distribution of value. The continuity between the interwar law and the postwar experience of Italian workers underscores a central point: Swiss state racism has functioned through the everyday management and codification of labour and migration. The LSEE made juridical reality of the fantasy that foreigners could be endlessly useful yet never truly belong, embedding exclusion into law and transforming migration governance into a laboratory for redrawing the nation's boundaries at the expense of migrant lives.

It was precisely this 'laboratory' function of Italian migration that enabled Switzerland to recalibrate and extend its recruitment strategies to other national groups. As early as 1958, Spanish workers began coming to Switzerland as tourists, often finding temporary employment. In March 1961, a labour migration agreement, modelled on the 1948 treaty with Italy, was signed with the Spanish government. The Swiss authorities welcomed the agreement as a way to diversify the origins of foreign labour. The Radical Vaudois councillor A. Jaunin, for

instance, expressed hope that a new contingent of Spanish agricultural workers would arrive, creating competition that would temper the increasingly demanding Italian workforce, particularly regarding working hours (Caillat et al. 2009, 106).

This 'open-door' policy continued into the early 1960s (Piguet 2017, 19-20). In this sense, the Italian case functioned as both precedent and benchmark: it tested the rotation and temporariness mechanisms of the workforce, provided a model for subsequent agreements with other countries, and allowed Switzerland to adapt to Italian governmental demands while maintaining control over migrant labour. Over time, it became clear that the rotation system did not always function as imagined, but the lessons learned from Italian migration helped codify practices and agreements for later labour flows.

Seen from this perspective, post-Second World War migration did not emerge in a vacuum but extended pre-existing logics into the new international order. Italian workers had long been present in Switzerland, and the racist imaginaries that structured their status were sedimented in political discourse, public opinion, and administrative and legal practices (Weill 2002). What changed after 1945 was less the content than the scale and international framing of labour recruitment. The bilateral agreement with Italy and the institutionalisation of the rotation system crystallised the postwar compromise: migration was welcome as long as it remained instrumental and ultimately reversible. Even as Switzerland presented itself as a humanitarian democracy in the post-Holocaust era, its migration regime remained marked by suspicion, surveillance, and a racialised hierarchy of belonging.

2.2 Layers of Dispossession: Migrant Workers' Experiences

> We were talking about racism – about how pervasive it is. I noticed his expression – uneased, maybe even offended. Without meeting my eyes, he said, "*You talk about racism to me, but I've lived it. Gino and I, we lived it. Maybe there are different kinds of racism. Maybe it's different now. But back then, it was directed at us*".
> My father left the room.

This fragment of dialogue does more than testify to an individual's past suffering. It unsettles how racism is usually thought about. My father's words point toward a conception of racism that is not fixed but historically situated, a phenomenon that reshapes itself depending on

context, targets, and political conjuncture. His refusal to look me in the eye, the unease in his expression, reveals less a denial of racism than a struggle to make sense of it: yes, racism exists, but it was not always directed at the same people. In that sense, the exchange illustrates what Hall (1996) argued: racism is not a fixed structure of domination but a historically adaptable set of practices and categories, rearticulated across different conjunctures.

At the same time, this unease cannot be separated from whiteness. For Italians and other white migrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, their position in Switzerland is profoundly ambivalent: they were once racialised as foreign, inferior and temporary, yet never fully stripped of the privileges that came with being European and phenotypically white. In evoking a "we", my father was speaking both of the men he worked alongside on construction sites in the 1990s and of the earlier generation – my grandfather's generation – who had arrived in the 1950s under harsher conditions. His words carry with them not only solidarity but also respect for those who endured the first wave of exclusions, whose sacrifices and struggles laid the ground for those who came later. To speak of racism in this way is to insist that their experience not be erased by later narratives of immigrant 'success'. Yet it is also to acknowledge the paradox of what Du Bois (1935) and Roediger (1991) called the "wages of whiteness". Southern and Eastern Europeans endured structural violence under the *Loi sur le séjour et l'établissement des étrangers* (LSEE), confined to temporary permits that denied them family life and civic recognition. Over time, however, whiteness facilitated a gradual acceptance: first as tolerated workers, then as integrated residents, and eventually as models against which 'new migrants' would be measured.

The unease in recalling this history lies precisely here: to remember racism directed at Italians and their peers is to resist its erasure, while also confronting the fact that this trajectory of acceptance was not universal. As Robinson (1983) reminds us, racial hierarchies are historically contingent and structurally embedded in capitalism: the gradual integration of Italians illustrates how whiteness could be deployed as a material and symbolic resource within a racialised labour regime. In contrast, other groups from Southern and Eastern Europe remained more ambivalently positioned, their exclusion maintained by the same structural logics. This tension permeates the memories of elderly Italian migrants today: recognition of what was built and sacrificed, coupled with a bitterness that persists.

> They invited me to dinner. They are not strangers to me. But I was to their story. Luciana welcomed me warmly, and before we sat down she insisted on showing me around their apartment. They live in the periphery of Geneva, in a modest building now

surrounded by new constructions and recently built habitations. For them, this apartment is a place heavy with memory: it is here that they raised their children, here that their family life took root. Luciana pointed out with pride the works they had done in the house – small renovations, improvements, details she was happy to show me, as if each change was another layer of their presence inscribed in the walls. Every room carried traces of that history: photographs, objects, and the atmosphere of continuity that comes from decades of inhabiting the same space.

Luciana has often told the story of her trip from Italy to Switzerland as a little girl, when she was only ten, in 1965. She has repeated it to her children and grandchildren, recalling her immigration, her memories, her origins. In a cabinet, she has even kept the luggage with which she and her mother made the journey. The marks of displacement are preserved alongside the life that followed. At the same time, what was emphasised was the happiness of their life in Switzerland. Again and again, the sentence came back: "*We have built something here, we are good here. Switzerland has been good to us.*"

Yet in the flow of this repeated narrative, another layer emerged when the question of nationality arose. It was Mario, her husband, who answered with quiet conviction: "*Do you have the Swiss nationality?*" – "*No*". – "*You were never interested?*" – "*No. Physically I am here, but my soul is in Italy*".

His words condensed the tension between rootedness and distance: the recognition of what has been built in Switzerland, and the refusal to translate belonging into formal national incorporation. The luggage in the cupboard, preserved for decades, and Mario's phrase – "*my soul is in Italy*" – sit together as reminders of a life made across borders.

(Geneva, March 2024)

Many resisted taking Swiss nationality, and their refusal constituted a small act of agency within a structure that sought to contain them. Mario's words echo a sentiment shared by many migrants of that generation: a refusal to translate physical settlement into full incorporation, which might have come at the cost of self-respect. In recent years, many also expressed a certain appreciation that their work has finally been recognised in Switzerland, though often with a smile that carries a trace of irony. The same society that once cast them as outsiders now hails them as proof of a successful multiculturalism.

This ambivalence is sharpened in recollections of the Schwarzenbach initiatives of the 1960s and 1970s, when anti-immigrant mobilisation sought to expel or drastically reduce the number of foreigners, overwhelmingly Italians (Arlettaz, Arlettaz 2004, 127-8). The bitterness of those years remains palpable. As Mario recalled:

> "*When the whole Schwarzenbach story came up, we were all like this*" (imitating a moment of anxiety, his body tensing up). "*It was decided by just a few votes, but half the country voted to send us away. But I would have liked to see how that story would have gone – if they had really sent us away, then what? Who would have done the hard work afterwards? It was us… the roads, the houses, who built them? The Swiss had all moved on to the good jobs, and the migrants did what was left over. But in the end, I never felt bad here, I got used to it quickly, you know? You couldn't just come here and shout*".
>
> (Mario)

His testimony highlights both the vulnerability and the pride of migrant workers: fear of exclusion, certainty of their indispensability, and the pragmatism of adaptation. Yet his last sentence carries particular weight. "*You couldn't just come here and shout*". In those few words lies a tacit recognition of the moral order migrants felt they had to inhabit. Adaptation was not only about work and survival; it was also about integrating into what many perceived as the Swiss way of being – orderly, discreet, avoiding excess. As older migrants often told their children, "*you must be more Swiss than the Swiss*". To live quietly, to accept rules without protest, became a way of entering the moral lines of 'Swissness'. This strategy was at once protective – allowing migrants to navigate a society that watched them with suspicion – and constraining, insofar as it demanded silence about the inequalities they endured. Mario's reflection, then, speaks to the lived negotiations of dignity: a recognition that being tolerated required conformity, even when that conformity reinforced their marginality.

If most testimonies from older migrants speak in this ambivalent register, they also reveal the multiplicity of migratory trajectories. Oral histories show that there was never a single migrant story, but rather a plurality of paths shaped by region, class, gender, and timing. Historian Paolo Barcella (2013; 2018), drawing on interviews and archives, has shown how Italians left for reasons ranging from economic necessity and political repression to personal aspirations or family reunification. Some arrived with contracts in hand, others came irregularly; some planned to stay only for a season, others settled permanently.

> "*Now they've built the road, there's a bus and everything. But back then, the road we had to walk. That's how it was in my village. My mother made me slippers out of worn-out car tires, then sewed them together. One day we went down the hill, the sky was clear and bright. But by five in the afternoon, when we came back out, there were fifty centimetres of snow, maybe more. With those slippers, with the rubber soles, I would take one step forward and then slide one step back, one forward and one back. So, you know what I did? I took the slippers off, tucked them under my arm, and kept going only with my socks. That's how life was*".
>
> (Oscar)

Oscar paused. Then quietly, in a tone almost impossible to hear, he added that he had to leave. He had no choice. He wished he could have been there for his parents. He repeated: "*I had to go, we had to*". He left illegally.

> "*To tell the truth, I came here by contraband. I had finished my military service, I had no work, and I wanted to go to Switzerland because there was work here. But you needed a contract. A few people from my village had gone to Switzerland, and there was one old man who had arranged a work contract for his son, who was living in France at the time. But his son didn't want to come to Switzerland, so he gave the contract to me. This man had the same last name as me, but a different first name. So, I went to the priest – he was the only one with a typewriter – and I added the name Oscar to the other one. But then you needed two months to get a visa. Someone told me what to do: 'Go to the café under the prefecture and ask for a certain man. Give him your name, put all your papers in an envelope with 500 lire'. You know how the mafia works in Italy. 'Then you'll see, a man will come down with a flowerpot to water it, and when he comes out you hand him the envelope. Two days later you'll have your passport in your pocket'.*
>
> *And so, I left. I didn't know the language, I didn't know anything, but I went straight to the town hall because I wanted to do everything properly. I was serious. That's how it had to be before you could go to work. And then they asked me why I was called Oscar. I told them that in church my name was Giovannino, but they didn't put Oscar because the priest didn't like it – there isn't a Saint Oscar on the calendar. So, they made the papers, and I was legal. After that, we came every year. I was a seasonal worker*".
>
> (Oscar)

This oral history delivers not only the ambiguity of migrant experience but also invites us to reconsider the timeline of migration from another vantage point. As Etienne Piguet's framework reminds us, Swiss migration policy has often been narrated through a chronology

of laws, treaties, and referenda, a story told from the perspective of the host country. Yet following Gennaro Avallone's engagement with Abdelmalek Sayad's work on migration as a "total social fact" (Sayad 1999; Avallone 2018), this history must also be reread from the migrants' perspective. From below, migration appears not simply as a response to labour market needs, but as something inscribed in biographies, desires, and strategies of settlement. The same chronology of laws and votes that Piguet reconstructs takes on a different meaning when refracted through lived experience: one where decisions to stay, to resist, or to adapt were inseparable from family life, community-building, and social and political subjectivity. Reintegrating this perspective shifts the analytical focus from a state-centered narrative of control to a more dynamic, relational understanding of migration as a social process.

This diversity of migration trajectories becomes even clearer when considering the experiences of women. Many Italian women entered Switzerland in the postwar period as domestic workers with year-long contracts, which gave them more stability than male seasonal labourers but also contributed to their social invisibility. Living in their employers' homes, they were often isolated from migrant communities, their labour essential yet hidden. Over time, some transitioned into factory work in watchmaking, papermaking, food processing, or textile production. Yet despite their growing economic role, their stories remain marginal in dominant narratives that privilege male-dominated sectors such as construction and agriculture. Scholarship on female domestic migration in Italy, such as Alessandra Gissi's "Le estere: immigrazione femminile e lavoro domestico in Italia (1960-80)" (2018), underlines the extent to which domestic labour shaped women's migration across Europe, while simultaneously rendering it socially invisible.

> I must be honest: I never expected to meet Oscar's wife, Maria. I had never wondered about her story. I knew of women who worked as domestics, but I never imagined her among them. The invisibility of domestic work is so persistent that it makes us forget it has its own past, its own voices. Stories remain unspoken, as if the labour that sustains everyday life could leave no record of itself.
>
> Oscar and I were speaking when Maria quietly left to prepare some coffee. When she returned, Oscar asked her to stay. He recalled a day when a doctor visited their home, surprised that an Italian worker could live in such a fine house. Oscar had smiled and replied: "*I worked all my life, but I told him: I wasn't the only one! We both worked for it*."

With pride, he turned to Maria and asked her to tell me her story. She spoke softly of her labour – she had arrived as a domestic worker. Later, after each childbirth, she paused, only to begin again in different places – eventually in a paper factory. It was a path marked by interruptions and restarts, a rhythm of resilience. Still, she seemed unsure of its worth. Then, almost as if searching for confirmation, she added: "*Your neighbour, I think she was also a domestic worker. I didn't know her much, but I remember she came like me, very young. Erminia, yes, that was her name*".

(Geneva, Octobre 2024)

Erminia came alone, without a network to receive her. A few years later her sister was also sent to Switzerland, to Zurich, and the two would never see each other again, though they spoke on the phone. Migration ran through her family: her father had spent seasons in Germany, and several siblings were scattered abroad. In Erminia's narratives, family is always at the centre. And so is loss.

"*I arrived in Switzerland on December 15, 1951. I would have liked to keep studying, but we had no means. You see, the only one in the family who managed an apprenticeship was my brother, and he died in the war. He was in the infantry.*

During the war, one day, we received a letter from the Red Cross. He wrote to tell us he needed food and warm clothes. He wrote regularly, but then the letters stopped. It was a nightmare for my mother. I remember it so well. We never heard from him again.

Later, when I was already living in Geneva, I read in the papers that Bulganin, the Russian president[13]*, was coming to Geneva. I knew which hotel he was staying in, so I took one of my brother's letters there. His name is on the war memorial in my village, but how could we be sure? I gave the letter to the secretary, because I had heard about a woman in France who had done the same thing – she had thrown herself in front of the president's car and managed to get news of her husband. I think my letter was probably thrown straight into the bin. That must have been around 1954. Since then, I cannot watch war films anymore*".

(Erminia)

[13] Nikolai Bulganin was Minister of Defense of the Soviet Union before becoming Premier in 1955. In her account, Erminia refers to him as "president" and situates the episode in 1954. It was most likely in 1955, when Bulganin came to Geneva for the Geneva Summit, that the event she recalls actually took place.

Erminia remembers every detail, every story, every name: the children, the grandchildren, the marriages – and the deaths. When I asked her about her work, she preferred instead to tell me the stories of the family she worked for: the weddings, divorces, and backstage intrigues of a wealthy Genevan household. And yet, eventually, she told me something of herself.

> "*When I arrived, I didn't speak a word of French, but my employer spoke a little Italian. They had a villa in Italy, so she knew a few words, and that made me happy.*
>
> *They treated me like family*, *except that my employer didn't want me going out in the evenings. And you know, Champel is a bit of a dead neighborhood. I would have liked to go out in the evenings. At the beginning it was hard.*
>
> *At some point I met another girl who worked for a family nearby, she was also from Belluno. Sometimes we went dancing together. Otherwise, there was the Italian church in Eaux-Vives. But I didn't like it much. Once I was asked to be the godmother of little Clara, and for that I had to confess. And that's when the priest tried to touch me. He told me he was just a man, like all men. I pushed him back and told him that if that's what he wanted, he should go to the Pâquis* [the neighbourhood with sex workers]. *From that day on, I never set foot in that church again. It was terrible. And then it happened to my friend too, with the same priest! But when she told her mother, her mother slapped her*".
>
> (Erminia)

Erminia's testimony places family at the heart of her experience. Her brother's death, the unanswered letters, the desperate attempt to seek confirmation from the Soviet president: these memories remain sharper than the recollection of her own labour. Migration, as Abdelmalek Sayad has argued, is always a total social fact: the first dispossession comes from what is left behind (Sayad 1999). For Erminia, what remains is memory, an absence that defines her life abroad as much as her work in Geneva.

Her story also highlights the specific constraints faced by migrant women. Unlike men who often circulated through construction sites or factories, she worked within the confines of a private home. Being "treated like family" did not erase the asymmetry of power: her movements were restricted, her evenings controlled, her isolation quietly reinforced. Even spaces meant to offer comfort and belonging, such as the Italian church, could turn into places of betrayal and fear.

In this, her memory echoed Luciana's. When she and her mother arrived in Switzerland, Luciana was too young to work and had to be placed in a boarding school. Their journey had been organised through the parish, and she should have gone with other Italian children. But the priest judged their situation improper – a woman arriving without a husband seemed

suspicious to him. With a stroke of moral authority, he declared the family unfit and said the girl should go elsewhere. Luciana found herself in a different school, among Swiss and French children. It was the time of the Algerian war; some French parents had placed their children there, but she was the only Italian in her class.

> "*At first I didn't understand, but they would move around and call out 'sale piaf!', 'sale piaf!', 'spaghetti'. That's how it was at that time. I didn't know what it meant at first. They were imitating birds. That's what they called Italians, because we spoke too loudly. But you know, maybe in French-speaking Switzerland people were a little more tolerant. In German-speaking Switzerland, I heard they even wrote on bars: 'no dogs, no Italians'. Here, perhaps, less. In the end, I liked the boarding school. And if I did well, I could take the train on Saturdays to see my mother, who worked for a family. They treated her well. Also, she was a very good cook, while they used to eat only potatoes*".
>
> (Luciana)

Her story reveals the dual role of the Church in migration: organiser of mobility, but also arbiter of morality. Its authority could enable the crossing of borders but also stigmatise, discipline, and exclude. For women in particular, moral judgments could weigh as heavily as contracts or permits. And yet, beyond these judgments, they too were subjected to the same ritual of entry as every other migrant: the medical visit at the border, remembered by many as a moment of humiliation. Luciana continued:

> "*From my village in Piedmont we took the coach to Mantova, then a train to Milan, and then on to Brig. Everything was in order – contract and passport. But you couldn't just enter; there were customs and everything. We arrived in Brig on a Saturday, I think. We had to sleep two nights in the waiting room before the medical exam. At that time, we had no money, you see? Elisa, my granddaughter, always asks me: 'Why didn't you go to a hotel, grandma?' But hotels were too expensive. Once we passed the exam, we took the train to Lausanne*".
>
> (Luciana)

For her, as a child, this journey still carried the flavour of adventure. She smiled as she recalled it, before excusing herself for a moment – the pizza in the oven needed her attention. Her husband, however, returned to the memory of those exams:

> "*Medical visits in Brig... For five years. Seasonal workers came until November, and in November they had to leave, only returning in March. Each arrival meant another medical exam – but never when you left. So many illnesses, especially from the*

construction sites, were only discovered in Brig when workers returned. They would come back and find they had cement in their lungs, or who knows what else. And since the health insurance expired in November, they were sent back to their villages in Italy. They had to return, at the expense of their country. Because what really mattered here were the hands to work – that's what Switzerland wanted from us".

(Mario)

The medical visits in Brig reveal, with almost brutal clarity, the logic that governed the presence of migrants in Switzerland. They were not examined as individuals, but as bodies to be measured, classified, and rendered useful. The exam was not a gesture of care; it was a filter. To pass meant to be admitted into the economy; to fail meant to be sent back across the border.

As Meyer and Modena (2004) emphasise, this structural arrangement produced profound psychological stress. Italian workers experienced persistent insecurity and early social marginalisation, particularly during periods of seasonal unemployment or economic crisis. Labour, intimately tied to survival and social recognition, became a source of existential precarity. Drawing on Robert Castel, the authors note that marginalisation "shifts to the margins of society what in reality concerns its very core", undermining the stabilising function of work and rendering workers socially and economically superfluous. In Hannah Arendt's terms, they became "workers without work": unnecessary for the world, yet still intermittently indispensable for productive circuits (Castel 1995, 337, 359).

In the Swiss case, the state could withdraw protection or refuse access to workers who fell ill, sending them back at the expense of their own communities. Seasonal workers' bodies were thus simultaneously indispensable for industrial growth and disposable when no longer productive – a configuration that resonates with Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "waste bodies" (2004): lives that do not count, bodies to be expelled or discarded when the economic or social order permits. The Swiss migration regime combined economic extraction, racialised governance, and selective biopolitical care in ways that rendered certain lives perpetually expendable, while preserving the integrity of the national body of citizens.

If earlier sections have underlined the limits of a Foucauldian framework by pointing to forms of biopolitical withdrawal operated by the state, it is at this point that Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics becomes analytically decisive. Necropolitics refers to the power to organise the conditions under which certain populations are exposed to death, abandonment, or social extinction – the power to determine not only who may live, but how and under what conditions life may be lived (Mbembe 2018). Central to Mbembe's analysis is the entanglement of race and capital, through which humanity is divided into "useful" and "useless" populations,

"surplus" and "superfluous" lives, usefulness being measured above all by the capacity to deploy labour power (Ibid., 23). This division is not accidental, but structural, forming a durable principle of modern governance.

Read through this lens, the Swiss migration regime appears not merely as a system of labour regulation, but as a dispositif that produced disposable lives: bodies rendered temporarily valuable and structurally replaceable. The power to admit, exclude, and expel migrant workers – particularly in moments of illness, exhaustion, or economic crisis – reveals how racial capitalism operates through the differential valuation of lives that count and lives that do not. As Mbembe argues, racism has become so insidious precisely because it is "part of the psychic economy and the libidinal structure of contemporary capitalism" (Ibid., 98), a process with a long historical genealogy rather than a recent aberration. In this sense, the Swiss case does not stand outside global histories of racial violence and extraction, but exemplifies how such logics operate and reproduce themselves within a specific national history.

The humiliation remembered by many was not only the physical discomfort of medical exposure but also the painful awareness of their difference – made explicit through the degrading language and gaze of border officers and doctors:

> "*Like she said, we were called* '*piafs*', '*hirondelles*' ['swallows'] – *birds who migrate and never have a stable place. But there, especially at the border, we Italians were called* '*Roma*', '*Zingari*'. *I guess they were looking at the clothes*".
>
> (Mario)

Here, the process of racialisation becomes more visible. Italians were already part of the Swiss collective imaginary as migrant workers, yet at the border they were marked with names historically reserved for Roma, Sinti, and Yenish communities. The association with Roma is particularly telling. Switzerland has a long history of racism against these groups: in the early 20th century, police maintained a "Gypsy registry" to monitor and expel Roma; racial scientists and psychiatrists, such as Josef Jörger, depicted itinerant families as biologically degenerate, feeding into European eugenics movements. The *Kinder der Landstrasse* program (1926-1972), run by the Pro Juventute foundation with state support, forcibly removed some 600 Yenish children from their families in an attempt to eradicate their 'nomadic' lifestyle (Galle 2016). These practices show how Roma, Sinti, and Yenish were treated not as citizens or

neighbours but as racialised 'Others', stigmatised as rootless, criminal, and unfit for national belonging.

To call Italian migrants 'Zingari' or 'Roma' at the border therefore did more than insult their appearance. It enacted what Frantz Fanon (1986, 109) described as the collapse of the self into a racialised signifier: the moment when the subject ceases to be seen as a full human being and becomes only the projection of collective anxieties. Just as Fanon recalled the cry "Look, a Negro!" freezing him into an object of difference, so too did these epithets strip migrants of individuality, collapsing their biographies into a stereotype of disorder and mobility. In that moment, the gaze of the doctor or officer did not register contracts, skills, or families; it saw only the 'Other'.

Seen through this lens, the border was not just a place of passage; it was a stage where Swiss society's racial hierarchies were rehearsed and reinforced. Italians could pass the medical exam, present the proper papers, even prove their usefulness, yet still be fixed in the humiliating position of being compared to those whom Switzerland had historically excluded through eugenic and racial science. To call Italians "gypsies" was not a neutral insult but an insertion into a broader racial genealogy that rendered them suspect, itinerant, and unfit for belonging – a genealogy that also resonates with Italy's own long history of racism and exclusion toward Roma populations (Di Noia 2016; Bravi, Bassoli 2013). Indeed, Italians recalling these insults underline their own positioning above other marginalised groups who occupied the lowest rungs of the social and racial hierarchy.

> "*The medical visit was humiliating, for them we were gypsies. But it was they who made us into that. Let's say the law was like that, well, yes. It was they who made the law that way*".
>
> (Oscar)

Oscar's words capture how racialisation defined the moment of entry; the LSEE then structured the experience that followed. The seasonal permit (Permit A) was the most precarious instrument of this regime. Seasonal workers were permitted entry as isolated labouring bodies: mostly young men without a family structure. Family life was explicitly prohibited, and settlement was legally foreclosed. The result was a generation of men condemned to live in solitude, absent from the intimacy of their home country yet never fully present in Switzerland. The "double absence," as Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) describes it, captures not only this physical separation but also the erosion of belonging in both places: in Italy, distance made them

strangers in their own families; in Switzerland, they remained foreigners, tolerated but not recognised.

While men were subject to multiple forms of humiliation, women faced a distinct precarity. They often arrived alone, with fewer social or economic resources, and were tightly monitored by employers, institutions, and the Church. Even when they could avoid the seasonal permit – particularly in domestic work – they had fewer opportunities to return home, experiencing a double absence of both physical connection to their families and social presence in Swiss society. Moreover, their labour was simultaneously essential and invisible, and their racialised status was compounded by gendered expectations of morality, domesticity, and subordination (Meyer Sabino 2004b).

Many attempted to resist this imposed solitude. Some brought their families illegally, hiding wives and children in cramped apartments. It is estimated that several thousand children grew up clandestinely in Switzerland between the 1950s and 1980s, concealed from authorities, without schooling, living in secrecy (Garufo et al. 2024). Known as the "closet children", their existence exposes the violence of policies that reduced family life to illegality. The isolation of men, and the hidden presence of children, were not accidental outcomes but direct effects of a system designed to produce a flexible workforce that was meant to stay only temporarily.

In 1964, a Swiss television documentary explicitly interrogates the presence of Italians in the country, at the very moment when Switzerland and Italy signed a new bilateral migration agreement[14]. While images of construction sites, factories, and urban neighbourhoods establish Italians as part of Switzerland's economic landscape, the film stages a choreographed debate about their legitimacy. In the first segment, Swiss workers – many of them trade-unionists and politically engaged – are invited to reflect on migration. Their responses are largely positive, stressing that Italians contribute to the nation's prosperity and stand alongside them in the struggle for labour rights. Yet, as the workers themselves acknowledge, their views are not representative of the majority of their compatriots, nor even of their Swiss colleagues. The film quickly shifts to interviews with people in the street, where ordinary Swiss citizens articulate a litany of grievances: Italians are accused of sending their wages abroad instead of reinvesting locally, of worsening the housing crisis, of being noisy, messy, and incapable of adapting to Swiss norms. In its final part, a trade unionist and his female colleague are brought in to answer

[14] https://www.rts.ch/archives/1964/video/italiens-en-suisse-26182042.html

the journalist's questions, attempting to nuance these stereotypes, even as their responses sometimes reproduce the very cultural tropes they seek to explain.

> "*Because we are calm people, the Italians should be calm too*". The trade unionist explains. "*What is not forgiven is that they are demonstrative and exuberant. Look at them: they gesticulate, sometimes they even sing.*
>
> *It seems to me that this question is often misunderstood. Objectively, we must admit: yes, Italians are louder than the Swiss. That is undeniable. But one must understand that noise plays a very different role in their culture than it does in ours. Especially gesticulation, noisy gesticulation, the way of speaking loudly, of making words ring. In their culture, this is linked to expressing relatively harmless emotions.*
>
> *In ours, the same noise is associated with extremely violent feelings. So, we always feel that Italians exaggerate, that they make noise for nothing, and that is what shocks and bothers us. They use their limbs differently, their voices differently, their bodies differently. And as a result, we judge them wrongly – simply because they are Other. It is, in short, a meeting of cultures*".
>
> (RTS Archives, *Italiens en Suisse*, 1964)

If cultural differences form the heart of the trade unionist's explanation, the next exchange reveals how stereotypes of Italian men as a sexual threat were tied to imaginaries already circulating in public discourse and reinforced by migration policy.

> "*People say Italians are worse than roosters*". The Journalist says. "*They are too fond of women; they harass ours by standing on the sidewalks and approaching them as they pass.*
> *You, as a Swiss woman, have you been disturbed by this so-called 'gallismo italiano'?*"
>
> The young woman responds: "*Yes, I have been bothered, and I must say it is not a very pleasant experience. Naturally, there are always different kinds of Italians. Some are extremely polite and would never dare to approach women. But there is nevertheless a fairly large group who do this almost like a sport, especially the young men who are not married.*"
>
> The journalist presses further: "*The fact that most Italians who come to Switzerland are unmarried, doesn't that explain this attitude?*"
>
> The trade unionist replies: "*Yes. About this, I believe here we Swiss are fooling ourselves. Our policy itself forbade the immigration of couples. Even Italians who were married could not bring their families until after three years of renewable residency. And so, we unleashed in our country 500,000 to 600,000 young men between the ages of 18 and 35 – that is, at the very age when biological pressure is at its maximum. It is therefore not surprising that these young bachelors, deprived of regular forms of*

intimacy accepted in their own culture, sought here in Switzerland the contacts that are natural for young men.

But I would add: cultural elements play a role too. In the regions they come from, in the remote villages they come from, a woman who doesn't seek adventure would never be seen outside between sunset and sunrise. So, a woman who is out running errands is considered fair game. These women are sometimes surprised when Swiss men, to whom they turn, resist or refuse them outright. They make a fuss just to draw attention to themselves, whereas here, women simply go where they want."

(RTS Archives, *Italiens en Suisse*, 1964)

Italian men were described as "galli", noisy roosters. This discourse exemplifies what Ann Laura Stoler (1995) analysed in colonial contexts: the figure of the male migrant as dangerous, sexually unruly, and threatening to the symbolic purity of the nation. Black feminists and critical race theorists have shown how such narratives have long policed the boundaries of belonging, casting racialised men as predators against the imagined innocence of the white female body (Davis 1981; Spillers 1987; hooks 1992). In Switzerland, this logic was mapped onto Italians. Their masculinity was marked as excessive, their bodies as disruptive, their presence a disturbance to the national order[15]. At the same time, Italian women were not exempt from scrutiny. Women who ventured out at night or took visible roles in public life were interpreted as provocative or seeking attention, reinforcing a moralised vision of gender roles and public behaviour imported from rural Italy. This gendered lens mirrored and amplified the cultural stereotyping applied to men, highlighting how both male and female migrants were cast as deviations from Swiss norms.

This duality is revealing. It demonstrates how racism does not operate only in the crude language of exclusion, but also within discourses that appear sympathetic. As Stuart Hall reminds us, racism is rarely coherent; it is instead a shifting set of contradictions, a "structure of attitudes and practices" that can accommodate both recognition of injustice and the repetition of stereotypes (Hall 1980). In this case, the structural violence of the permit system was acknowledged but immediately reframed through cultural essentialism, confirming Italians as 'other'. Yet the irony is stark: these very conditions were produced by the permit regime itself.

[15] In the short article "Immigrati italiani e criminalità" (2004), Gatani reviews studies on the alleged criminality of Italian immigrants in Switzerland, notably the statistical work of Emanuele Sella and Giuseppe De Michelis, which offered a nuanced and critical reading of age and gender categories and challenged dominant late 19th century stereotypes. This literature documents the early consolidation of a racialised imaginary surrounding Italians and helps explain its persistence and reactivation in the postwar period. Although criminality is not examined in detail in this section, it formed part of the broader discursive repertoire through which Italians – and foreigners more generally – were governed.

By excluding family reunification, the seasonal permit manufactured “bachelors” on a mass scale, men condemned to separation. Their solitude was then reinterpreted as cultural pathology: men who moved in groups, who were noisy, or who supposedly threatened Swiss women. Similarly, women’s behaviour – whether cautious or assertive – was interpreted through a lens of moral judgment, transforming structural constraints into cultural fault. Racism and sexism here worked together by converting structural violence into individual blame, erasing the policy’s role and projecting responsibility onto the migrants themselves.

The violence of the LSEE extended into every aspect of daily life. Because work contracts were tied directly to residence permits, foreign workers could not change employers during their seasonal stay. To remain in Switzerland, they had to accept poor or exploitative conditions with little recourse against abuse. Foreign workers were channelled into the lowest-paid, most precarious, and physically demanding jobs, often in construction, agriculture, and domestic service. These hierarchies were visible even on the worksite: as Oscar recalled, “*There were still a few Swiss on the construction sites. But they had to show they were not like us. One of them used to come and work, but in a jacket and tie!*” The presence of Swiss workers, performing the same labour in a different guise, symbolised and reinforced the social and racial distinction between citizens and foreigners.

This segmentation stabilised Swiss society in three ways. First, it protected Swiss workers by insulating them from the most exploitative conditions. Second, it provided employers with a disciplined, flexible workforce that could be expelled in times of crisis. Third, it facilitated a political compromise with trade unions and the left, who tolerated mass immigration as long as it did not undermine wages, social protections, or mobility for Swiss citizens. In this sense, immigration was not merely tolerated but actively functional: it supported the *Friedensordnung*, the corporatist pact between capital and labour (Stohr 2013).

The resulting “dual labour market” created a precarious balance reminiscent of Cedric Robinson’s concept of the labour aristocracy. Writing on the U.S. context, Robinson notes that non-Black workers were granted a “fictive measure of status” that insulated them from the harshest forms of exploitation, while Black workers were systematically excluded from access to well-being (Robinson 1983, 201). In Switzerland, Swiss workers gained relative advantages and opportunities for upward mobility into skilled trades or unionised positions, while foreign workers – particularly Italians – bore the brunt of economic insecurity, precarious contracts, and social marginalisation. Trade unions, though occasionally showing solidarity with

migrants, were complicit in maintaining this two-tier system, ensuring that the burdens of exploitation fell disproportionately on foreigners. National identity, labour relations, and capitalist accumulation were thus mutually reinforcing, with migrants at the centre of this engineered precarity.

> When I asked Oscar about trade unions, he looked at me and made a hand gesture, as if to push the topic away, signalling scepticism and perhaps frustration. "*There were so many injustices. We had to haul the materials up with the freight lift, you know? They put up a notice: for workers who wanted to take the course to obtain the permit. We had to register and pay – I think it was sixty francs. So, I registered, and I paid the sixty francs.*
>
> *The day of the course came, and we went. There was a man there, and before the lessons even began, he said:* '*Before starting, those who do not have the Settlement permit cannot attend the course*'".
>
> He stopped speaking for a moment. He laughed lightly, but it was a laugh that transmitted suffering and humiliation, not amusement. He turned his head away, covering it with his hand. When he resumed, his voice was strong, almost angry, each word carrying the weight of injury remembered: "*I found it terribly unjust. Because before making us register, they should have told us. We didn't say anything. We just left. Half of us – maybe twenty – got up and walked out. We went home like clowns. That hurt me deeply*".
>
> Another short silence followed, as he shifted quickly to another subject: "*Well, aside from that, housing was also a big problem for all of us*".

Oscar's rapid shift in topic, his hand gestures, and the way he turned away makes visible the emotional cost of narration. To speak these words is to reinhabit the wound, to relive the sting of being treated unjustly. Yet the very act of telling is also a refusal of silence: a reclaiming of dignity against a system that had rendered him voiceless at the time. As oral history scholars such as Alessandro Portelli remind us, memory is not only the recall of facts but the expression of meaning – it conveys not just what happened, but how it was lived and what it continues to signify (Portelli 1991). His pauses and tone of voice communicate precisely this: that injustice was not only structural but also intimate, inscribed in the body and difficult to utter. Within this broader system, trade unions appear as part of the landscape Oscar recounts. He does not explicitly blame them, nor does he provide multiple examples; yet this single episode he cites when asked about unions suggests that, in his experience, they were far from supportive, embedded instead in the same structures that produced exclusion.

At the same time, his testimony points us beyond the workplace. Injustice extended into the very spaces where migrants were expected to live. Housing, like employment, was entangled with mechanisms of control. Employers who held the power to authorise contracts often also organised accommodations, leaving migrants doubly dependent and with little room for negotiation. For many seasonal workers, this meant being crowded into old buildings or temporary barracks (*baracche*), damp, cold, and unhealthy. Rents were deducted directly from wages, reinforcing the sense of being trapped in arrangements decided by others. If the permit system marked workers as temporary and replaceable, housing practices confirmed it daily, not through words but through walls: spaces that confined rather than sheltered, reminding migrants of the limits placed on their belonging[16].

[16] The *Archives contestataires* contain numerous documents illustrating these housing practices; I discuss these materials and their implications further in Chapter Three.

Christian Murat, Bibliothèque de Genève. 1970

The workers were grouped together in a form of urban segregation, housed in temporary wooden barracks on the outskirts of the cities, excluded from the symbolic heart of the urban community they were helping to build. Christian Murat, a photographer for the newspaper *La Tribune*, who also pursued work as an independent photographer, undertook a series documenting the lives of these migrants, from their arrival in Switzerland to their daily existence in the '*baracche*' (Magnin et al. 2019). His images belong not only to the register of journalistic reporting but also to that of critical testimony: they expose what the public often preferred not to see, the hidden infrastructures of labour and the fragile shelters of those who sustained Swiss prosperity. Through his lens, Murat captured not only conditions of material

deprivation but also the symbolic and affective dimensions of exclusion, invisibility, and endurance.

In the first image, the exterior of the barracks stretches along a dirt road, under a grey sky heavy with silence. The buildings are improvised, made of wood and corrugated metal, fragile and temporary, their decay already inscribed in the materials from which they are built. The human presence is absent: no workers are visible; no bodies move along the muddy path. Yet their absence is paradoxically what makes their presence felt. For who else but the migrants would live here, in this non-place at the city's margins? In the background, massive concrete high-rises rise into the sky, symbols of postwar modernity and the very prosperity to which migrant labour was essential. The juxtaposition is striking: behind the barracks lie structures of permanence set against their own ephemeral shelters. The photograph stages, visually and spatially, the logic of segregation. Migrants were indispensable to the making of modern Switzerland, yet pushed outside its urban fabric, placed at the threshold of the city but never fully inside it. Murat's framing, with the barracks in the foreground and the modern towers in the distance, silently narrates the contradiction of the migrant condition: to be central to production, yet peripheral to belonging.

If the first photograph captures the silence of absence, the second shifts inside, toward the fragile intimacies of life in the barracks. Here, Murat photographs the interior of a dormitory, where large white sheets hang across the room. Their purpose is ambiguous: they might have been left to dry after washing, they might serve as makeshift partitions to create a minimum of privacy in overcrowded rooms. But in this particular image, the arrangement seems deliberate, almost theatrical. Workers push their arms through holes torn in the fabric, deliberately staging a scene for the camera. Their faces remain hidden, covered by the white cloth; what emerges is only the fragment of the body, the arm that pierces through. The image thus becomes more than documentation: it is a performance, a denunciation of the material conditions of life in the barracks.

The ambiguity of the photograph is part of its power. The sheets are ordinary objects, but in Murat's framing they become symbols: of poverty, of overcrowding, of concealment, and of the impossibility of privacy. The workers' decision not to show their faces complicates the image further. On one level, it reflects the condition of invisibility imposed on them: their individuality effaced, their humanity obscured, their bodies reduced to labouring limbs. On another level, it can be read as an act of resistance: by refusing to show their faces, they withhold themselves from the full capture of the photographic gaze. What remains visible are only their

arms – the very instruments of their labour – a stark reminder of Max Frisch's famous words: "We asked for workers, and human beings came".

Christian Murat, Bibliothèque de Genève. 1970

Taken together, these photographs tell a story of absence and erasure, but also of presence and endurance. The first shows a landscape emptied of human figures, yet haunted by their labour. The second shows human presence, but fragmented and faceless, bodies made anonymous within the barracks. Murat's images confront us with the paradox of migrant life in postwar Switzerland: workers were everywhere, in every building and street, yet kept invisible at the edges of society. Their labour was hyper-visible, their humanity hidden. The photographer exposes not only poor living conditions but also the deeper structures of social exclusion: the ways in which migrants were materially essential and symbolically erased, central to the economy yet absent from the imagined community of the nation.

In the hands of Murat, photography becomes more than documentation; it becomes testimony and critique. His images remind us that the story of Italian migration is not only one of contracts, wages, and policies, but also one of lived spaces, of silences, and of gestures that

reveal as much as they conceal. The barracks were not simply shelters; they were the material expression of a regime that produced isolation, invisibility, and dispossession. Yet in the torn sheets and the hidden faces, one glimpses also a form of agency: the workers' refusal to be fully seen, their staging of their own invisibility, their quiet resistance to complete erasure. Murat's photographs thus do not simply show us the conditions of migrant life; they compel us to think about the politics of visibility itself, about how migrants were seen, unseen, and how they chose to appear.

This chapter has shown that the post-Second World War years, and the new forms of labour and migration management implemented then, must be understood both as the outcome of a longer historical process and as a testing ground for later migration policies. Measures first developed during the world wars were not abandoned after 1945 but rearticulated within a productivist, racist and patriarchal order, with Italian migrants at the centre of this experiment.

Oral testimonies reveal how legal precarity translated into social exclusion, family separation, and vulnerability to multiple forms of violence. Migration reshapes every aspect of life, producing a "double absence" (Sayad 1999) – from the country of origin and from the host country, which withholds full recognition. In Switzerland, the seasonal permit exemplified this dynamic, making migrant workers simultaneously essential and precarious, structuring labour, housing, family life, and social interaction, and reflecting the materiality of racial capitalism, which produced a racialised social order while denying the existence of racism.

The permit codified segmented labour, creating a dual market in which native and long-term residents held secure jobs while foreigners filled low-paid, precarious roles. Spatial segregation and peripheral housing limited community formation, while rotation, deportation, and surveillance disciplined the workforce. Reproductive expropriation further entrenched exclusion: families were separated, and the care work of migrant women remained largely invisible. Migrants were reduced to their function as workers, their presence provisional, their identities narrowed and stigmatised. The resulting structural violence left deep marks on both individual lives and collective memory, explaining why elderly migrants' narratives are often at once proud and bitter: proud of their contribution to national prosperity, bitter at the indignities endured and futures foreclosed.

Yet these memories are not only testimonies of suffering; they are also seeds of resistance. The precariousness of the seasonal permit became a rallying point for organising and contestation, generating solidarities and political consciousness that would later challenge

the very structures that had excluded them. These struggles show that dispossession is not merely historical residue but part of an ongoing negotiation of migration, belonging, and identity in Switzerland.

Viewed in this light, anti-Italian riots in the 1890s or the racist mobilisations of the 1970s, epitomised by the Schwarzenbach initiatives, were not isolated episodes of resentment. They were the visible eruptions of a deeper contradiction: the demand for migrant labour coexisting with the construction of migrants as racially threatening. As Stuart Hall (1980) reminds us, race is never external to class struggle but a key modality through which it is experienced and organised. Switzerland's case demonstrates how racialised exclusion and segmented incorporation were not opposites but complementary processes.

Part II

3. Challenging Racism

- "*Incompetent, lazy people. I say it kindly, but we're no longer at home. In many cases… well, the Italians, they dominate too much. After all, it's a well-known fact. Three Italians together, and they're the masters. They sing, and you can't tell them to stop.*
- *And does that bother you, personally?*
- *Of course it bothers us, because they look down on us. If you make a remark, they look down on you. In many shops and restaurants, we are served by Italians. We're treated badly. In our own country, we accept everything. Already now, as you can see, the Italians or others who've just been naturalised absolutely do not have the same mentality as us. They form the mass. And it's they who will command us, not we who will command them.*

  (…)
- *Well, yes, me, I'm firmly against them. I say they can all leave*".

(RTS Archives, *Italiens en Suisse*, 1964)

Such voices, captured on the streets in 1964, reveal how Italian migrants were made objects of resentment in everyday life. These statements were not isolated prejudices but part of a wider public mood, where fears of being 'overrun' blended cultural stereotypes with everyday grievances about housing shortages, rising rents, and economic competition. Migrants were portrayed as both indispensable to Switzerland's postwar boom and as a threat to social cohesion, embodying the paradox of being needed yet unwanted. The presence of their children in schools further signalled that families were settling, challenging the fiction of temporary migration and intensifying anxieties about irreversible demographic change. Right-wing actors amplified these concerns through the discourse of *Überfremdung*: the fear of 'over-foreignisation' was making its come back. By the mid-1960s, this old nationalist trope was reactivated, now fuelled by the rapid growth of the postwar economy and the visible presence of migrants in daily life.

In the early 1960s, immigration politics in Switzerland entered a new phase of tension as the liberal model based on the so-called 'rotation' of foreign workers reached its limits (Niederberger 2004, 94-5). The seasonal permit system was meant to ensure circulation without settlement, but in practice it faltered: employers depended on a stable workforce, while migrants sought to secure family life and continuity. The contradiction became untenable. Italian authorities, pressured by the realities faced by hundreds of thousands of their citizens abroad, urged the Swiss government to recognise more durable rights (Piguet 2017, 22-3). The bilateral

agreement of 1964 crystallised this shift. Within Switzerland, however, the agreement was widely perceived as a loss of control, reinforcing fears that the state's sovereignty over immigration was being eroded.

Faced with a situation perceived as an 'overheating' of the economy, federal authorities introduced successive measures to limit the number of foreign workers. The first, the so-called "*simple plafonnement*" ("single cap") of 1963, capped the total number of employees per firm at two percent above the previous year's level. When this measure proved insufficient, a "*double plafonnement*" ("double cap") was introduced in 1965: companies faced both an absolute ceiling on foreign employees and a required reduction of overall staff by a fixed percentage. The aim was to slow economic growth by regulating labour supply, yet the regulations proved ineffective, as family reunification and the transition of seasonal workers into annual permits continued to increase the foreign population (Ibid., 22-6).

This failure of state measures coincided with the intensification of popular initiatives calling for stricter restrictions. The most dramatic manifestation was the 1970 Schwarzenbach Initiative, which proposed reducing the foreign population to 10 percent nationally (25 percent in Geneva). Narrowly rejected, it nevertheless mobilised nearly half of the electorate and created an atmosphere of hostility that profoundly affected migrants' everyday lives. Subsequent initiatives, in 1974 and throughout the late 1970s and beyond (1977, 1988, 1993, 1997), were also defeated, yet they confirmed the persistence of racist discourse in Swiss political culture (Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 88-9). These initiatives crystallised demographic fears, economic anxieties, and cultural prejudices into a coherent anti-immigration project, marking a period in which migrant presence became a highly visible and contested aspect of Swiss society.

Against this backdrop, the 1970s witnessed diverse and multifaceted forms of resistance. Migrant workers mobilised in the *baracche* and workplaces, while community spaces such as the *Colonie Libere*, churches, universities, feminist networks, and militant political groups provided additional arenas for organising and solidarity. These struggles connected everyday grievances – over labour conditions, housing and social marginalisation – to broader campaigns for recognition, rights, and dignity, showing how local, social, and political spaces intersected (Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000). Resistance to the racist initiatives in the 1970s emerged largely from the grassroots rather from unions or mainstream parties. In this hostile environment, migrant communities articulated counter-narratives, organised protests, published newsletters and forged alliances with Swiss activists opposed to these policies. Though often limited in

scale, these actions laid the groundwork for what can be seen as the early contours of an anti-racist movement in Switzerland.

It is crucial to ask what anti-racism meant in this historical context. While contemporary discussions of the period often emphasise xenophobia, justice, equality, or workers' rights, historical sources show that actors at the time explicitly used the term 'racism'. This raises key questions: what forms of discourse did opponents of these policies and initiatives employ, and what practices accompanied these interventions in everyday life, workplaces, and community spaces? Understanding anti-racism here requires attention to who articulated it and how.

This chapter focuses on a historical period marked by mobilisations in which migrants were central protagonists (Mélo 2024). It traces how critiques of exclusion emerged, circulated, and overlapped, examining the forms of solidarity that sustained them and the networks connecting migrant struggles to broader social movements. The analysis draws primarily on archival documents from the *Archives contestataires* and the *Collège du Travail* in Geneva. Rather than providing a comprehensive account of every strike or protest, selected sources illustrate how anti-racist critique was expressed through language, strategies, and collective practices. Some oral histories are also integrated, offering insight into the lived experiences of migrants and allies, giving voice to those who shaped these struggles. By mapping actors, spaces, and discourses, the chapter highlights both the forms of opposition to racism and the ways in which these efforts reshaped the boundaries of social activism in Switzerland in the 1970s.

3.1 Building Political Consciousness: Workers' Struggles and Grassroot Organising

> "*But before sending them away, let us consider the place they occupy in the vital sectors of the economy:*
>
> *Building construction and road works: the most critical sector of our development. Foreigners, 89%.*
>
> *Agriculture: increasingly abandoned due to urbanisation. Foreigners, 30%.*
>
> *Hospitality: the second national industry, a specifically Swiss tradition. Foreigners, 70%.*
>
> *Textiles and clothing: a decisive element in the balance of payments. Foreigners, between 48 and 58%.*
>
> *Metallurgy and mechanical engineering: the nerve of the Swiss economy. Foreigners, up to 40%.*

Yet it must be emphasised that these percentages reveal only partial realities. There are averages, and then there is the truth. In some key areas of production, foundries for instance, the proportion of foreigners reaches 99%. These figures now need to be interpreted".

(RTS Archives, *Italiens en Suisse*, 1964)

The journalist's voice in the 1964 documentary, reflecting on the centrality of Italian migrants in the Swiss economy, is striking for its statistical precision, its carefully staged *mise en scène* – and its silences. Migrant workers appear only as numbers, percentages of 'foreignness' attached to vital economic sectors, but never as subjects who speak, reflect, or contest their condition. Italians were nearly omnipresent in certain industries – up to ninety-nine percent in some foundries, as the archival footage indicates – yet their words, experiences, and struggles remain absent from the narrative. This absence exemplifies what scholars of migration such as Sandro Mezzadra (2001) and Nicholas De Genova (2002) have described as the systematic erasure of migrant subjectivities: a mode of representation in which migrants are rendered visible as labouring bodies, yet invisible as political and speaking subjects. The archive does not merely document economic dependence on foreign labour; it also illustrates the asymmetry of voice, where official discourse authorises the perspective of the nation while muting those of the workers themselves. How, then, can we reconstruct the practices through which migrants articulated themselves against such erasure? Today, the Schwarzenbach initiatives are remembered as symbols of anti-immigrant politics, but the responses of migrants remain less visible. What were their discourses? What forms of resistance and spaces of alliance did they create in the shadow of the dominant narrative?

In his work *Grèves et contestations ouvrières en Suisse 1969-1979* (2014) Frédéric Deshusses identifies a persistent silence not only around migrant voices but around labour struggles more broadly. This silence is both political and historiographical: it affects how mobilisations are remembered and how they are inscribed – or erased – from collective memory. Each new wave of strikes, he notes, seems to emerge from a "memorial void", as though workers were condemned to reinvent their strategies with no lineage of struggle to draw upon. And yet, as Deshusses insists, despite the powerful ideological investment in 'social peace' ('*Paix du travail*'), Switzerland has a recent and recurring history of strikes and

protests[17]. This tension between the narrative of consensus and the reality of conflict offers a crucial entry point for rethinking migrant workers' resistance, not as isolated or exceptional, but as grounded in everyday practices and collective spaces that preceded and sustained more visible struggles.

The notion of resistance has been richly theorised in the social sciences. James C. Scott (1985) famously argued that subaltern groups often engage in "everyday forms of resistance" that remain invisible to dominant institutions yet constitute meaningful ways of undermining power. Pietro Saitta (2015), in his exploration of *resistenze*, similarly stresses that resistance cannot be reduced to spectacular moments of revolt. It includes quotidian practices – evasions, negotiations, tactics of survival – that allow individuals and groups to carve out margins of autonomy. To speak of resistance only in terms of overt confrontation risks obscuring the subtle forms of refusal and creativity that shape the lives of marginalised populations.

Seen from this perspective, the alliances, solidarities, and informal infrastructures built by migrant workers in Switzerland were not secondary to strikes and organised protests, but the very conditions that made them possible. To live precariously does not mean to live without agency, as Judith Butler (2004) reminds us, but rather that survival itself becomes political, a refusal to disappear. Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) develops a similar insight in his sociology of migration, noting that while migrants are often reduced to "bare arms", they carry with them histories, cultures, and capacities for organisation that exceed the framework imposed by states or employers.

The everyday practices of migrants in Switzerland during the 20th century can thus be read as forms of resistance. To cross borders despite restrictive laws, to maintain family life under the seasonal regime that sought to separate men from women and children, to navigate clandestinity, and to transform anonymity into community – all of these were refusals of reduction to mere labour power. They asserted subjectivity against a system that aimed to fragment and depoliticise migrant life. As Avallone (2013, 2017, 2018) argues, this was also a struggle against epistemic violence: migrants were not allowed to define themselves but were

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17 The expression *Paix du travail* refers to the 1937 agreement between Swiss employers and trade unions in the metal and machinery sector, which established a framework based on collective bargaining and a renunciation of strikes. Historians have shown how this agreement became a cornerstone of Swiss labour relations, often invoked to emphasise national consensus and stability, even though strikes continued to occur in practice (Boillat et al. 2006).

instead defined by dominant discourses. Creating spaces where they could name themselves and act collectively was therefore already a political act, a form of resistance.

These reflections lead directly to the importance of space in the analysis of resistance. Scholars such as Henri Lefebvre (1991) and Don Mitchell (2003) have argued that space is never neutral but is always socially produced and contested. Building on these insights, scholars such as Doreen Massey (1994), David Harvey (2008), and Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos (2008) have further emphasised how migrant and marginalised groups actively produce spaces of encounter and solidarity – what Papadopoulos et colleagues call "mobile commons" – that both contest exclusion and enable new forms of collective life. In the Swiss context, cafés, parish halls, sports clubs, and even train stations with their telephone booths functioned as everyday infrastructures of migrant sociality.

As underlined by Giovanna Meyer Sabino (2004a), Italian migrants in Switzerland developed one of the most extensive and diversified associational landscapes in Europe, encompassing political, religious, cultural, welfare, educational, and recreational organisations. This dense network played a central role in social support, political mobilisation, and the transmission of collective identities across generations (Fibbi 1985; Meyer Sabino 2004a). Yet among these spaces, one stands out for its scale and political significance: the *Colonie Libere Italiane*.

Founded in 1943, in the midst of war and exile, the *Colonie* were conceived as a secular, antifascist alternative to Catholic missions (Castelnuovo Frigessi 1978, 102-8). They quickly became central points of reference for Italian migrants, offering help with bureaucracy, housing, health, and legal defense against expulsion. They also created schools and libraries, cultivated cultural life, and organised fundraising campaigns for communities in Italy (Ricciardi 2014, 102). Each of these measures responded to immediate needs, but together they amounted to a political program of defending migrants against both economic exploitation and institutional neglect. From their inception, the *Colonie* were more than mutual aid societies: they were spaces where migrants forged a collective community through what Castelnuovo-Frigessi describes as a "cultural self-defense" (1978, 115-120), a practice that challenged their reduction to isolated units of labour power.

In the postwar decades, as migration from Italy intensified, the *Colonie* multiplied: from about twenty in 1944 to over ninety by the mid-1960s (Ricciardi 2014, 140). This expansion reflected both the demographic growth of the Italian presence and the pressing need for support structures in a context where official protections were minimal. The 1960s brought a new

profile of migration, with increasing numbers from Southern Italy, many of them young, unskilled, and subjected to harsh conditions in construction and industry. Dormitories were overcrowded, contracts precarious, and the threat of deportation constant. The *Colonie* adapted by creating regional committees and by addressing the needs of these new arrivals. To understand how these structures were experienced and transformed from within, it is helpful to turn to individual trajectories. One such trajectory is that of Vincenzo, whose life connects the *Colonie Libere*, the *baracche*, the Communist Party, and the unions, tracing the arc of Italian migration and political struggle in Switzerland across several decades.

> I met Vincenzo in a small kebab shop near his house in Renans, where he was chatting with the owner in a tone of long familiarity. We had a coffee and he started talking. With him he had taken the press article that had been written about him. At the trade union Unia, where he remains active after decades of militancy, everyone had told me: "*You must talk with him. Vincenzo is a living memory of the struggles*". His reputation preceded him, and as soon as he began to speak it became clear why. Vincenzo talks with the cadence of someone who has narrated these experiences many times, but each sentence still carries an urgency that makes evident how present these memories remain.
>
> (Renans, February 2025)

Much of his political formation took place not in lecture halls but in the barracks where seasonal workers lived. He described the *baracche* in stark words: "*The baracca is terrible. Those who lived there hardly speak about it, they buried the memory. It was exhausting, unhygienic, humiliating*". These were spaces of deprivation – overcrowded, cold in winter, suffocating in summer – but also places where solidarities emerged. Vincenzo recalled that militants went to the *baracche* to sustain this fragile community life.

> "*We went there with young teachers and journalists to organise elementary courses for the seasonal workers who could not read or write. Some barely knew how to sign their names. We held lessons after work, in those same barracks where people slept, because that was where they were most at ease*".
>
> (Vincenzo)

What many preferred to forget, Vincenzo insisted on remembering, because these were the places where political consciousness began to take form out of hardship.

> "*Nobody spoke of the baracche, those who lived there wanted to forget. But we understood that we had to enter, to bring solidarity, politics. It was not charity, it was about giving tools, dignity, the sense that you were not alone*".
>
> (Vincenzo)

Officially, the *Colonie* were compelled to present themselves as non-political associations, concerned primarily with cultural and social assistance. In reality, they became key actors in defending migrants' rights and shaping broader debates on labour and integration. Their story shows how social initiatives could function as political practices in all but name, and how migrant associations, even under restrictive conditions, influenced the policies of both Switzerland and Italy (Ricciardi 2014, 45-7). The roots of this enforced 'apoliticism' lay in Swiss legislation: on 24 February 1948, the Federal Council introduced a decree prohibiting foreigners without permanent residence from giving political speeches without prior authorisation – authorisation that could be refused whenever public order or national security were deemed 'endangered', a formulation that effectively suppressed fundamental rights of expression and association (Ibid., 83). The Swiss state thus sought to reap the economic benefits of immigration while ensuring that migrants remained politically invisible. The *Colonie Libere*, fully aware of this legal framework, framed their work in terms of assistance and solidarity rather than overt political struggle – a tactic that allowed them to endure, expand, and continue shaping migrant life.

Despite this legal fiction, the *Colonie Libere* developed into a structure of collective representation for a community that otherwise lacked a voice. By insisting on the dignity of Italian workers, they challenged Swiss authorities to recognise the human costs of their labour policies, while simultaneously denouncing the Italian state for its lack of protection of its citizens abroad. This dual role – confronting both host and sending countries – proved particularly significant after the signing of the bilateral labour agreements between Switzerland and Italy, first in 1948 and later in 1964. In this context, the *Colonie Libere* became an indispensable counterweight, articulating grievances that could not be voiced in official channels and pressuring Italian authorities to intervene more forcefully in the negotiations (Ibid., 95-7). For Vincenzo, this ambiguity was central.

> "*The Colonia was a good cover for us*. *We animated it, we promoted it, but we always had the caution to present it as the association of emigrants. Inside there were socialists, Christian democrats, but for us it was a clandestine base of the Communist Party. We organised the 'red trains' that converged from the valleys to vote in Italy*".
>
> (Vincenzo)

What appears as benign 'clubs of emigrants' were, in practice, infrastructures of grassroots organising, where conviviality on Sundays overlapped with clandestine political activity. As Vincenzo put it, they were their "*laboratories of working-class self-organisation*".

The politicising force of these spaces became even clearer after the Mattmark catastrophe in 1965, when dozens of Italian workers died building a dam. The *Colonie* played a decisive role in framing the event not as a natural accident but as a symptom of systemic exploitation. Social networks and solidarities cultivated in everyday life provided the foundations for this politicisation: mourning became denunciation, and solidarity became a resource for mobilisation (Butler 2004). By the late 1960s, as racist discourses gained traction, the façade of apoliticism had become increasingly untenable (Meyer Sabino 2004a, 124). The *Colonie* helped organise demonstrations, forged alliances with progressive unions and parties, and promoted a discourse of equality and anti-racism, while Italian workers themselves mobilised through strikes and protests, often in defiance of both employers and legal restrictions.

Vincenzo also emphasised the often-overlooked role of women in migrant struggles, noting that his political involvement unfolded within shared spaces – such as the *Colonie* – where many others, including women whose contributions were often less visible than those of male workers, also lived, worked, and organised.

> "*Many women found a form of emancipation here. They experienced independence for the first time, through contact with Swiss women sometimes and by entering the factories. My mother worked in a nylon factory. She was fired three times, and each time rehired. I remember she was 62 when she was fired the last time because she had participated in campaigns to denounce work diseases. There were many spontaneous abortions, and the management tried to pressure the doctors. My mother used to distribute the leaflets we had made, standing at the factory entrance. If a few were left, she would slip them into her bag. That day, they called her into the office and told her to take her things and leave. She was dismissed on the spot. She asked for a letter of dismissal and her pay, but they refused. One man grabbed her by the arm in the corridor; she was small and wearing high heels, which broke under the sudden force. Without hesitation, she hit him. Silence followed. They called an ambulance.*

In the village where I was born, my mother would never have dared such a thing. It was the only time I ever heard her threaten someone in that way. I went to pick her up at the police station. When I arrived, a policeman told me she was in the kitchen, washing dishes. She said, 'I have to wait for my son, and in the meantime, I'm bored – let me do this'".

(Vincenzo)

Vincenzo's memory complicates any straightforward reading of emancipation. His mother's actions – distributing leaflets, confronting management, striking back against physical intimidation – mark a radical departure from the constraints that structured women's lives in her village of origin, where public confrontation and political dissent were tightly policed by family, community, and gendered norms. Migration did not dissolve these power relations, but it displaced them, opening fragile spaces of action in which women could act differently.

Crucially, her agency is not limited to overt militancy. The moment at the police station, where she chooses to wash dishes while waiting for her son, is deeply revealing. Far from a gesture of submission, it reclaims a gendered form of labour as an assertion of autonomy: she refuses passive waiting, occupies institutional space on her own terms, and transforms boredom into action. That these were the dishes of the police station – the very institution disciplining migrant bodies – adds another layer of irony and quiet subversion. Her gesture exposes both the persistence of gendered expectations and the ways women actively navigated, bent, and sometimes inverted them. Emancipation here is neither total nor abstract, but embodied, tactical, and forged in everyday encounters with authority, labour, and power.

"*Sometimes we gathered in a chalet, and there you would find the cream of intellectuals of Eastern countries and Africa, together with us migrants. We spoke about Vietnam, about anti-colonial struggles. These experiences gave us an international horizon, much wider than our everyday life on the construction site*".

(Vincenzo)

For him, the *Colonie* were never simply recreational; they connected Italian bricklayers in Switzerland to anti-fascist exiles, to liberation movements, and to the Communist Party in Italy. This circulation of ideas was sustained by cultural work as much as by direct mobilisation. Newspapers and printed material played a crucial role. "*I was an importer of communist press*", Vincenzo remembered. "*We received packages of newspapers from Italy. They arrived at the station, I went to collect them, and we distributed them in the Colonie*". These practices

connected workers in Switzerland not only to Italy but also to wider struggles, reinforcing a sense that they "*were part of something bigger, something that crossed borders*".

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LUGLIO 1972

GIORNALE DEGLI EMIGRATI

Lire 50

LOTTA CONTINUA

IL GOVERNO CHE SI SONO FATTI: GOVERNO DELLA VENDETTA ANTI-OPERAIA, DELLA MAFIA, DEL FASCISMO

Che si resti o che si torni, la nostra rabbia esplode ovunque

Se si torna in Italia prendiamo il posto che ci spetta nella lotta

Decenni di emigrazione ci insegnano molto

Lotta Continua, July 1972, Archives Contestataires, Genève.

The political imagination cultivated in these spaces can thus be traced in the militant press. In one of the issues published in 1972, *Lotta Continua*, a newspaper that circulated among Italian workers in Switzerland, devoted its front page to the transformations brought about by migration. One article, *Se si torna in Italia prendiamo il posto che ci spetta nella lotta* ("If we return to Italy, we take the place that is ours in the struggle"), warned against portraying returning migrants as defeated or unemployed 'burdens'. Instead, it insisted:

> "Those who return are no longer willing to beg, to listen to promises of jobs that will never come. They come back with the experience to guide a general struggle for the right to live. They have learned in the factories of Europe that wealth is the product of

> their labour, and that capitalists took it illegally. They know who their enemies are, they have discovered the ties between capitalists across Europe and the Italian government.
>
> Those who return, permanently or only for a while, can use all this experience to lead a general struggle – they can become the vehicle that unites the struggles of the North with those of our brothers in the South, in a program that reflects the needs of all proletarians, workers and unemployed, women, men, children”.

Here migration is framed as a ‘school of struggle’. Moving back and forth between Italy and Northern Europe did not produce passivity but rather political awareness: returning migrants were imagined as carriers of lessons capable of unifying struggles across Italy’s internal divides. What this document captures – and what theorists like Sandro Mezzadra help us articulate – is migration as a ‘site of production of political subjectivity’ (Mezzadra 2001; Mezzadra, Neilson 2013). Migrant workers in Switzerland did not only resist discrimination within the existing order; their very presence destabilised the borders between citizen and non-citizen, insider and outsider, temporary and permanent. By organising collectively, they transformed the ‘border’ from a line of exclusion into a site of struggle. Their anti-racist discourse – in journals, speeches, and associations – was not only reactive but creative, producing new political languages that forced Swiss society to confront the racialised underpinnings of its prosperity.

Another article in the same issue, *Dieci anni di emigrazione ci insegnano molto* (“Ten years of migration teach us a lot”), offered an even sharper analysis of the racism embedded in European labour markets:

> “In Switzerland, in Germany, in Belgium, all across Europe, we migrants are given the hardest jobs, where exploitation is highest: on the assembly lines, on construction sites, in the mines. In the employers’ plans, our role is that of ‘international strike-breakers’, a mass of arms that works a lot and for little money, that accepts any destination, on the margins of any ‘civil right’, ready to be squeezed dry just to stay alive. Thus we are always presented to the local working class, German or Swiss as it may be, and in this way, alongside wage and social discrimination, the divisions of class are deepened across Europe”.

This passage not only denounced exploitation but also exposed the mechanisms of racial capitalism in Robinson’s sense (1983): the organisation of labour through racial differentiation

as a constitutive feature of capitalist accumulation. Italians were represented to local workers as *crumiri internazionali* – "strike-breakers," unreliable outsiders – while being systematically channelled into the hardest, lowest-paid, and most disposable forms of work. Racialisation here functioned not as an after-effect of exploitation, but as the very condition that made such exploitation governable and legitimate. The paper then turned explicitly to how employers used these divisions, drawing attention to how nationalities were played against one another – a striking anticipation of what scholars later described as differential inclusion (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) and the racialised division of labour (Hall 1980; Miles 1982): mechanisms through which migration regimes not only extract labour but actively produce hierarchies among workers.

> "The bosses, striking at the nationalities that prove most combative, replace them with others more blackmailed and with less experience with struggle, in order to keep migration divided not only from the local working class but also among the nationalities themselves. (…)
>
> The bosses can always play the card of unemployment and exploitation, counting on the passivity forced on those who are blackmailed by their basic needs, and counting on the divisions that make rebellion suicidal. In this plan, the bosses find the consent and active support of the unions and reformists of every kind".

Here, racism appears not as a matter of individual prejudice, but as a structural logic through which labour is organised and exploited. The replacement of Italians – once framed as a cheap and docile workforce – by Spaniards, Yugoslavs, and later Portuguese and Turkish workers was not a neutral process of labour substitution. These groups were explicitly described as "more blackmailed" and "less experienced," and thus more easily exploitable. Racial differentiation functioned as a 'divide-and-rule' mechanism, but one rooted in a deeper association between race, labour value, and disposability. In this sense, racism was not merely an instrument of capital, but a constitutive element of how exploitation was made possible and continuously renewed. Crucially, the text also denounced the complicity of unions, which by legitimising these divisions stabilised the system of exploitation (Stohr 2013). This critique resonated powerfully in Switzerland, where the *Union syndicale suisse* (USS) had, by 1965, already aligned themselves with the rising tide of anti-immigration sentiment, accepting quotas and restrictions that reinforced the precarious status of foreign labourers. Yet, the article's conclusion was uncompromising:

> "For decades we have been transformed, through blackmail, into a river of arms circulating across Europe. But today we will no longer adapt. We will no longer adapt to work in factories, in construction, in the mine (…) and the anger we have we will direct entirely against the state – which is no longer German or Italian or Swiss, but the European state of the bosses (…) We no longer adapt – not to the work in the factories, not to the barracks where they make us live, not to dying on the job. And the anger we have we want to direct against the state of the bosses".

By making racism and exploitation visible, such press outlets offered a framework through which migrants could understand their condition collectively, rather than internalising stigma. Migration becomes a site of political education and solidarity, a space in which daily experiences of marginalisation are linked to broader struggles against inequality. As Alana Lentin (2004) argues, anti-racism is not merely the inversion of racism but a discourse and set of practices inseparable from the histories and political processes of European states. Similarly, Paul Gilroy (1987) highlights how anti-racist struggles in Europe are entangled with nationalism's contradictions: appeals to democratic ideals often collide with the nation's racialised boundaries of belonging. By articulating their own experiences, as in the *Lotta Continua* piece, migrants forced Swiss society to confront the limits of its democracy and the exclusionary mechanisms sustaining it.

Alongside this transnational press, the Colonie also produced their own *Bollettino*. Throughout the 1970s, it became a vehicle for developing a critical discourse against the racist initiatives, while anchoring this critique in a structural analysis of the permit system, especially the seasonal permit. When, in 1977, a third anti-immigrant initiative promoted by the National Action was rejected in a popular vote, the *Bollettino*'s front page captured the Colonie's multiple functions: it announced a theatre and cinema program that made them spaces of conviviality; it reported on labour struggles then unfolding, such as in the typography sector; it connected these Swiss dynamics to the Italian context, with an article on unemployment; and it reminded readers that racist campaigns, though recurring, could be defeated.

Most striking is the drawing that dominates the page. It depicts a man, most likely James Schwarzenbach, his tongue extending grotesquely from his own mouth, which then shouts back at him "*Razzista*!" ("Racist!"), strangling him in the process. His hands clutch at his throat,

unable to breathe. The caricature suggests that the venom of racist discourse rebounds upon its speaker: words themselves become the instruments of suffocation. Read more broadly, the image can be seen as an allegory of Switzerland's national-populist rhetoric – racism not only dehumanises migrants, but corrodes the society that mobilises it, a self-inflicted violence. In this sense, Fanon's work on the psychic and social effects of racism is relevant: as he shows, the violence of racial ideology damages both its targets and the societies that sustain it, revealing the insidious and self-consuming logic of racism (Fanon 1952). Thus, the drawing does more than ridicule Schwarzenbach: it visualises how racism, deployed as a tool of division, ultimately undermines the very social fabric it claims to defend.

Bollettino

maggio numero 4

Usciamo dall'isolamento tutti insieme

Il 13 marzo il popolo svizzero ha respinto ancora una volta ad una forte maggioranza le iniziative razziste contro gli stranieri.
Abbiamo dei buoni motivi per credere che questi "signori" dopo questa batosta ci penseranno due volte prima di lanciare delle altre iniziative. Il tentativo di scaricare sugli stranieri tutto il malcontento dei lavoratori svizzeri, dovuto alla crisi economica, é fallito.
Questo non significa che per noi le cose siano cambiate, al contrario
- Per molti lavoratori stranieri esiste ancora il pericolo di essere obligati a partire a causa dei licenziamenti.
- Esistono sempre i varii statuti, tra cui quello dello stagionale. Anzi quest'ultimo é ancora peggiorato poiché il lavoratore stagionale non potrà mai ottenere il permesso B (contratti di tre mesi)
- Le misure dell'OFIAMT che fanno in modo che gli emigrati siano i primi ad essere licenziati, andranno a fare parte della nuova legge sugli stranieri.

→

SOMMARIO

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PERMANENZE
Sede CLI – 2 av. du Mail,
COMITATO: venerdi alle 20,3o
INCA: martedi – giovedi 18,3o-20,3o
Maison des Jeunes – 5 rue du Temple (3° piano),
Gruppo culturale: lunedi alle 20,3o

COLONIA LIBERA ITALIANA DI GINEVRA
avenue du Mail 2
C.P. 244 GENEVE 2
CCP. CLI 12_9548 Genève

Bollettino (CLI), n. 4, May 1977, Archives Contestataires, Geneva.

The *Colonie Libere* provided the infrastructures through which this language circulated – the spaces where newspapers were distributed, debated, and translated into collective practices. As Castelnuovo Frigessi (1978, 130-5) emphasises, their importance lay in transforming scattered experiences of discrimination into a shared consciousness. The archives show that the *Colonie* themselves actively documented workers' conditions, producing questionnaires, reports, and inquiries that complemented and informed the militant press. At the same time, these networks fostered a broader cultural engagement – from theatre to cinema – through which migrants began to experiment with new expressive forms and public languages of critique. As Morena La Barba has shown, the associative spaces created by Italian migrants in Switzerland also served as laboratories of cultural and aesthetic experimentation. Through cineclubs, screenings, and collaborations with filmmakers, these associations provided both the audiences and the interpretive frameworks for a 'migrant cinema' that made visible the experiences and critiques of working-class Italians abroad[18]. In La Barba's terms, these practices fostered the emergence of a "*linguaggio proprio*" – a self-generated language of representation and resistance – that articulated social struggle through cultural means (La Barba 2018). Seen from this perspective, the *Bollettino* produced by the *Colonie Libere* appears not merely as an information tool but as part of the same ecosystem of cultural and political self-expression. Its pages document this process unfolding in real time: racism, exploitation, and division were named, analysed, and turned into the basis for a common political subjectivity.

This trajectory illustrates what Pietro Saitta (2015) describes as practices of survival and autonomy in the margins that, under certain conditions, radicalise into open confrontation. Judith Butler (2004; 2009) similarly insists that vulnerability is not simply passivity but a relational condition that can ground solidarity and mobilisation. Read together, these insights highlight how migrants, precisely because of their precarious legal and social position, developed collective resources that turned fragility into strength. As Henri Lefebvre (1991) reminds us, community halls, schools, and meeting places must be seen as terrains of contestation, or infrastructures of "mobile commons" (Papadopoulos et al. 2008), built and sustained through migrants' own efforts.

[18] On this point, see Morena La Barba's work on anti-racism and Italian migrant cinema in Switzerland, one of the few sustained attempts to approach migrant cultural production through the lens of race. See La Barba, M. (2018). "Cinema, migrazioni e antirazzismo: un percorso nella Svizzera dei Trenta Gloriosi". In *Visualità e anti-razzismo*, Padova: Padova University Press.

Placing the *Colonie Libere* at the centre of this history allows us to go back to the "memorial void" Deshusses (2018) insisted on. The erasure is not only of the open conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s, but of the practices, spaces, and networks that sustained migrant life and made those conflicts possible in the first place. By neglecting these subterranean histories of association and solidarity, public memory risks reducing migrant workers either to silent victims or to episodic moments of revolt. In reality migration itself was a political condition: excluded from formal rights yet compelled to organise, migrants were never mere "bare life[19]". Through institutions like the *Colonie*, they transformed vulnerability into solidarity and built infrastructures of representation that prepared the ground for strikes and protests, while simultaneously making Italian migration visible as a political presence in Switzerland.

[19] While Agamben's concept of "bare life" (1998) has been influential in analysing camps and states of exception, it has been criticised for its eurocentrism and its tendency to evacuate political agency. Post-colonial scholars, notably Mbembe (2003), have shown how biopolitics and necropolitics operate together in colonial and post-colonial contexts, where exposure to death and control does not preclude, but often intensifies, political life.

EMIGRACION

EL APARTHEID SUIZO

M.S-M.

La grave y humillante situación de privación de los más elementales derechos económicos, cívicos, sociales, familiares y humanos de gran parte de los 800.000 trabajadores extranjeros (italianos, españoles, yugoslavos, griegos, portugueses, turcos, etc.) inmigrados en Suiza, pero más especialmente de los folklóricamente conocidos como *temporeros* (en francés, *saisonniers;* en italiano, *stagionali)* —auténticos *esclavos* de la Europa central del último tercio del siglo xx— es conocida, en sus rasgos generales, aunque no en sus espeluznantes detalles, por los españoles peninsulares atentos a los problemas de Europa y del mundo.

Resumiremos tal situación diciendo que estos cientos de miles de ex hombres, hoy reducidos a la categoría inhumana y meramente productiva y servil de *brazos* («brazos, sí, hombres, no» es la piadosa consigna de los nuevos negreros del capitalismo helvético), a quienes el sociólogo y militante italiano Claudio Calvaruso ha calificado, en un impresionante libro, de *subproletariado extranjero en Suiza,* se ven condenados, por decreto, durante años, lustros o decenios, a no poder traer a su familia, a no poder alquilar un apartamento independiente, a vivir en infectos barracones sin la más mínima higiene, seguridad (¡cuántos son los que se han incendiado, dejando a sus inquilinos sin sus míseros enseres, ropas, ahorros y recuerdos!), posibilidad de aislamiento y dignidad, a no poder cambiar de empleo ni intentar reclamar mejores condiciones de trabajo, salario, alojamiento o comida o ejercer alguno de los derechos de expresión, asociación o reunión, sin la amenaza de brutal represión y de fulminante *expulsión* del país.

En favor de estos temporeros y por la supresión de su sofocante estatuto han empezado a moverse, en los últimos tiempos, primero grupos y organizaciones de inmigrados más *estables* —en sus dos categorías de «anuales» (permiso B) y «residentes» o «establecidos» (permiso C)— y, por tanto, menos vulnerables que los mencionados (que sólo tienen permiso A), y luego, arrastrados por ellos, los grupos socialmente más progresivos —de carácter político, sindical, asistencial, religioso o educativo— de la propia colectividad suiza. Recordemos que hace más de tres años un grupo de españoles preocupados y vigilantes por mantener el puente del diálogo entre las organizaciones obreras suizas y los inmigrados, actuando ante las primeras de portavoz responsable de las legítimas reivindicaciones de los últimos, pidió en un importante encuentro a nivel nacional que tuvo lugar en Zurich que la Unión Sindical Suiza y sus federaciones de industria apoyaran ante el Consejo Federal (gobierno suizo) la exigencia unánime de los inmigrados de una supresión pura y simple del *estatuto de temporero,* con sus humillantes restricciones de los derechos humanos fundamentales.

Desde entonces, todas las organizaciones de inmigrados —especialmente españolas e italianas— han venido reiterando esta exigencia sin cesar, ante la pertinaz sordera moral de los poderes políticos y económicos de este país, incorporando últimamente a dicha campaña a cierto número de grupos suizos que han tenido el valor, nada desdeñable, de enfrentarse con buena parte de la opinión pública de la nación helvética —indiferente, cuando no hostil, a las aspiraciones vitales de los inmigrados— y con el ataque abierto y directo de los *nacionalistas,* partidarios de la mano dura y de la significativa consigna «brazos, sí, obreros, no»: la «Acción Nacional» y, en especial, los seguidores del hábil demagogo James Schwarzenbach, cuya influencia es creciente, como han demostrado palpablemente las últimas elecciones ginebrinas de hace unas semanas, en las que los «vigilantes» (extrema derecha xenófoba) han obtenido diez escaños en el Parlamento («Gran Consejo»).

En vísperas de dos nuevas y más radicales iniciativas de los racistas —para quienes el drástico decreto del Consejo Federal en julio último, perpetuando, de hecho, la condición de temporero y haciendo imposible que los nuevos temporeros puedan convertirse jamás en «anuales», no ha sido suficiente—, y cuando el problema, sobre todo de los españoles, se agiganta y se convierte en angustioso —no se olvide que la presión de nuestros emigrantes sobre Suiza va a incrementarse, por las consecuencias de la crisis del petróleo y el cierre de la República Federal de Alemania a la inmigración de nuestros compatriotas—, las escasas fuerzas progresivas de que hemos hablado se han agrupado en el llamado *Comité para la abolición del estatuto*

70/*Pág. 14* *Cuadernos para el Diálogo*

Miguel Sánchez-Mazas, “El Apartheid Suizo”, 1974, Cuardernos para el Diálogo, 1974: 14-15 (AEG Archives privées 353.4.1.3)

While the Italian case provides a particularly rich example, other migrant communities were also organising and circulating their own critical voices across Europe. A striking instance is the 1974 article *El Apartheid Suizo* by Miguel Sánchez-Mazas, a Spanish trade-union militant and writer living in Geneva. In his piece, Sánchez-Mazas denounced the condition of the *temporeros* as “*auténticos esclavos de la Europa central del último tercio del siglo XX*” (“authentic slaves of Central Europe in the last third of the 20th century”). He argued that these workers were reduced “*a la categoría inhumana y meramente productiva y servil de brazos – ‘brazos sí, hombres no’ es la piadosa consigna de los nuevos negreros del capitalismo*

helvético" – ("to the inhuman and merely productive and servile category of arms – 'arms yes, men no' is the pious slogan of the new slave traders of Swiss capitalism"). By using the term *apartheid*, Sánchez-Mazas underscored the systematic segregation structuring migrant presence in Switzerland, while also noting how community organisations – both Italian and Spanish – were denouncing this unsustainable situation. The articulation between these struggles was not abstract: the first major strike in Geneva, at the Murer factory, directly involved Spanish workers most affected by the case, showing how migrant mobilisations were interconnected across national lines and how news, strategies, and solidarities circulated beyond borders.

By invoking the term 'apartheid', migrants in Switzerland were doing more than making a rhetorical gesture: they were inserting their struggle into a transnational anti-racist horizon, recognising that:

> far from being a purely biological signifier, race in this expanded sense referred to a body without a world or anchorage – a body of combustible energy, a kind of double of nature that could, through labour, be transformed into a stock or reserve available for use. (Mbembe 2018, 21)

The fact that Sánchez-Mazas and others were familiar with apartheid in South Africa – and that people like Vincenzo recalled contacts with activists elsewhere – shows that militants in Switzerland saw themselves as part of a wider political constellation. 'Apartheid' here becomes not only a name for segregation and exploitation at home but a symbolic link to global regimes of race, colonialism, and capitalism. This connection does important theoretical work for anti-racism: it asserts that the local is shaped by, and can shape, the global; that the experiences of *temporeros* are not exceptional or peripheral, but share structural affinities with the racial regimes known in South Africa, Latin America, and colonial Africa.

Moreover, as the volume *Apartheid and Anti-Apartheid in Western Europe* (2020) has shown, European societies were not only reacting to apartheid abroad but also adopting the term as a framework to interpret their own forms of racial segregation, immigrant exclusion, and colonial legacies. In the Swiss case, calling the condition 'apartheid' thus served several functions: it dignified migrant demands by linking them to anti-colonial struggles; it provided a language of critique that refused to accept discrimination as a natural or temporary aberration; and it built transnational solidarity by echoing movements in South Africa, Latin America, and among European anti-racist networks and beyond. Through this shared vocabulary of struggle, migrants in Switzerland positioned themselves not as isolated labourers but as actors within a

broader global critique of the "European state of the bosses" confronting the intertwined regimes of race, labour, and migration.

The insistence on self-organisation, together with the emergence of political consciousness, extended beyond associative and cultural networks into the workers' own forms of communication. The leaflets, newsletters, and bulletins produced marked a further step in this process: they translated the collective awareness cultivated within and in parallel to the *Colonie Libere* and the militant press into autonomous practices of writing and organising. One striking example is *Nostro Giornale. Periodico del gruppo di base della costruzione*, a leafleft produced by a collective rooted in the Geneva construction sector during the 1970s. Far from reproducing the language of official union bulletins or party pamphlets, the text conveyed the urgency of lived struggles and the determination to build autonomous forms of organisation. It can be read as both a historical snapshot and a manifesto of grassroots syndicalism: a call to struggle from below, to build solidarities across national and linguistic boundaries, and to ground collective action in the everyday spaces of work and life.

The front page of *Nostro Giornale* no. 3/4 makes this ethos immediately visible. Hand-drawn and densely composed, it merges the graphic codes of protest, humour, and didactic illustration: construction workers advance with pickaxes and banners reading "No to the new emigration law", "No to shacks and hovels", and "United in the struggle". The crane towering over the scene functions almost as an emblem of labour itself – a key means of production symbolically reclaimed by workers, echoing a Marxian understanding of class struggle in which control over labour and its tools becomes a site of political contestation. At the same time, the drawing enacts what Mirzoeff (2011) would call a "counter-visuality": a reappropriation of the means of visual production by those usually rendered invisible. The cartoon-like rendering, deliberately amateur and exaggerated, signals the refusal of polished, institutional aesthetics in favour of a workers' vernacular style that speaks from within the building site; this vernacular multiplicity enacts what Bakhtin (1981) would recognise as heteroglossia, where multiple voices and social languages coexist in a single communicative space.

Linguistically, the slogans alternate between protest imperatives ("Enough!", "United we win!") and programmatic statements, establishing an immediate rhythm of urgency and solidarity. The coexistence of text and image exemplifies Barthes' (1977) insight that the relationship between word and image is dialogic: each reinforces and reinterprets the other. In this sense, the cover performs what Rancière (1989) describes as a reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible, asserting workers as both subjects and authors of their own

representation. Rather than simply representing protest, the cover performs it – it invites reading, laughter, and identification, transforming the act of communication into an act of mobilisation.

Nostro Giornale, n. ¾, 1972, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

The text following the front page begins with a direct address to “comrades”, signalling from the outset its participatory tone and horizontal mode of communication. It interweaves personal testimonies with political reflection, offering a vivid portrayal of the conditions faced by

migrant workers in Switzerland: the rising cost of living, the precariousness of seasonal permits, overcrowded barracks, and the pervasive experience of repression in both social and political life. In this context, the document underlines that solidarity could not remain abstract but had to be forged across lines of nationality. One of the most powerful examples in the document is the strike at the Saint-Jean tunnel, where Yugoslav workers – long considered by employers as "safe" and compliant – took the lead. "We particularly salute the strike at the Saint-Jean tunnel" the newspaper declares, "because the Yugoslav comrades were united in the struggle. The Yugoslav comrades, with whom it was very difficult to communicate and who were considered 'reliable workers' by the bosses, found their own way. And another trick of the bosses went to hell". Here, solidarity was not imposed from above but discovered through common struggle, breaking the stereotypes that had been used to divide the workforce.

The same dynamic appears in the account of Spanish students employed as summer labour in construction sites, initially brought in to weaken solidarity. At first, Italian workers regarded them with suspicion, seeing them as potential strike-breakers. Yet, supported by the *Gruppo di base*, these tensions gave way to cooperation: the students and the migrant workers began to recognise their shared condition and to fight together. The leaflet thus testifies to the capacity of workers to transform division into unity, turning employer strategies of fragmentation into opportunities for building new alliances.

Equally central is the critique of established unions, which the document portrays not as allies but as part of the problem. Their failure to translate materials into Italian or Spanish is presented not as an oversight but as a deliberate strategy to keep migrants uninformed about their rights. The distance between the official labour movement and migrant workers was therefore not merely organisational but political: while unions negotiated compromises, grassroots groups like the *Gruppo di base* insisted on direct, uncompromising struggle.

This position is further illustrated by the case of the Cuénod factory, presented as exemplary. When workers there mobilised, management sought to neutralise their anger with an absurdly inadequate gesture – offering them a simple lunch. The text describes this episode not merely as an insult but as a lesson, and from it the group elaborated a methodology of struggle. Workers were urged to build internal committees, to keep their plans from management, to resist surveillance, and to cultivate networks across sectors facing similar conditions. The emphasis was not on waiting for representation but on creating their own structures of decision-making and solidarity.

Taken together, this archival source exemplifies a double resistance: against the external forces of exploitation and repression, but also against the internal limitations of unions and

bureaucratic institutions that had abandoned the most vulnerable. It is a text that speaks of structural violence, but also of the extraordinary collective creativity of migrant workers who refused to remain silent or invisible. Far from being relics of the past, such documents stand as active archives of struggle, preserving the memory of how dignity, solidarity, and consciousness were constructed in the everyday battles of migrant labour in Switzerland. The practices revealed in these papers – naming injustice, asserting agency, and generating collective reflection – also illuminate the dynamics of anti-racist and political consciousness described in contemporary theory. Following Lentin (2004), anti-racism can be understood not only as a critique of racialised hierarchies embedded in law and policy, but as a practice emerging from collective experience and action. In this sense, anti-racism does not appear here as an abstract moral stance, but as something produced from below, through conflict, organisation, and the refusal of invisibility.

One element that proves particularly significant for this research is the way migrant workers articulated their critiques of trade unions. Such critiques were already visible in early 1970s documents but persisted and evolved throughout the decade, showing both continuity and innovation in grassroots political expression. Archival sources from the early 1970s, such as *Nostro Giornale* analysed above, reveal that unions were often perceived not as defenders of labour but as instruments of control and compromise. Migrant workers sought to address broader structural inequalities, including precarious labour, housing conditions, and racist policies – areas where unions were seen as largely absent or complicit.

Similarly, Portuguese migrant groups quickly produced their own discourse, showing that even relatively small waves of new migration could generate autonomous political reflection. Their text *Os temporários na Suíça* (Archives contestataires, Geneva, May 1974), also highlighted the control exerted by unions. The text described unions explicitly as part of a system of political control alongside the police and bourgeois institutions. Far from being allies, unions were framed as instruments of surveillance and pacification, emphasising that autonomous organisation required a rupture not only with employers but also with institutionalised labour structures. By the end of the 1970s, worker's publications such as the *Journal du Groupe de base du bâtiment* (Archives contestataires, Geneva, May 1978) confirms that the earlier concerns persisted. As the text states:

> “We observe that, in the strengthening of their paralysis, as a function of the generalised and prolonged state of crisis, social-democratic unions reduce unionism to the mere negotiation of collective labour agreements, whose content they increasingly narrow”.

Workers expressed a sense of suffocation in terms of “paralysis” and “reduction”, reflecting frustration with unions that limited the scope of working-class struggle to wage negotiations and narrow collective agreements. The vocabulary used in 1978 resonates with the early 1970s critique, reflecting a dynamic interplay between movement and immobility: while unions remained structurally constrained and conservative, migrant workers actively moved – socially, politically, and discursively – creating new forms of collective agency despite systemic obstacles.

The vocabulary and forms of organisation found in these archives underscore the political creativity of grassroots worker movements in Switzerland. They reveal a working class dissatisfied with institutionalised unionism, capable of inventing alternative modes of collective action, and determined to redefine the very meaning of solidarity. If unions were accused of defending only the collective labour agreements (*conventions collectives de travail*, CCT) in an increasingly narrow way, grassroots groups sought to broaden the terrain of struggle to include migration, housing, racism, and political rights. These struggles unfolded across a plurality of spaces: in the *colonie libere*, at workplaces, in barracks, and in informal social settings such as cafés and community centres. In each of these sites, workers generated knowledge, cultivated solidarity, and developed political language rooted in everyday experience.

By doing so, they gave voice to a radical reimagining of labour politics – one that remains a crucial, if often overlooked, chapter in the history of the Swiss workers' movement. The organisations, networks, and everyday practices created by migrants show that they were not merely reacting to exclusion but actively producing new forms of political consciousness and anti-racist theorisation. In this sense, they should be recognised as participants in the theorisation of anti-racism, not merely as its “objects” (Fraser 1990), but as actors in subaltern counter-publics where knowledge, solidarity, and political imagination were collectively produced.

3.2 Mapping Networks and New Alliances: Militantism and Social Activism

> In front of the Geneva courthouse, during a demonstration in support of a black woman denouncing sexual harassment at work, a friend and fellow activist pointed discreetly towards someone among the crowd: "*You should talk to her!*"
>
> Weeks later, I found myself sitting in Marina's living room. She began our conversation not with herself, but with the question of memory:
>
> "*I have given all my documents to the 'Archives contestataires'. (...) So many things happened. And it's true, I'm very enthusiastic about the counter-archives, because I think they're very important. Otherwise, nothing remains*".
>
> (Geneva, February 2025)

Marina is a long-standing militant whose life, marked by feminist commitments and decades of political struggle, stretches across geographies and movements. Her trajectory embodies the dense and often contradictory history of the radical left from the 1970s onward. From the outset, she reminds us that the archive is never neutral. As Derrida argues in *Archive Fever* (1996), it is both a space of preservation and of power, where remembering is inseparable from forgetting. By entrusting her documents to the *Archives contestataires* – a counter-archive dedicated to preserving traces of militant experiences – Marina underlines the urgency of safeguarding histories that would otherwise disappear.

Her testimony, too, works as an archive: a narrative that reconnects scattered experiences, restores silenced voices, and unsettles dominant accounts that rarely acknowledge the texture of militant struggles. Through Marina's memories we trace the networks, contradictions, and solidarities of militant Geneva from the late 1960s onwards. Her life refracts dictatorship and migration, workers' strikes and feminist awakenings, alliances forged and undone. Listening to Marina does not simply reconstruct her path; it sketches the cartography of a political landscape that is always shifting but anchored in the lived experience of those who shaped it.

To understand Marina's story, it is crucial to begin where she comes from. Migration, as Abdelmalek Sayad has taught us, and as Avallone emphasises in his reading of him, is never only about arrival. It encompasses departure, displacement, and the ties that bind before and

after. To separate the ‘emigrant’ from the ‘immigrant’ experience is to erase part of a person’s trajectory, to reduce life to what begins only once one crosses into the host country (Sayad 1999; Avallone 2018). Marina story in Spain already gestures towards themes that will recur later: the tension between silence and speech, the pursuit of autonomy as a woman, and the way personal choices – marriage, children, migration – are entangled with broader structures of repression and possibility. Her presence in Swiss struggles thus carries within it not only the weight of Francoism and family strategies of survival, but also the sensibility for justice and autonomy that would later nourish her political commitments.

> “*I was born in 1941, in Reus, a small town. My parents had been sent there as a form of punishment. There was the war, the triumph of Francoism, and my father was vaguely socialist, but not very engaged. After the war, civil servants had to appear before a sort of tribunal. He was lucky: he wasn’t fired, but he was transferred to Catalonia. He didn’t know the language; the atmosphere was different. They sent him to Reus. That’s where I was born.*
>
> *So, my whole childhood was lived in the atmosphere of Francoism. That’s important to say, because it was the atmosphere of fear. There were things you couldn’t talk about, because if they spoke in front of me, I could repeat things outside. A child, you know... So, there was this climate of fear that left a strong mark. We lived there until I was 14 or 15.*
>
> *Many people in Spain thought that Franco would fall, but he didn’t. I know there were people who met secretly. Once, my father wanted to go to a meeting – I was very small – and my mother stopped him from going. It was a really painful atmosphere, latent.*
>
> *Every year my parents requested to return to Madrid where they had their family. Finally, my father was allowed to go back. I wasn’t happy at all. We didn’t have the means for me to attend university. I was very disappointed. I worked a little and did a year of studies that might eventually have allowed me to enter university. And then I met the man who became my first husband. At 19, I was married with a child; there was no contraception you know. He was studying law in Geneva, and that’s how I came here*”.
>
> (Marina)

Marina’s words evoke the intimate texture of authoritarianism: silence, vigilance, the unspoken. Her childhood memory of being a “danger” to her parents – because she might innocently repeat what she had overheard – shows how Francoism extended into the home, disciplining not only political opponents but also the everyday life of families. This resonates with Veena Das’s reflections on violence and the intimate, where power reshapes domestic relationships and installs fear as a habit of life (Das 2007).

The family's displacement to Catalonia also speaks to the mechanisms of repression: punishment through exile within the national territory, linguistic and cultural dislocation, and the precarious survival of those with suspected sympathies for the defeated republicans. Her father's cautious distance from open politics illustrates the ambivalence of many in postwar Spain, where the line between survival and resistance was constantly negotiated (Scott, 1985).

At the same time, Marina situates herself as a young woman facing structural constraints: the impossibility of university studies due to economic limitations, marriage and motherhood at nineteen, the absence of contraception. These conditions shaped not only her private life but also her trajectory into migration. As Sayad reminds us, the reasons for migration are inscribed in the social, political, and familial conditions of departure (Sayad 1999). Marina does not 'become' an immigrant only in Geneva; she carries with her the legacies of Francoist Spain, of gendered expectations, and of class limitations that pushed her towards another horizon. After leaving Spain, Marina's journey to Geneva marked the beginning of her immersion into new social and political landscapes.

> "*It was in Geneva that I began to become politicised. I've always been very sensitive to questions of justice, and also economic independence was important to me as a woman. But I wasn't a feminist at all at that point.*
>
> *Here, I discovered that people had the right to demonstrate. I was dazzled by the May Day parade – even if it was a bit folkloric with the marching band and all – I found it extraordinary that people could demonstrate in the streets. After a year, I started studying sociology at the university. That's where I began to have contacts, mostly with people on the left, and to become politicised.*
>
> *My husband was from the north of Morocco, which had been a Spanish colony. Through him, we had contacts that touched on the relationship between Spain and Morocco. I had my second child during this time, and at university we began to connect with people from the student union, which was close to the Labour Party. We were also inspired by what was happening in Cuba.*
>
> *At first we lived in a studio, but later in a shared flat offered by the university. My husband and I had one room, but there was also an Italian student and a Genevan. We were also connected to Chileans – through a friend – and Russians, who always came with a bottle of vodka. There was a Venezuelan, and upstairs a Spaniard. We called it the 'coloc'.*
>
> *It was student life, yes, but so many things happened there. For women, something significant emerged: no one wanted to do the housework. I remember saying 'let's clean', but in practice it meant me, because no one else would. I didn't do it very often either, but there was a real problem around this. It was a formative experience, though at that time I had no feminist awareness at all*".
>
> (Marina)

Marina's arrival in Geneva illustrates the intersections of migration, gender, and political socialisation. Geneva functioned as a hub of political and cultural exchange**,** where exiles, students, and workers from multiple countries coexisted, collaborated, and occasionally conflicted. The shared flat – the "coloc" – reveals the micro-politics of everyday life, where gendered labour, household responsibilities, and informal social networks created lessons in cooperation, conflict, and organisation. Her interactions with students, leftist organisations, and people from Chile, Venezuela, Russia, Italy and Spain highlight the transnational dimension of these networks. Personal relationships and romantic ties (her husband's Moroccan origin) intertwined with ideological engagement, showing how private and political spheres are mutually constitutive immigrant activist experiences. This early period in Switzerland was foundational. Even before identifying as a feminist, Marina's lived experience made her sensitive to inequality and the distribution of labour, linking her personal reality to structural patterns emphasised by feminist theorists such as Silvia Federici (2012) and Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972).

Amid these everyday interactions and networks, one public experience particularly marked Marina's political awakening: her first encounter with the May Day parade. It served as both a symbolic and practical point of initiation into activism. Realising that public demonstration could be a legitimate, even celebratory, exercise of collective rights stood in sharp contrast to the repression of her childhood under Francoism. The parade not only impressed her personally but also resonates with archival evidence showing how May Day functioned as a crucial political arena in Geneva during the 1970s, where labour unions, leftist parties, and social movements claimed visibility, contested space, and expressed solidarity. It introduced her to political space and public visibility, essential elements of her later activism. In this sense, May Day embodied what Arendt (1958) called the "space of appearance", where individuals become political through collective visibility. As Butler (2015) and Mitchell (2003) remind us, such assemblies are performative acts that assert the right to appear.

Marina's early political awareness and her sensitivity to gendered and social inequalities were soon mobilised in the context of labour struggles. One formative episode was the strike at the Murer construction site in Geneva in 1970, a site where workers' demands, transnational solidarity, and the multiplicity of leftist organisations intersected. Marina recounts her involvement:

> "*I don't know exactly how I got involved, but I ended up as a translator. We held meetings in a café where the Murer workers spoke Spanish, and I translated for them.*

There were various leftist groups quite active in Geneva: radical leftist groups, the Colonie Libre, and Spanish exiles. It was sometimes conflictual with the official unions, but there were still some contacts.

It was around September when the strike erupted, I think. I remember attending sessions, sometimes even at lunchtime, translating. It was interesting because many different groups were involved: students, university researchers, the student union. My new partner at the time was very active, unionised, and involved with the Labour Party. There were also architects and intellectuals connected to these groups, urbanists who fought to preserve neighbourhoods.

I also had contact with Spanish organisations, including the Spanish Communist Party. There were international civil servants, doctors from the WHO, all left leaning. An important figure was Cesar Montero, sent from the Spanish Communist Party to organise the Association of Spanish Workers in Switzerland. There were Italians from the Italian Communist Party, some of whom later joined the Labour Party. So, there were really links everywhere, it was important.

Honestly, at Murer, the workers were exhausted. One of my friends in metallurgy said, 'I don't know if I can continue like this; I'll never reach retirement'. It was such hard work. When the chance came to express that, even if they weren't political activists, it was a relief: saying 'enough, this isn't fair'. There was something powerful in that."

(Marina)

The Murer strike illustrates how Marina's personal trajectory intersected with broader labour, political, and transnational networks. Her role as an interpreter was not neutral; it positioned her as a mediator, a conduit of communication between workers, activists, and organisations. Translation, in this sense, was itself a political act, highlighting the centrality of knowledge, language, and mobility in activist networks. As Spivak (2000) argues, translation is never a mere transfer of meaning but an ethical practice that negotiates power and representation. In moments like these, the interpreter becomes a political subject, inhabiting what Mignolo (2000) calls a "border space", where multiple languages, struggles, and imaginaries converge to produce new forms of solidarity.

The strike also demonstrates the intersection of multiple organisational fields: student unions, leftist parties, exiled communities, architects, and intellectuals. Drawing on Tilly and Tarrow's framework of contentious politics (2015), Marina's testimony shows how protest events operate as moments when "otherwise distinct actors form new connections, activate old ones, and learn new ways to make claims" (Tilly, Tarrow 2015, 11), producing shared repertoires of collective action. The involvement of Spinards and Italians, alongside local Swiss militants, emphasises the transnational dimension of activism, where solidarity crosses national and cultural boundaries. Moreover, her reflections on workers' exhaustion and the relief of

being able to voice grievances underscore the affective dimensions of collective action. The strike was not only a struggle over wages or working conditions but also a site for the expression of justice, recognition, and dignity, linking Marina's earlier sensitivity to fairness and autonomy with collective mobilisation.

Marina's presence at the Murer strike allows us to move from individual testimony to the broader terrain of migrant labour struggles in Geneva at the turn of the 1970s, bringing us close to the lived texture of a conflict that archives present as a key turning point in Swiss social history. The Murer strike, which erupted in spring 1970, mobilised primarily Spanish and Italian seasonal workers who faced not only exhausting conditions on the construction sites but also degrading forms of social exclusion: dormitory-style barracks, the impossibility of family reunification, and the precarity of the seasonal status, which kept them in a state of permanent vulnerability. Contemporary militant documents – tracts, letters, personal notes, university reports – depict the strike as more than a localised workplace conflict. It was a prism revealing the very architecture of domination: the permit system, the racist initiatives spearheaded by James Schwarzenbach, the "peace of work" ("*paix du travail*") tradition that bound unions to employers in a corporatist compromise. For militants, Murer symbolised a potential rupture, a rare unifying moment capable of bridging the divide between Swiss and immigrant workers (Mélo 2024, 83). It was framed as a united strike, one that linked questions of labour with those of housing, infrastructure, and racial discrimination. Yet the archival record also reveals its limitations. Traditional unions often hesitated to move beyond corporatist boundaries, while factions of the far-left sometimes faced internal divisions.

> "*During this period, there were internal conflicts too. I had brief involvements with different organisations: the Spanish Communist Party, the Association of Spanish Workers, and the Centre de Liaison Politique (CLP). In the CLP, we were supposed to meet workers and discuss building issues, but sometimes it felt absurd – like typographers being assigned tasks unrelated to their expertise. From that, I learned a lot about power struggles within and between groups. Eventually, I had my third child and left the CLP. Soon after, I started working for the state, joining the Public Sector union, and gradually became involved in feminist-oriented initiatives towards the late 1980s*".
>
> (Marina)

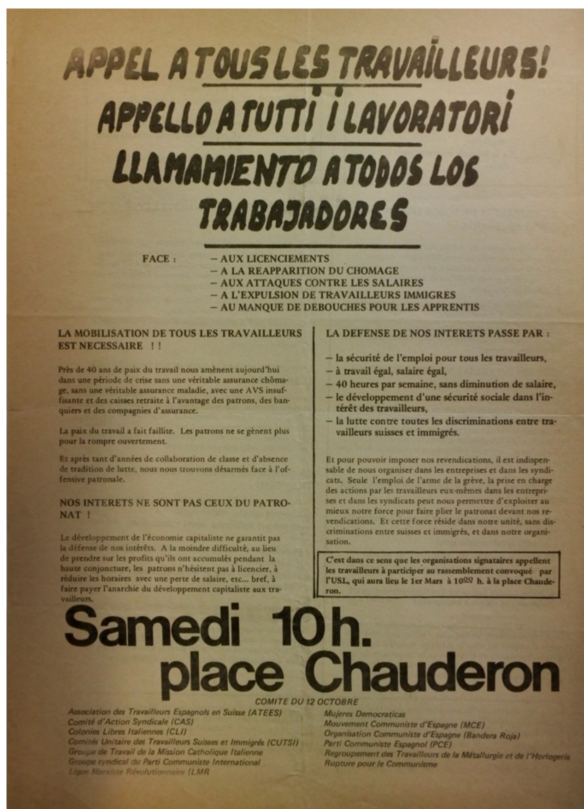
Finally, her experiences within organisations like the CLP reveal the internal dynamics and conflicts of activist networks. The absurdity of bureaucratic assignments, power struggles, and fleeting memberships highlights that militant spaces are not homogeneous or harmonious. They

are instead arenas where political ideals, personal relations, and organisational hierarchies intersect, offering rich lessons for understanding both solidarity and tension in social movements (Fillieule 2001). As Marina herself recalls, solidarity was real but fragile: the exhaustion of the workers, the lack of organisational unity, and the institutional conservatism of unions imposed clear constraints. As Deborah B. Gould (2009) shows in her study of ACT UP, political commitment is sustained not only by ideology but by a dense web of emotions – anger, hope, disappointment, love – that binds people together even as it wears them down. "Affect", she writes, "is not simply a personal experience but a political resource and a terrain of struggle" (Gould 2009, 33). While Marina's experience unfolds in a very different historical and geographical context, Gould's insight helps illuminate the affective dimension of militant life: how collective action depends on emotional labour, vulnerability, and the constant effort to hold together fragile bonds of solidarity. Still, the strike demonstrated the central role of immigrant workers in shaping the contours of social conflict in Switzerland, forcing into public view issues long relegated to invisibility.

The Murer strike in fact marked the beginning of a cycle of contestation that unfolded across the 1970s (Deshusses 2014). Archival traces document a succession of labour conflicts – in metallurgy, watchmaking, construction, and precision mechanics – that punctuated Geneva and the surrounding cantons. The occupation of Bulova in Neuchâtel, the strikes at Matisa, Dubied, Luxar, or the Charmilles, and cross-border mobilisations in the nearby city of Annemasse in France illustrate how struggles multiplied, often led or sustained by migrant workers. Organisations such as the *Colonie Libere Italiane*, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), the *Association des travailleurs espagnols en Suisse*, and local radical left groups played an important role, alongside more established unions such as FTMH, FOBB, and others. What emerges is a fragmented but vibrant cartography of actors. The 1970s were marked by an unprecedented visibility of immigrant labour struggles and by attempts – partial, contested, but significant – to articulate a collective class position that encompassed both Swiss and foreign workers, men and women, across different industries. Marina's testimony situates her directly within this conjuncture: her personal role as translator, her connections and her reflections bridge the intimate and the structural, giving voice to the lived contradictions of this "season of struggles" (Deshusses 2014; Mélo 2024).

The archives allow us to draw this cartography in more detail. Beyond the organisations Marina recalls, documents from the mid-1970s reveal a dense constellation of actors, ranging from syndicalist committees to far-left currents, religiously inflected migrant groups, and feminist collectives. A leaflet from the Collective *12 octobre* (probably 1974) in Lausanne, for

instance, was addressed to workers in French, Italian, and Spanish under the headline: “Call to all the workers”. It denounced “layoffs, the distribution of unemployment, attacks against wages, the expulsion of immigrant workers, and the lack of opportunities for apprentices”. The appeal explicitly underlined the necessity of unity between Swiss and immigrant workers. The list of signatories maps out the complexity of Geneva’s militant landscape: *Association des Travailleurs Espagnols en Suisse (ATEES), Comité d’Action Syndicale (CAS), Colonie Libere Italiane (CLI), Comité Unitaire des Travailleurs Suisses et Immigrés (CUTSI), Groupe de Travail de la Mission Catholique Italienne, Groupe Syndical du Parti Communiste International, Ligue Marxiste Révolutionnaire, Mujeres Democraticas, Mouvement Communiste d’Espagne (MCE), Organisation Communiste d’Espagne (Bandera Roja), Parti Communiste Espagnol (PCE), Regroupement des Travailleurs de la Métallurgie et de l’Horlogerie, Rupture pour le Communisme.* This expanded cartography highlights not only the centrality of Italian and Spanish migrants but also the entanglement of religious, feminist, and revolutionary left groups in the attempt to articulate a united network.



APPEL A TOUS LES TRAVAILLEURS!

APPELLO A TUTTI I LAVORATORI

LLAMAMIENTO A TODOS LOS TRABAJADORES

FACE :
- AUX LICENCIEMENTS
- A LA REAPPARITION DU CHOMAGE
- AUX ATTAQUES CONTRE LES SALAIRES
- A L'EXPULSION DE TRAVAILLEURS IMMIGRES
- AU MANQUE DE DEBOUCHES POUR LES APPRENTIS

LA MOBILISATION DE TOUS LES TRAVAILLEURS EST NECESSAIRE ! !

Près de 40 ans de paix du travail nous amènent aujourd'hui dans une période de crise sans une véritable assurance chômage, sans une véritable assurance maladie, avec une AVS insuffisante et des caisses retraite à l'avantage des patrons, des banquiers et des compagnies d'assurance.

La paix du travail a fait faillite. Les patrons ne se gènent plus pour la rompre ouvertement.

Et après tant d'années de collaboration de classe et d'absence de tradition de lutte, nous nous trouvons désarmés face à l'offensive patronale.

NOS INTERETS NE SONT PAS CEUX DU PATRONAT !

Le développement de l'économie capitaliste ne garantit pas la défense de nos intérêts. A la moindre difficulté, au lieu de prendre sur les profits qu'ils ont accumulés pendant la haute conjoncture, les patrons n'hésitent pas à licencier, à réduire les horaires avec une perte de salaire, etc... bref, à faire payer l'anarchie du développement capitaliste aux travailleurs.

LA DEFENSE DE NOS INTERETS PASSE PAR :

- la sécurité de l'emploi pour tous les travailleurs,
- à travail égal, salaire égal,
- 40 heures par semaine, sans diminution de salaire,
- le développement d'une sécurité sociale dans l'intérêt des travailleurs,
- la lutte contre toutes les discriminations entre travailleurs suisses et immigrés.

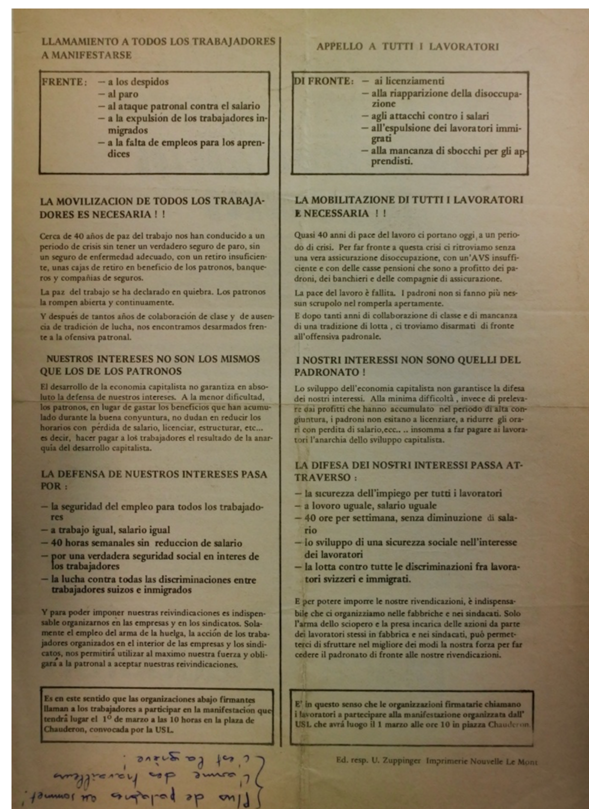
Et pour pouvoir imposer nos revendications, il est indispensable de nous organiser dans les entreprises et dans les syndicats. Seule l'emploi de l'arme de la grève, la prise en charge des actions par les travailleurs eux-mêmes dans les entreprises et dans les syndicats peut nous permettre d'exploiter au mieux notre force pour faire plier le patronat devant nos revendications. Et cette force réside dans notre unité, sans discriminations entre suisses et immigrés, et dans notre organisation.

C'est dans ce sens que les organisations signataires appellent les travailleurs à participer au rassemblement convoqué par l'USL, qui aura lieu le 1er Mars à 10oo h. à la place Chauderon.

Samedi 10 h.
place Chauderon

COMITE DU 12 OCTOBRE

Association des Travailleurs Espagnols en Suisse (ATEES)
Comité d'Action Syndicale (CAS)
Colonies Libres Italiennes (CLI)
Comités Unitaire des Travailleurs Suisses et Immigrés (CUTSI)
Groupe de Travail de la Mission Catholique Italienne
Groupe syndical du Parti Communiste International
Ligue Marxiste Révolutionnaire (LMR
Mujeres Democraticas
Mouvement Communiste d'Espagne (MCE)
Organisation Communiste d'Espagne (Bandera Roja)
Parti Communiste Espagnol (PCE)
Regroupement des Travailleurs de la Métallurgie et de l'Horlogerie
Rupture pour le Communisme



LLAMAMIENTO A TODOS LOS TRABAJADORES A MANIFESTARSE

FRENTE :
- a los despidos
- al paro
- al ataque patronal contra el salario
- a la expulsión de los trabajadores inmigrados
- a la falta de empleos para los aprendices

LA MOVILIZACION DE TODOS LOS TRABAJADORES ES NECESARIA ! !

Cerca de 40 años de paz del trabajo nos han conducido a un periodo de crisis sin tener un verdadero seguro de paro, sin un seguro de enfermedad adecuado, con un retiro insuficiente, unas cajas de retiro en beneficio de los patronos, banqueros y compañias de seguros.

La paz del trabajo se ha declarado en quiebra. Los patronos la rompen abierta y continuamente.

Y después de tantos años de colaboración de clase y de ausencia de tradición de lucha, nos encontramos desarmados frente a la ofensiva patronal.

NUESTROS INTERESES NO SON LOS MISMOS QUE LOS DE LOS PATRONOS

El desarrollo de la economia capitalista no garantiza en absoluto la defensa de nuestros intereses. A la menor dificultad, los patronos, en lugar de gastar los beneficios que han acumulado durante la buena conyuntura, no dudan en reducir los horarios con pérdida de salario, licenciar, estructurar, etc... es decir, hacer pagar a los trabajadores el resultado de la anarquia del desarrollo capitalista.

LA DEFENSA DE NUESTROS INTERESES PASA POR :

- la seguridad del empleo para todos los trabajadores
- a trabajo igual, salario igual
- 40 horas semanales sin reduccion de salario
- por una verdadera seguridad social en interes de los trabajadores
- la lucha contra todas las discriminaciones entre trabajadores suizos e inmigrados

Y para poder imponer nuestras reivindicaciones es indispensable organizarnos en las empresas y en los sindicatos. Solamente el empleo del arma de la huelga, la acción de los trabajadores organizados en el interior de las empresas y los sindicatos, nos permitirá utilizar al maximo nuestra fuerza y obligará a la patronal a aceptar nuestras reivindicaciones.

Es en este sentido que las organizaciones abajo firmantes llaman a los trabajadores a participar en la manifestación que tendrá lugar el 1º de marzo a las 10 horas en la plaza de Chauderon, convocada por la USL.

APPELLO A TUTTI I LAVORATORI

DI FRONTE :
- ai licenziamenti
- alla riapparizione della disoccupazione
- agli attacchi contro i salari
- all'espulsione dei lavoratori immigrati
- alla mancanza di sbocchi per gli apprendisti.

LA MOBILITAZIONE DI TUTTI I LAVORATORI E NECESSARIA ! !

Quasi 40 anni di pace del lavoro ci portano oggi a un periodo di crisi. Per far fronte a questa crisi ci ritroviamo senza una vera assicurazione disoccupazione, con un'AVS insufficiente e con delle casse pensioni che sono a profitto dei padroni, dei banchieri e delle compagnie di assicurazione.

La pace del lavoro è fallita. I padroni non si fanno più nessun scrupolo nel romperla apertamente.

E dopo tanti anni di collaborazione di classe e di mancanza di una tradizione di lotta , ci troviamo disarmati di fronte all'offensiva padronale.

I NOSTRI INTERESSI NON SONO QUELLI DEL PADRONATO !

Lo sviluppo dell'economia capitalista non garantisce la difesa dei nostri interessi. Alla minima difficoltà , invece di prelevare dai profitti che hanno accumulato nel periodo di alta congiuntura, i padroni non esitano a licenziare, a ridurre gli orari con perdita di salario,ecc.. .. insomma a far pagare ai lavoratori l'anarchia dello sviluppo capitalista.

LA DIFESA DEI NOSTRI INTERESSI PASSA ATTRAVERSO :

- la sicurezza dell'impiego per tutti i lavoratori
- a lovoro uguale, salario uguale
- 40 ore per settimana, senza diminuzione di salario
- lo sviluppo di una sicurezza sociale nell'interesse dei lavoratori
- la lotta contro tutte le discriminazioni fra lavoratori svizzeri e immigrati.

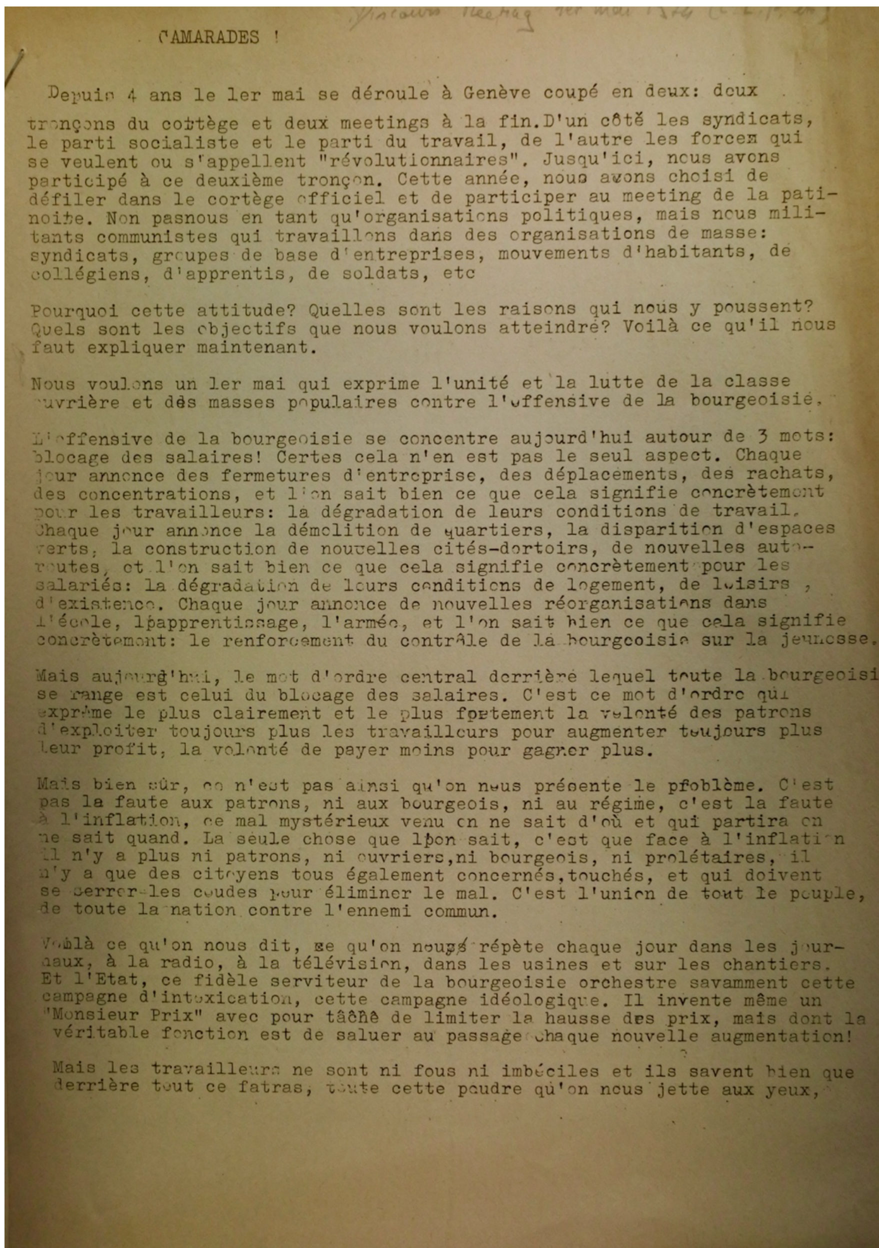
E per potere imporre le nostre rivendicazioni, è indispensabile che ci organizziamo nelle fabbriche e nei sindacati. Solo l'arma dello sciopero e la presa incarica delle azioni da parte dei lavoratori stessi in fabbrica e nei sindacati, puó permetterci di sfruttare nel migliore dei modi la nostra forza per far cedere il padronato di fronte alle nostre rivendicazioni.

E' in questo senso che le organizzazioni firmatarie chiamano i lavoratori a partecipare alla manifestazione organizzata dall' USL che avrá luogo il 1 marzo alle ore 10 in piazza Chauderon.

Ed. resp. U. Zuppinger Imprimerie Nouvelle Le Mont

“Appel à tous les travailleurs”, 1974, Archives Contestataires, Geneva.

The archives are full of such documents, which show how alliances were forged and contested in practice. Leaflets, meeting calls, and multilingual pamphlets trace the everyday work of solidarity: the use of three languages (French, Italian, Spanish), the insistence on entering unions and reshaping them from within, the attempts to merge 'Swiss' and 'immigrant' demands into a common platform. By the mid-1970s, even some unions began adopting these practices: leaflets from the metalworkers' union, for example, included parts written in Italian and Spanish, signalling both recognition of the migrant workforce and an effort – however belated – to address them directly, an example of how language functions as a medium of power and symbolic positioning (Bourdieu 1991).



CAMARADES !

Depuis 4 ans le 1er mai se déroule à Genève coupé en deux: deux tronçons du cortège et deux meetings à la fin. D'un côté les syndicats, le parti socialiste et le parti du travail, de l'autre les forces qui se veulent ou s'appellent "révolutionnaires". Jusqu'ici, nous avons participé à ce deuxième tronçon. Cette année, nous avons choisi de défiler dans le cortège officiel et de participer au meeting de la patinoire. Non pasnous en tant qu'organisations politiques, mais nous militants communistes qui travaillons dans des organisations de masse: syndicats, groupes de base d'entreprises, mouvements d'habitants, de collégiens, d'apprentis, de soldats, etc

Pourquoi cette attitude? Quelles sont les raisons qui nous y poussent? Quels sont les objectifs que nous voulons atteindre? Voilà ce qu'il nous faut expliquer maintenant.

Nous voulons un 1er mai qui exprime l'unité et la lutte de la classe ouvrière et des masses populaires contre l'offensive de la bourgeoisie.

L'offensive de la bourgeoisie se concentre aujourd'hui autour de 3 mots: blocage des salaires! Certes cela n'en est pas le seul aspect. Chaque jour annonce des fermetures d'entreprise, des déplacements, des rachats, des concentrations, et l'on sait bien ce que cela signifie concrètement pour les travailleurs: la dégradation de leurs conditions de travail. Chaque jour annonce la démolition de quartiers, la disparition d'espaces verts, la construction de nouvelles cités-dortoirs, de nouvelles autoroutes, et l'on sait bien ce que cela signifie concrètement pour les salariés: la dégradation de leurs conditions de logement, de loisirs, d'existence. Chaque jour annonce de nouvelles réorganisations dans l'école, l'apprentissage, l'armée, et l'on sait bien ce que cela signifie concrètement: le renforcement du contrôle de la bourgeoisie sur la jeunesse.

Mais aujourd'hui, le mot d'ordre central derrière lequel toute la bourgeoisi se range est celui du blocage des salaires. C'est ce mot d'ordre qui exprime le plus clairement et le plus fortement la volonté des patrons d'exploiter toujours plus les travailleurs pour augmenter toujours plus leur profit, la volonté de payer moins pour gagner plus.

Mais bien sûr, ce n'est pas ainsi qu'on nous présente le problème. C'est pas la faute aux patrons, ni aux bourgeois, ni au régime, c'est la faute à l'inflation, ce mal mystérieux venu on ne sait d'où et qui partira on ne sait quand. La seule chose que l'on sait, c'est que face à l'inflation il n'y a plus ni patrons, ni ouvriers, ni bourgeois, ni prolétaires, il n'y a que des citoyens tous également concernés, touchés, et qui doivent se serrer les coudes pour éliminer le mal. C'est l'union de tout le peuple, de toute la nation contre l'ennemi commun.

Voilà ce qu'on nous dit, ce qu'on nous répète chaque jour dans les journaux, à la radio, à la télévision, dans les usines et sur les chantiers. Et l'Etat, ce fidèle serviteur de la bourgeoisie orchestre savamment cette campagne d'intoxication, cette campagne idéologique. Il invente même un "Monsieur Prix" avec pour tâche de limiter la hausse des prix, mais dont la véritable fonction est de saluer au passage chaque nouvelle augmentation!

Mais les travailleurs ne sont ni fous ni imbéciles et ils savent bien que derrière tout ce fatras, toute cette poudre qu'on nous jette aux yeux,

Statement by the CLP, 1975, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

The 1st of May emerges here as a particularly important political arena, both symbolic and practical. A leaflet from 1975 notes: "For four years now, May 1st in Geneva has been divided in two: two sections of the parade and two meetings at the end. On one side the unions, the Socialist Party, and the Workers' Party; on the other side the forces that consider themselves, or call themselves, 'revolutionary'". The authors, militants from the *Centre de Liaison Politique* (CLP), explained why they had chosen this time to join the official union parade, rather than marching separately:

> "*This year, we have chosen to march in the official demonstration and to participate in the meeting at the ice rink. Not as political organisations, but as communist militants who work in mass organisations: unions, workplace groups, neighbourhood movements, groups of high school students, apprentices, soldiers, and others. Why this change of attitude? What are the reasons that push us? What are the objectives we want to reach? We want a May 1st that expresses the unity and the struggle of the working class and of the popular masses against the offensive of the bourgeoisie*".

This document is revealing for two reasons. First, it shows the evolving strategies of far-left groups, who sought to engage with broader working-class institutions. Second, it highlights the tensions inherent in these efforts: how to maintain revolutionary identity while also embedding oneself in unions, parties, and mass organisations. Reading these practices through Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the 'field' is helpful (1985). The militant landscape of 1970s Geneva can be understood as a structured field of struggle in which different actors – unions, migrant associations, radical collectives, feminist groups – occupied unequal positions and competed over political legitimacy, resources, and symbolic authority. Within this field, struggles were not only about demands or ideology, but about who had the right to speak in the name of 'the working class', and under what conditions. Leaflets, translations, and May Day parades were thus not merely practical interventions but acts of positioning: attempts by migrant militants to accumulate political and symbolic capital, to challenge established hierarchies of representation, and to redefine the boundaries of working-class politics itself.

At the same time, these practices resonate with Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow's concept of "repertoires of contention" (2015) already used earlier. The strike, the occupation,

the May Day march, and the multilingual leaflet were part of a repertoire that was both inherited and innovated upon. Migrant workers, in particular, stretched the repertoire by bringing in new claims – on housing, residency rights, family life – that exceeded the narrow economic frame of the 'peace of labour' system. The effort to unite Swiss and migrant workers under a common banner can thus be seen as an attempt to enlarge the repertoire and redefine the political stakes of class struggle, highlighting how demands for labour rights were inseparable from the fight against racialised exclusion and discrimination.

In this sense, Marina's role as a migrant woman translator and mediator acquires a deeper meaning. It was not only a linguistic practice but a symbolic and political one, contributing to the production of a shared political language across divides of nationality, gender, and ideology. Her experience embodies what Bourdieu calls the "double truth" of practice: at once personal and structural, intimate and collective (Bourdieu 1990). By translating and interpreting, Marina exercised agency that actively shaped the circulation of knowledge, facilitated alliances, and helped construct a diverse activist network composed of migrants, students, intellectuals, and Swiss allies. Her activism adds another layer to our understanding of migrant engagement: it took place on the border, intersecting with other militant spaces beyond her immediate community and negotiating alliances across national and social boundaries. In this sense, she occupies a "borderland" in the Anzaldúa sense (Anzaldúa 1987): a liminal space where identities, communities, and political practices collide and are renegotiated. From this position, she participated in an anti-racist landscape where migrants were central actors in struggles for solidarity, recognition, and political transformation.

By moving between groups, documents, and events, Marina helped to weave the fragile threads of solidarity that, however contested, defined the "season of struggles" in Geneva and beyond. Marina's testimony recalls how militants went into the *baracche*, how they carried out inquiries alongside workers, often together with architects and urbanists. She herself underlined the limits of these practices – the difficulty of sustaining systematic inquiries, the risks of reproducing a gaze of distance and superiority – yet they formed a crucial part of the militant repertoire. They were not only moments of encounter with migrant lives, but also efforts to render visible the structural and racist architecture of Swiss state policies. Beyond the strikes and the May Day parades, leftist collectives dedicated significant energy to the production of counter-knowledge: reports, inquiries, and research projects that dissected the status of migrant workers, housing conditions, and the mechanisms of discrimination. These practices were at once investigative and political, aiming to challenge the racist framings that portrayed migrants

as a threat or as disposable labour, and to show instead how their subordination was structurally produced.

One of the earliest of these inquiries emerged in Lausanne in October 1970 with the report "*Baraques et saisonniers*" produced by the *Groupe Action Travailleurs Immigrés* (G.A.T.I.). The report analysed the precarious status of seasonal workers and exposed its effects across work, housing, family, and social rights. What the report made clear was that this was not an accumulation of isolated difficulties, but a coherent system: economic exploitation, spatial segregation, and social control were combined to maintain a cheap and docile labour force. Housing in the *baracche* became the symbol of this politics – a deliberate form of isolation and marginalisation. By explicitly calling for the abolition of the seasonal status, the report did not simply describe conditions; it transformed documentation into an act of political denunciation. In doing so, it inaugurated a form of militant counter-expertise that challenged the official narrative of prosperity and necessity promoted by the Swiss state and employers.

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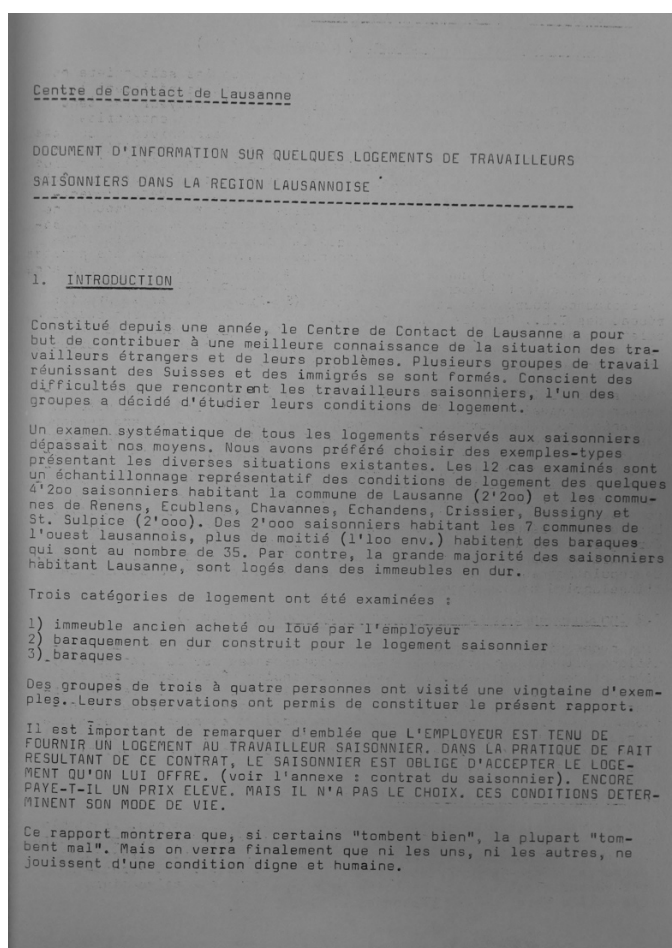
Baraques et saisonniers, Groupe Action Travailleurs Immigrés (G.A.T.I), 1970, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

A few months earlier, another initiative had been launched in Geneva by students at the École d'architecture, who produced the report *Logement et travailleurs étrangers à Genève* (April–June 1970). The report reflected on the complicity between urban infrastructures and migration regimes and denounced the separation between academic knowledge and the lived conditions of migrants, calling for research to be placed in the service of social transformation. In the archives, only the introductory section of the report survives; the analytical parts on migrant housing appear to be missing. Yet this remaining fragment is particularly revealing for our purposes. In its opening pages, the authors insist that understanding the housing situation of migrant workers is impossible without an analysis of racism. This statement situates their work within a nascent anti-racist framework, one that viewed urban space as a key site where inequality and segregation were reproduced. In this sense, immigration appears not merely as a labour issue but as a structural dimension of Swiss society itself, indispensable to the economy yet marked by systematic exclusion. Mobilising Abdelmalek Sayad's perspective (Sayad 1999, Avallone 2018), work, housing, and social life form an indivisible whole, and racism functions as a technology of government and division, fragmenting the working class through visible differences of language, culture, and nationality. Though incomplete, the surviving text embodies an important moment in militant thought – an effort to connect research, activism, and anti-racist critique, and to confront the academic world with its own political responsibilities.

By 1973, a third inquiry carried out by the *Centre de Contact de Lausanne* revealed the persistence of the same structures. Their report, "*Travailleurs saisonniers. Conditions de logement*", emphasised that the problem was not technical or individual, but structural: degrading housing conditions were the direct product of the seasonal status itself. The reactions collected in the annexes are striking. Employers admitted to "some difficulties" but blamed workers' habits – alcohol, cigarettes, negligence – for the state of the housing. Authorities acknowledged the findings only to redirect the debate toward minor technical adjustments. Even unions, while sympathetic, admitted their impotence in the face of the 'peace of labour' regime and the political tensions surrounding immigration. This reception demonstrates the difficulty of confronting the racism embedded in institutions: by individualising blame, official actors avoided questioning the discriminatory dispositive that governed seasonal labour.



Centre de Contact de Lausanne

DOCUMENT D'INFORMATION SUR QUELQUES LOGEMENTS DE TRAVAILLEURS SAISONNIERS DANS LA REGION LAUSANNOISE

1. INTRODUCTION

Constitué depuis une année, le Centre de Contact de Lausanne a pour but de contribuer à une meilleure connaissance de la situation des travailleurs étrangers et de leurs problèmes. Plusieurs groupes de travail réunissant des Suisses et des immigrés se sont formés. Conscient des difficultés que rencontrent les travailleurs saisonniers, l'un des groupes a décidé d'étudier leurs conditions de logement.

Un examen systématique de tous les logements réservés aux saisonniers dépassait nos moyens. Nous avons préféré choisir des exemples-types présentant les diverses situations existantes. Les 12 cas examinés sont un échantillonnage représentatif des conditions de logement des quelques 4'2oo saisonniers habitant la commune de Lausanne (2'2oo) et les communes de Renens, Ecublens, Chavannes, Echandens, Crissier, Bussigny et St. Sulpice (2'ooo). Des 2'ooo saisonniers habitant les 7 communes de l'ouest lausannois, plus de moitié (1'1oo env.) habitent des baraques qui sont au nombre de 35. Par contre, la grande majorité des saisonniers habitant Lausanne, sont logés dans des immeubles en dur.

Trois catégories de logement ont été examinées :

1) immeuble ancien acheté ou loué par l'employeur
2) baraquement en dur construit pour le logement saisonnier
3) baraques

Des groupes de trois à quatre personnes ont visité une vingtaine d'exemples. Leurs observations ont permis de constituer le présent rapport.

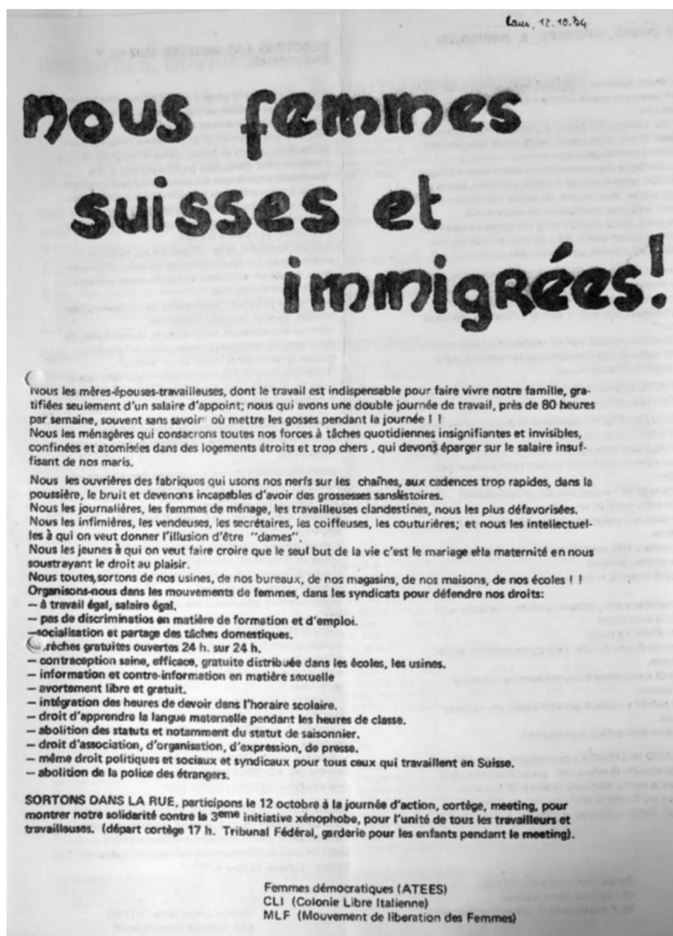
Il est important de remarquer d'emblée que L'EMPLOYEUR EST TENU DE FOURNIR UN LOGEMENT AU TRAVAILLEUR SAISONNIER. DANS LA PRATIQUE DE FAIT RESULTANT DE CE CONTRAT, LE SAISONNIER EST OBLIGE D'ACCEPTER LE LOGEMENT QU'ON LUI OFFRE. (voir l'annexe : contrat du saisonnier). ENCORE PAYE-T-IL UN PRIX ELEVE. MAIS IL N'A PAS LE CHOIX. CES CONDITIONS DETERMINENT SON MODE DE VIE.

Ce rapport montrera que, si certains "tombent bien", la plupart "tombent mal". Mais on verra finalement que ni les uns, ni les autres, ne jouissent d'une condition digne et humaine.

"*Travailleurs saisonniers. Conditions de logement*", Centre Contact de Lausanne, 1973, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

Taken together, these inquiries exemplify how leftist groups, and migrant collectives articulated an early form of anti-racist discourse and practice. Their work was not framed in the moral terms that would become common in later decades, but in structural and political ones. Racism was read as a system of domination that intertwined with labour exploitation and spatial segregation, fragmenting the working class and legitimising inequality. By documenting the *baracche*, by exposing the 'double exploitation' system, by situating Swiss migration within global capitalist logics, these groups sought to dismantle the naturalised view of migrants as outsiders or surplus. Importantly, these efforts also reveal how anti-racist thought in 1970s Geneva was already attentive – if implicitly – to the intersections of race, class, and gender.

One of the clearest illustrations of this intersectional awareness can be found in a document produced in 1974 and preserved in the *Archives contestataires*: the leaflet “We Swiss and Immigrant Women!”, co-signed by the *Femmes démocratiques (ATEES)*, the *Colonie Libere Italiane (CLI)*, and the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes (MLF)*.



nous femmes suisses et immigrées!

Nous les mères-épouses-travailleuses, dont le travail est indispensable pour faire vivre notre famille, gratifiées seulement d'un salaire d'appoint; nous qui avons une double journée de travail, près de 80 heures par semaine, souvent sans savoir où mettre les gosses pendant la journée ! !
Nous les ménagères qui consacrons toutes nos forces à tâches quotidiennes insignifiantes et invisibles, confinées et atomisées dans des logements étroits et trop chers, qui devons éparger sur le salaire insuffisant de nos maris.

Nous les ouvrières des fabriques qui usons nos nerfs sur les chaînes, aux cadences trop rapides, dans la poussière, le bruit et devenons incapables d'avoir des grossesses sanslistoires.
Nous les journalières, les femmes de ménage, les travailleuses clandestines, nous les plus défavorisées.
Nous les infirmières, les vendeuses, les secrétaires, les coiffeuses, les couturières; et nous les intellectuelles à qui on veut donner l'illusion d'être ''dames''.
Nous les jeunes à qui on veut faire croire que le seul but de la vie c'est le mariage etla maternité en nous soustrayant le droit au plaisir.
Nous toutes, sortons de nos usines, de nos bureaux, de nos magasins, de nos maisons, de nos écoles ! !
Organisons-nous dans les mouvements de femmes, dans les syndicats pour défendre nos droits:
— à travail égal, salaire égal.
— pas de discriminatios en matière de formation et d'emploi.
—socialisation et partage des tâches domestiques.
— crèches gratuites ouvertes 24 h. sur 24 h.
— contraception saine, efficace, gratuite distribuée dans les écoles, les usines.
— information et contre-information en matière sexuelle
— avortement libre et gratuit.
— intégration des heures de devoir dans l'horaire scolaire.
— droit d'apprendre la langue maternelle pendant les heures de classe.
— abolition des statuts et notamment du statut de saisonnier.
— droit d'association, d'organisation, d'expression, de presse.
— même droit politiques et sociaux et syndicaux pour tous ceux qui travaillent en Suisse.
— abolition de la police des étrangers.

SORTONS DANS LA RUE, participons le 12 octobre à la journée d'action, cortège, meeting, pour montrer notre solidarité contre la 3ème initiative xénophobe, pour l'unité de tous les travailleurs et travailleuses. (départ cortège 17 h. Tribunal Fédéral, garderie pour les enfants pendant le meeting).

Femmes démocratiques (ATEES)
CLI (Colonie Libre Italienne)
MLF (Mouvement de liberation des Femmes)

“Nous femmes suisses et immigrées”, ATEES, CLI, MLF, 1974, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

The text brings together Swiss and migrant women in a collective call to action against the third Schwarzenbach initiative and for the unity of all workers. What makes this document remarkable is its explicit articulation of gender, labour, and migration as inseparable dimensions of oppression. It moves fluidly between domestic and industrial spaces: from “mothers-wives-workers” struggling to survive on insufficient wages, to factory workers “*wearing down their nerves on the assembly lines*”, to journalists, nurses, cleaners, and intellectuals. The repeated

invocation of "we" constructs a collective subject that transcends class and nationality, naming the shared conditions of invisibilised labour and social devaluation.

This "we" is performative – it does not simply describe solidarity but enacts it. The leaflet's demands for equal pay, recognition of domestic work, free childcare, and the right to learn one's mother tongue prefigure later feminist and anti-racist claims linking social reproduction, linguistic justice, and labour rights. Crucially, migrant women appear here not as recipients of solidarity but as active political agents. Their presence among the signatories testifies to a transformation within both feminist and leftist circles: anti-racism was not merely a matter of rhetoric but of collective practice. As the closing line of the leaflet urges, "*Let us take to the streets*", solidarity was to be performed publicly – through visibility, voice, and embodied participation.

The cross-organisational collaboration embodied in this leaflet offers a concrete example of how feminist and anti-racist struggles intersected in 1970s Geneva. As Angela Davis argues in *Women, Race, and Class* (1981), "the liberation of women will never be achieved as long as the structures of racial and economic domination remain intact" (Davis 1981, 138). Reading the Geneva leaflet through this lens reveals how migrant women's activism added a crucial layer to local militant cultures. Their intervention expanded the terrain of anti-racist politics beyond the factory floor – into the home, the school, and the street – transforming everyday life into a space of political imagination and collective resistance.

Alongside these feminist and anti-racist initiatives, another form of militant practice took shape – one that translated the language of structural critique into the cultural and affective register of everyday life. The *Comité pour l'abolition du statut de saisonnier* (CASS), founded in Geneva in the early 1970s, exemplifies this turn. While earlier inquiries and manifestos sought to expose inequalities through research and documentation, the CASS mobilised theatre, cinema, music, and multilingual print culture to make visible the violences produced by the seasonal status. Its work operated as a form of cultural translation**,** mediating between migrant experience and public consciousness, transforming personal grievances into collective narratives of injustice. What at first sight might appear as a 'cultural' or secondary activity was, in fact, deeply political. As Stuart Hall reminds us, culture is not simply a reflection of social struggles but one of their primary terrains – a space where "forms of consciousness and conditions of existence are fought over and won" (Hall 1981, 239). The CASS understood this intuitively: every leaflet, every evening of theatre, every film screening was a way of producing counter-hegemonic knowledge, a refusal to let migrant lives remain invisible or inaudible.

Archival traces show the centrality of these cultural forms. Solidarity evenings in neighbourhoods such as La Jonction or Les Eaux-Vives combined theatre performed by workers, music performances, and the projection of films like *Lo stagionale* (1971) by Alvaro Bizzarri. Leaflets advertising these events were systematically multilingual – French, Italian, Spanish – addressing both Swiss audiences and the heterogeneous migrant population. This practice of translation was not only linguistic but also political: "politics of translation" (Spivak 2000) that attempted to make subaltern voices intelligible without erasing their differences.

JONCTION
SALLE DU FORUM
9 AV. ST.-CLOTILDE
vendredi 7 juin
dès 17h00
exposition
à 20h30
film 'lo stagionale'
théâtre
'scènes de la vie d'un saisonnier'
débat public

EAUX-VIVES
SALLE DU CERCLE DE L'ESPERANCE R. DE LA CHAPELL
samedi 8 juin
dès 14h00
exposition
à 20h30
film 'lo stagionale'
théâtre
'scènes de la vie d'un saisonnier'
débat public

POUR L'ABOLITION DU STATUT DU SAISONNIER !

ENTREE LIBRE

ORGANISE PAR LE
COMITE POUR L'
ABOLITION DU
STATUT DU
SAISONNIER
case postale 158

POUR L'ABOLITION DU STATUT DU SAISONNIER

Depuis longtemps nous nous sommes habitués à la présence de près de 200'000 travailleurs saisonniers dont très souvent nous ignorons les conditions de vie et de travail ainsi que leur "statut".

Il est urgent de nous mettre en face de cette situation en vue de supprimer l'une des injustices les plus criantes.

Bien sûr, il y aura des problèmes! C'est pour mieux les comprendre que nous vous proposons:

- UNE EXPOSITION "Les saisonniers en 1974"
- Une soirée avec UN FILM : "Lo stagionale" tourné par des immigrés en Suisse
- Une pièce de THEATRE: "Scènes de la vie de ceux qui bénéficient du "PERMIS A" par un groupe de travailleurs de l'Université OUvrière et
- Un DEBAT animé par tous les participants.

REPONDEZ A NOTRE APPEL! PRENONS CONSCIENCE DE NOTRE FORCE!

Desde hace mucho tiempo estamos acostumbrados a la presencia de unos 200'000 trabajadores temporeros de los cuales muchos ignoran las condiciones de vida, de trabajo y también de los problemas que les plantea el estatuto de temporeros.

Ha llegado el momento de unirnos para que esta situacion de injusticia cambie.

Os esperamos à todos a:

- UNA EXPOSICIÓN sobre: "Los temporeros en 1974"
- A LA PELÍCULA: "El temporero" realizada por los emigrantes en Suiza
- A LA OBRA DE TEATRO interpretada por un grupo de trabajadores españoles dela Universidad Obrera "Escenas de la vida de los del permiso A"
- DESPUES tendra lugar une discusíon publica

UNAMOS NUESTRAS FUERZAS.

Da molti anni, ci siamo abituati alla presenzas di circa 200'000 lavatori stagionali. Però, ci sono tanti che non conoscono le loro condizioni di vita, di lavoro et lo statuti al quale sono sottomesi.

È tempo di metterci di fronte a questa situazione e denunciare questa ingiustizia!

Dunque, Vi proponiamo:

- UN ESPOSIZIONE sul tema: "Gli stagionali"
- UNA SERATA Con FILM:" Lo stagionale" fatto da lavoratori emigrati in Svizzera
- TEATRO "Scene della vita di quelli che hanno il permesso A". da un gruppo di lavoratori spagnoli dell' Università Operaia
- UN DIBATTITO

Rispondete al nostro appello! Prendiamo coscienza delle nostre forze!

Leaflet "Pour l'abolition du statut du saisonnier!", CASS, 1974, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

The use of films by Bizzarri and other migrant filmmakers formed a crucial element of anti-racist cultural production in postwar Switzerland. As Morena La Barba (2007; 2014) notes, these cinematic productions were part of a broader network of civic and activist engagement, connecting directors, journalists, writers, and cultural animators through associations, cineclubs, and media initiatives. These films proposed and "counter visualised" (Mirzoeff 2011) the lived realities of Italian migrants, making visible the long history of racialisation in

European societies (Frisina 2016). They offered a political consciousness, positioning the migrant as both subject and critic of exclusionary national discourses. Bizzarri's *Il treno del Sud* (1970) and *Lo stagionale* (1971) exemplify how cinema functioned as a tool for social and political engagement. In these works, protagonists navigate everyday experiences of marginalisation, exploitation, and racism, while simultaneously articulating a vision of collective struggle and solidarity (La Barba, Mayenfisch 2009). The films were not only screened in cineclubs and migrant community spaces but also circulated through trade unions, television networks, and solidarity evenings, creating opportunities for dialogue with Swiss audiences and political actors. This distribution strategy enabled migrant cinema to intervene in public debates around anti-immigrant policies, fostering empathy, awareness, and activism. These practices illustrate how migrant cinema functioned simultaneously as a medium of artistic expression, political education, and anti-racist activism. In this way, Bizzarri's films found concrete space and impact through the cultural and political activities of the CASS, reinforcing the organisation's mission to make migrant lives visible and to build collective political consciousness.

At the same time, the CASS contributed to the construction of a memory of migration. Notes on the film *Les hirondelles* or on Jean Steinauer's *Le saisonnier inexistant* (1980) demonstrate how cultural production became an extension of political struggle. This was not only about documenting injustices, but about creating spaces where seasonal workers could recognise themselves, speak, and be heard. These "border thinking" (Mignolo 2011) practices are knowledges born in displacement, at the intersection of migration and exclusion, that unsettle the dominant narratives of Swiss prosperity.

By 1973, the CASS had moved beyond cultural evenings to articulate a more structured political platform, one that framed the rights of migrant workers as a matter of social justice and demanded concrete legal and institutional reforms. Drafted in collaboration with the Spanish *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT) and the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE), it demanded the abolition of the seasonal status and denounced the discriminatory system that divided Swiss and foreign workers. The Geneva platform of November 1973 outlined three main objectives: to act on Swiss society, to produce counter-information, and to build a durable political project. Throughout the late 1970s, this project expanded. Campaigns against humiliating border medical controls and reports on housing, work accidents, and the impossibility of family reunification exposed both the symbolic and structural violence embedded in the seasonal system. The 1976 *Livre blanc*, produced by the CASS and preserved in the archives (*Archives Contestataires*), synthesised these struggles and served as a primary

text promoting their engagement, challenging the official narrative of necessity and temporariness.

Taken together, the archival documents examined in this chapter – multilingual leaflets, militant reports, newspapers, and records of cultural and political activities – reveal how the question of the seasonal status, long treated as a mere administrative arrangement, became in the 1970s a site of social and political confrontation. Through cultural evenings, political platforms, cinema screenings, and the production of counter-expertise, these documents show how individual conditions of precarity were transformed into collective causes. They became tools of struggle, extending the repertoire of solidarity beyond workplaces into cultural and public spheres.

In this sense, the significance of these archives lies not only in the campaigns they document but in the methods they reveal: an insistence that to challenge silence and exclusion, new forms of speech and new languages of solidarity had to be created. The materials underscore that struggles were never only about immediate demands – wages, housing, or permits – but also about recognition, visibility, and the right to speak in one's own name. Moreover, they highlight the question of representation: who could speak for migrants, and under what conditions? These examples are only a selection; the archives contain many more traces, each offering further insight into the multifaceted and enduring nature of migrant activism in postwar Switzerland.

Representation is central to this confrontation. Lentin reminds us, recalling Ioan Davies's words (1995), that anti-racism is always entangled with the question of "who is being represented by whom, to whom, and under what auspices" (Lentin 2004, 239). Migrants in Switzerland, denied political rights, were often spoken for by unions, churches, or parties. Yet their creation of autonomous spaces – *Colonie libere*, cultural associations, journals, films – amounted to a claim to representation on their own terms. Here, their insistence resonates with Hall's idea of "politics of articulation" (1985): the attempt by marginalised groups to forge political identities and connections that are not given in advance but constructed through struggle. Rather than simply demanding integration, migrants articulated new political subjectivities that both drew upon and challenged the categories imposed upon them.

Yet, an important shift emerges over time. In the early 1970s inquiries, such as those produced in Lausanne or Geneva, the term 'racism' was used explicitly to name the structures that fragmented the working class and marginalised foreigners. By the mid-1970s, however, the language of 'discrimination' appears more frequently in documents produced by allies – churches, leftist committees, unions – while 'racism' retreats from the vocabulary of solidarity.

This change is not neutral. To speak of 'discrimination' narrows the problem to particular practices or institutions, often manageable within a framework of legal redress or reform, whereas to speak of 'racism' points to a structural logic underpinning the entire organisation of migration and labour. The fading of the word 'racism' can thus be read, with Sara Ahmed's (2006) insights in mind, as part of the difficulty of naming racism in public life: a tendency to displace its structural violence into softer, more individualisable terms. Migrant organisations themselves often held on to the language of racism – as seen in the analysis of the *Bollettino* produced by the *Colonie* – while allies preferred the seemingly more pragmatic vocabulary of discrimination. This divergence marked the limits of alliance, even as solidarities were being built.

The second shift concerns organisational strategies. By the mid-1970s, there were growing attempts to unify the various initiatives – migrant associations, solidarity committees, Christian groups, and revolutionary collectives. These efforts reflected the recognition that fragmented struggles risked isolation, and that a unified platform could exert more pressure on state institutions. At the same time, however, this push toward unity also brought a turn toward institutionalisation: committees sought recognition from municipal authorities, cooperation with unions, and access to state resources. What began as grassroots militancy, often grounded in the everyday experience of struggles, increasingly became mediated by formalised structures and bureaucratic procedures. This dynamic anticipates what the next chapter will explore in greater detail: the evolution of solidarity from a radical, bottom-up politics of denunciation toward a more institutionalised form of advocacy within trade unions and official consultative bodies.

Balibar and Wallerstein, for instance, have argued that the nation-state framework tends to produce fragmented and competing identities, making universalism necessary for solidarity (1988). Yet their universalism risks abstracting from the very historicity of racism that gives rise to those differences. It is here that Hall (1996) and Gilroy (1993) provide a more fruitful approach: one that acknowledges the centrality of race and cultural identity without reifying them, and that emphasises the need for 'new forms of solidarity' grounded in the concrete experiences of migrants and minorities. In the Swiss case, the tensions between national migrant associations (Italian, Spanish, Portuguese) and cross-national organising illustrate precisely this dilemma: authenticity was a resource, but solidarity across difference was a necessity.

This necessity also speaks to the broader horizon of alliances. Lentin closes her chapter on representation with the reminder that the "possibility of alliance" remains essential to anti-racism, but alliances are fragile, contested, and never guaranteed (Lentin 2004, 300).

Sivanandan's reflections on "communities of resistance" push this further: alliances cannot be built on abstract notions of tolerance but must grow from shared struggles against oppression (1990). Migrants in Switzerland embodied this principle. They built alliances with Swiss leftists and unions, with co-nationals abroad, and with anti-colonial movements, not by erasing their differences but by recognising common conditions of exploitation and exclusion. Their organising from housing to workplace to the street was not only defensive but also generative: it created spaces where solidarity could be lived, tested, and expanded. These alliances were precarious, constantly threatened by nationalism and racism, but they demonstrated the potential for anti-racism to transcend narrow identity and become a broader politics of emancipation. As Lentin argues, grounding anti-racism in lived experience allows for "the development of a critique that fundamentally questions the view of the state as a neutral interlocutor" (2004, 301). The alliances forged by migrant workers in Switzerland operated precisely within this space of distance from the state, refusing incorporation into institutional forms of anti-racism.

In this sense, migrant workers in 1970s Switzerland remind us that resistance is not only about visible moments of protest but also about the slow work of building networks, spaces, and languages of struggle. Their efforts show that anti-racism is not an external moral critique of democracy but an internal political practice, forged by those denied its promises. Critiquing Balibar and Wallerstein's tendency to return to universalist categories, one might instead recognise the necessity of particular histories, lived and grounded experiences. Migrant workers did not dissolve their differences into abstraction; they negotiated them, sometimes conflictually, in order to forge alliances that could expand the meaning of solidarity itself. However, autonomy, collective action, and alliances are never guaranteed; as we will see in the following chapter, they can be eroded by co-optation, economic pressure, and shifting political conditions.

4. Challenging Structures

> "*My name is Sisto Vincenzo, I come from the south of Italy, from a village near Brindisi, Carovigno. (…) I arrived in Switzerland in December, on the 8th of December 1964. I have a background in general mechanical engineering. I was looking for work for economic reasons. I came to join the rest of my family (…).*
>
> *At first, I tried to find my bearings in the country: what was I going to do? Where was I? I tried to make contacts. Already in my mind, from my village back home, I had the experience, even if only a small one, that on your own you can achieve nothing. So I looked for a union, because I wanted to be with those like me, who had the same principles, the same goals, and the same ideals.*
>
> *Today I am president of the migrant interest group at Unia Vaud, and my presence and militancy are about bringing into our union the voice and the problems connected to Unia militants of foreign origin*".
>
> (Video interview*, Événement syndical*, 17 January 2025[20])

We have already met Vincenzo in the previous pages, where his memories illuminated the lived experience of migrant workers in Switzerland. Here, however, we return to him in a different setting: an interview conducted within the trade union context. This shift matters. Vincenzo's words, spoken as part of a union archive, allow us to use his presence as a bridge toward the institutions themselves and their discourse. His testimony does not simply recall personal struggles; it also exposes how unions have been challenged, pressured, and gradually transformed by the voices of those they long kept at its margins.

A portrait of Vincenzo in the online version of the newspaper *L'Événement syndical* accompanies the video interview cited above[21]. Together, they trace his transformation from "*un gamin des rues*" ("a street kid") in Carovigno into a lifelong militant who never ceased to challenge the centres of power. From his childhood, Vincenzo's sense of injustice was sharpened by destitution and by exclusion: "*As a child, I would have liked to be helped*" he says. When he arrived in Switzerland, he encountered both opportunity and hostility: drawn to the union because "*alone one achieves nothing*". It is specifically through his work with seasonal workers that Vincenzo carved out a role of mediator: "*They called me the advocate for the seasonals… I helped them with administrative steps*".

What makes his activism particularly disruptive is how early he entered union engagement, not only to defend his own conditions but to extend that defense to those whom

[20] https://www.evenement.ch/videos/pause-cafe-militante-avec-vincenzo-sisto
[21] https://www.evenement.ch/articles/du-gamin-des-rues-au-militant-au-grand-coeur

unions often neglected. The article emphasises how, even when unions were cautious or dismissive, Vincenzo refused to stay silent: insisting on equal dignity, exposing dangerous work sites, demanding fair pay for those doing the hardest labour, and often doing so without waiting for official approval. In this, he challenged not just employers, but the very structure of union representation – forcing unions to reckon with migrant labour's claims not as external issues but as issues internal to union legitimacy. He made clear that a person's papers or nationality should never determine whether they received help.

Even as he rose into positions of responsibility, Vincenzo did not conform to the rhetoric of institutional harmony. He continued to speak of racism explicitly, resisting the softer language of 'integration' or 'discrimination that became increasingly common from the late 1970s onward. Through these acts, Vincenzo's presence functions as both mirror and motor: a mirror reflecting the gaps in union representation – who is included, whose voice is heard – and a motor driving institutional change. He demonstrates that migrant challenge is not merely protest from outside unions; it can also be embedded within union life, pressing institutions to live up to their own claims of worker solidarity and equality. In this sense, Vincenzo embodies the persistence of grassroots critique within institutional frameworks.

His story crystallises the central tension of this chapter: how did migrant labour struggles of the 1970s challenge union structures, and how did entry into more institutional spaces constrain radical anti-racist discourses? In the previous chapter, we saw that the vocabulary of racism was articulated clearly by migrant workers and segments of the radical Left. But what about the unions? To what extent did they adopt, resist, or silence this language? The archives on which this study relies are largely militant archives, preserving the voices of those who insisted on naming racism as part of their lived experience. They do not necessarily reflect the dominant discourse, which often focused on wages, contracts, and maintaining agreements with employers. This gap between militant articulation and institutional discourse is precisely where we situate our analysis in this section.

Following Vincenzo's example, this chapter interrogates two intertwined dynamics. First, it examines how migrant workers acted within unions themselves, shaping their structures and practices from the inside, even when recognition was slow to follow. Studies such as *L'apport de l'immigration au syndicalisme suisse* (2000) are crucial here: they remind us that while unions often claimed to speak for the working class as a whole, migrant labour both sustained and transformed them, numerically and culturally. Participation in unions can also be understood through Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1998): by engaging in

institutional structures, migrant workers accumulated recognition and legitimacy, which functioned as a form of social inclusion within Swiss labour and institutional fields. This raises a critical question: to what extent did participation in union structures offer migrant workers a path toward recognition and inclusion within Swiss institutions, and, conversely, how did unions leverage this participation to reinforce hierarchies of belonging along racialised lines? In other words, can integration into unions be seen as a way of securing a form of "wages of whiteness" (Du Bois 1935; Roediger 1991), where institutional acceptance grants symbolic and material belonging while simultaneously stabilising the cultural and social boundaries of Swissness?

Second, the integration of foreign workers within union structures must be situated within a broader landscape. Associations, political parties and initiatives shaped how discourse on immigration and integration evolved toward institutionalisation. In particular, the nationwide initiative *Être solidaires*, the only popular initiative in Swiss history explicitly seeking to abolish the seasonal worker status, provides a useful lens to examine which actors mobilised, what discourses they employed, and what its limited success reveals about the possibilities and constraints of institutional politics in the 1980s.

These questions lead to a broader reflection on the institutionalisation of anti-racism. By the late 1970s and 1980s, leftist parties, unions and associations increasingly framed migrant struggles through humanitarian vocabularies such as 'integration', 'equal opportunity', and 'non-discrimination'. This shift absorbed some claims into bureaucratic logic, blunting radical critiques of structural exclusion and translating political demands into moralised or administrative concerns (Fassin 2011; Ticktin 2011). It also intersected with changing immigration waves: Italians and Spaniards, who had formed the bulk of postwar labour, were gradually integrated into unions and society, establishing new hierarchies of inclusion that prepared the ground for the more radical governance shifts at the end of the 1990s.

In what follows, this trajectory is traced through union documents, campaign materials and testimonies, exploring how the language of solidarity was reframed, how anti-racist critique was translated into humanitarian concern, and what these transformations meant for migrant and their relationship to institutional politics.

4.1 Trade Unions: from Rejection to Integration

Whenever I ask him about trade unions, he always tells me the same story. He had just arrived, working on construction sites in 1989, he was 26. The floor was crowded with men – some from Italy like him, others from Eastern Europe. Then, a sudden shout. In an instant the site emptied. He stood still, bewildered. Around him, workers were already gone. The unions had arrived. Most of the men had vanished into the construction chutes – those massive vertical tubes built to carry away the debris of construction. One by one they had thrown themselves in, sliding down, risking serious injury to escape inspection. Fear hung heavy in the air, but he had not yet understood it. Everything had moved too quickly. When the moment came, he showed his papers. My father had a contract. Not everyone did.

That story has stayed with me.

In Switzerland, some of the most visible mobilisations of labour are those of construction workers. Every four years, unions negotiate new collective agreements. And with each cycle comes a demonstration: thousands of masons marching through the streets of Swiss cities. The unions prepare for months. Banners are printed, routes secured, speeches written. It is a ritual of recognition, a performance of presence. For one day, construction workers appear as a collective force, taking up space in the public sphere.

And yet, as someone once said to me, it is also a staging. This was not meant as criticism, more an observation. The spectacle of unity is carefully orchestrated.

Between the panic of men hurling themselves down chutes of concrete waste and the choreographed procession of thousands of masons in the cities' centres, there lies a tension – a gap between the hidden dramas of fear and the staged performances of recognition. One doesn't erase the other.

(Geneva, February 2024)

The contrast between these two moments captures something essential about the place of unions in migrant labour struggles. To understand this tension, it is necessary to look more closely at the history of Swiss trade unionism, its evolving role, and the ways in which it has been challenged over time.

What makes this history particularly striking is the fact that, today, many of the trade unionists who organise demonstrations, negotiate contracts, and lead struggles are themselves of migrant origin. Italians, once among the most precarious groups in Switzerland, now form an important part of union leadership and activist culture. This presence forces us to look back in time: to ask how unions, often hesitant or ambivalent in their early engagements with migration, were compelled by the mobilisations of the 1970s to take public positions and redefine their role in a changing society. As the authors of *L'apport de l'immigration au syndicalisme Suisse depuis 1945* (2000) note in their introduction, tellingly entitled "*Une problématique délaissée*" ("A Neglected Issue"), research has long overlooked this dimension:

> In both scholarly literature and administrative documents, immigration and labour are generally framed through the lens of the labour market. This corresponds to a widespread reality: in Switzerland, a migrant is above all perceived as a unit of labour power. The predominance of this economistic vision is hardly corrected by sociological research on immigration, which rarely considers the dimension of work and even less the dimension of trade union engagement. Yet it is also an undeniable reality: the primordial importance of trade unions for migrants, and vice versa. (Von Almmen, Steinauer 2000, 9)

The history of Swiss trade unionism is deeply intertwined with the country's economic and political structures. In the early 20th century, unions emerged as workers' associations, gradually formalising into the Swiss Trade Union Federation (USS) in 1880 (Boillat et al. 2006). Their role was not only to defend wages and working conditions but also to mediate relations between workers and employers, especially in periods of economic uncertainty. This mediating function became institutionalised in the interwar years and crystallised with the *Paix du travail* – the so-called 'Peace of Labour' – which sought to establish stability through negotiated compromise. While this framework limited large-scale strikes and conflict, it also entrenched a culture of negotiation and consensus-building, setting the tone for Swiss labour relations for decades to come.

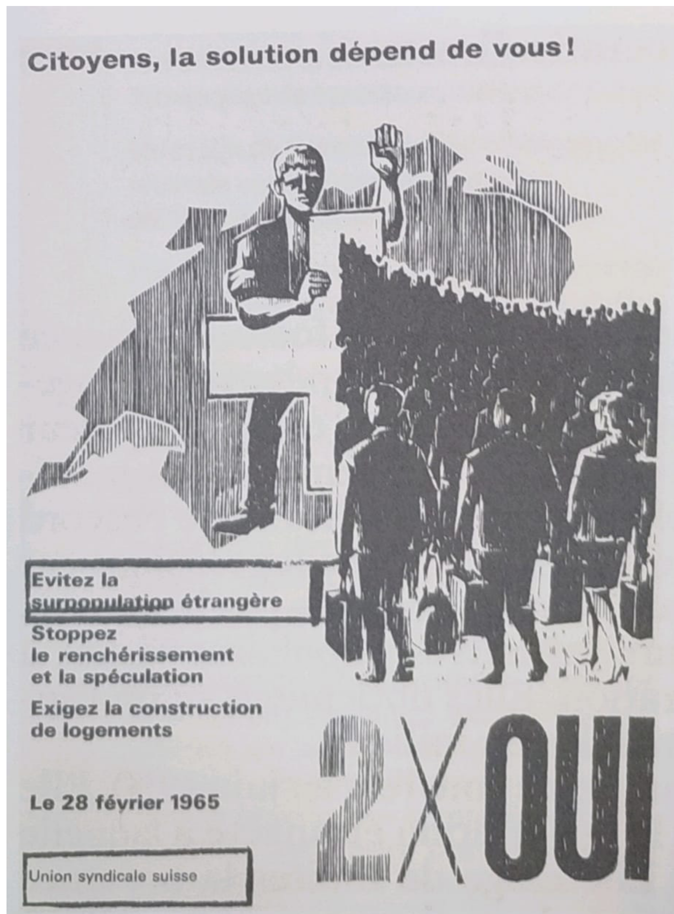
The *Paix du travail* had both stabilising and constraining effects (Jost 2001). On the one hand, it secured important protections for workers and fostered a sense of social partnership. On the other hand, it imposed limits on more radical or collective forms of activism, channelling dissent into controlled and institutionalised forms. Within this system, unions became the primary, but often cautious, interlocutors. Their position was complicated by the presence of migrant workers, who were an essential part of the workforce yet often excluded from full participation. For much of the postwar period, unions prioritised negotiation with employers over the broader political mobilisation of migrant communities, reinforcing the tension between institutionalised labour representation and grassroots demands. As we saw in the previous chapter, the participation of foreign workers in unions was far from self-evident, even though they represented a large proportion of the workforce (Stohr 2013). As Von Allmen and Steinauer remind us:

> In theory, participation in trade union life represented a privileged means of social integration and of participation in public life. In practice, however, unionisation among migrants did not come naturally. (2000, 10)

Indeed, in 1965 the Swiss Trade Union Federation (USS) itself called for a ceiling of 500,000 foreign workers – illustrating the broad consensus, even within organised labour, that immigration should be curtailed, thereby inscribing itself within the broader racist discourse that was gaining traction in those years. This alignment is significant because it complicates the retrospective construction of a unified, anti-racist trade-unionist position. On the leaflet below, issued by the USS, the discourse of *Überfremdung* – translated in French as "*surpopulation étrangère*" (foreign overpopulation) – is clearly adopted and reproduced. The imagery conveys the idea of an invasion: an indistinct mass of people floods into the country, while a man, standing upright and carrying the white cross, raises his hand in a gesture of refusal. The gesture, with the arm extended in a protective and assertive manner, recalls the legendary Swiss folk hero William Tell[22], famed for defending his people against tyrannical oppression. In Ferdinand Hodler's 1897 painting *Wilhelm Tell*, Tell similarly raises his right hand to stop aggressors and safeguard the national identity. Echoing Tell's protective gesture, the man in the image is depicted as a Swiss worker, his sleeves rolled up, embodying the figure of the honest labourer defending the nation. In this sense, the union's discourse at this time presented itself as

[22] Guillaume Tell has a complex history: initially depicted as a bourgeois figure, he was gradually transformed into a "people's hero". His story has shaped Swiss nationalist discourse and the figure of civic virtue (Jurt 2005).

protective: defending Swiss workers from the supposed competition posed by migrant labour, a threat for the nation's identity (Skenderovic, D'Amato 2008, 45-9).



Leaflet, USS, 1965, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

If the USS in those years openly adopted anti-immigration rhetoric, the position of trade unions has always been marked by ambivalence (Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 194-5). As we saw in Chapter Two, in the video archive documenting how Italians were perceived in Switzerland in the mid 1960s, both the trade unionist and his assistant expressed support for Italians' right to better conditions in Switzerland, yet at the same time reproduced stereotypes that underscored supposed cultural differences as the source of the 'problem'. This reflects a broader trend: while unions defended equal wage standards in principle, they also reproduced hierarchies that placed Swiss workers first, reinforcing the precarious status of migrants (Ibid.; Mahnig, Wimmer 2003, 148-151).

This ambivalence was not confined to the 1960s. As highlighted in the book published following the Geneva exhibition *Nous, saisonniers, saisonnières. Genève 1931-2019*, the presence of migrant workers has been, since 1946, a continual source of tensions. The authors emphasise:

> For the unions, the situation was complex: they sought to protect the local workforce from wage undercutting and the risk of unemployment, while at the same time remaining faithful to the values of solidarity and workers' internationalism. To achieve this, they demanded the application of identical wage conditions for all. In Geneva, the cantonal section of the Wood and Construction Workers' Union (FOBB) participated, since 1946, alongside employer representatives and the administration, in a tripartite commission charged with issuing seasonal work permits, the Supervisory Commission of the Cantonal Placement Office. The FOBB intervened vigorously to participate in the control of immigration and to monitor the working conditions of migrants. To this end, it did not hesitate to restrict, through various means, the recourse to seasonal workers. At the same time, however, the union tried to provide seasonal workers with limited forms of organisation and specific services. (Magnin et al. 2019, 32-4)

This dual approach – regulating migration while offering selective support – illustrates the contradictory dynamics of postwar Swiss trade unionism. Far from welcoming, unions oscillated between protectionist logics and reluctant accommodations, reflecting both reliance on migrant labour and commitment to defending Swiss workers' relative privileges (Degen 2006, 98-101). The ambivalence was not only documented in policy but also experienced by workers. Vincenzo recalls the contradictions migrants faced: unions were often distant and unwelcoming. "*They were not interested in us… for them, we were just passing workers*". He also emphasises on how difficult it was for Italians to join assemblies or have their voices heard, as decisions were taken in German or French and seldom translated. This linguistic and cultural barrier reinforced a sense of exclusion and deepened mistrust. Nonetheless, the experiences and actions of migrant workers in the 1970s began to challenge union structures, discourses, and practices, revealing tensions between official policies and grassroots realities.

Picking up from the previous chapter's discussion of May 1st as a contested political arena, this section returns to that same terrain from a different angle, not to revisit the events themselves, but to trace how they were perceived and reinterpreted within the trade union context. The

pressures that transformed Swiss unions in the 1970s came first from outside institutional structures. As seen in the previous chapter, autonomous strikes and mobilisations by migrant workers – especially Italians, Spaniards, and later Yugoslavs and Portuguese – brought the migrant condition into public view. By occupying factories, streets, and symbolic spaces, these workers made visible what the *Paix du travail* had long rendered invisible: their indispensable role in the economy and their exclusion from representation. As Charles Tilly (2004) argues, collective action operates through repertoires of contention that materialise claims in public space; visibility becomes a form of political agency. This relational and collective dimension of political action has been explored by Butler (2015), who reminds us that performativity is not only an individual achievement but can emerge through coordinated, collective acts:

> If performativity has often been associated with individual performance, it may prove important to reconsider those forms of performativity that only operate through forms of coordinated action, whose condition and aim is the reconstitution of plural forms of agency and social practices of resistances. So this movement or stillness, this parking of my body in the middle of another's action, is neither my act nor yours, but something that happens by virtue of the relation between us, arising from the relation, equivocating between the I and the we, seeking at once to preserve and disseminate the generative value of that equivocation, an active and deliberately sustained relation, a collaboration distinct from hallucinatory merging or confusion. (Butler 2015, 9)

Migrant workers, through these acts, imposed themselves as social and political actors when institutional frameworks refused them recognition. In Vincenzo's words, "*It was us who went on strike first… and then the union had to follow*". Italians, familiar with more conflictual traditions of organising, forced Swiss unions into terrains of open struggle. "*Without the Italians, there would have been no struggle. We showed them that it was possible*".

Having seen how revolutionary and migrant collectives approached May Day as a field of political expression, we can now observe how what had been a stage of external contestation became, increasingly, a site of internal transformation. Historically a ritual of unity, International Labour Day became in the early 1970s a space of contestation, where representation was publicly negotiated and the limits of inclusion tested. As Nancy Fraser (1990) reminds us, public arenas are terrains of struggle over who can speak and be seen. Similarly, Henri Lefebvre's (1991) concept of the "right to the city" helps us understand May Day as a spatial and political occupation: an assertion that migrant workers, too, belonged to

the social body of the country. These demonstrations were therefore not mere commemorations but performative occupations, following Butler: moments where visibility, speech, and collective presence became political acts of re-signification.

Archival headlines from 1970 captured this tension between tradition and disruption: "*1er mai à Lausanne, les 'gauchistes' sabotent la manifestation*" ("May Day in Lausanne, the 'leftists' sabotage the demonstration") and "*La fête du travail entre tradition et contestation*" ("Labor Day between tradition and contestation") (*Journal de Genève*, 1 May 1970). These reports illustrate the ambivalence of the period: celebration intertwined with confrontation, unity colliding with demands for recognition. In Lausanne, images show workers and radical left members sharing the same space. As Pierre Rieben, spokesperson of the *Ligue Marxiste Révolutionnaire* (LMR), explained to the journalists:

> "*There was never any question of sabotaging the official demonstration, nor of trying to replace it. We had a right to speak, and we asked the organisers for it, but they refused, claiming they had no microphone. We then offered to use our portable microphone on the condition that we could also deliver the speech prepared in collaboration with the Progressive Youth and the Organisation of Swiss Communists*".

This offer was again declined "*without the trade unionists giving any clear reasons*". While in Lausanne banners in Spanish and Italian highlighted the precarious status of seasonal workers, poor living conditions, and the need for unity, in Morges foreign workers abandoned the demonstration shouting *"Syndicats… trahison!"* ("Unions… betrayal!"). In other cities, Italians and Spaniards participated more actively, using May Day as a stage to assert visibility and claim recognition. These scenes reveal how, in the early 1970s, contestation and collaboration coexisted – migrant workers sought to enter established spaces, even as they challenged the exclusions embedded within them.

The May 1st, 1975 celebrations illustrate a significant shift in this relationship. Although most unions had not yet opened their ranks to migrants, and migrants did not yet see unions as natural allies, this period marked the beginning of a transformation in organisational culture. Migrant workers, through their sustained mobilisation, reshaped union practices from below – changing priorities, discourse, and forms of engagement (Von Allmen, Stainauer 2000, 11). Comparing the May Day headlines of 1971 and 1975 reveals this turn: both migrants and the radical left were actively present, signalling a reconfiguration of labour politics.

The economic crisis of 1973 amplified these tensions. Rising unemployment and inflation exposed the fragility of the *Paix du travail* and the limits of corporatist negotiation (Piguet 2017, 36). As the postwar consensus fractured, new alliances emerged between migrant and Swiss workers, while unions faced growing pressure to redefine their role and legitimacy. An example is the previously examined text by the *Comité du 12 octobre*[23], a coalition of radical left, feminist, and community groups, which called for a unified May 1st demonstration and encouraged workers to mobilise across sectors in solidarity. Their trilingual leaflet (French, Italian, Spanish) urged workers to strike:

> "*Nearly forty years of industrial peace bring us today to a period of crisis without genuine unemployment insurance, without real health coverage, with an insufficient AVS* [Old Age and Survivors' Insurance], *and pension funds favouring employers, bankers, and insurance companies. Industrial peace has failed. Employers no longer hesitate to break it openly. And after so many years of class collaboration and absence of a tradition of struggle, we find ourselves disarmed against the employers' offensive*".

This text can be read through the lens of debates around class collaboration (Monney 2020), a critique of the Swiss system's limited capacity to defend workers' interests. In contrast to the Marxist class struggle, class collaboration denounced the depoliticisation of labour relations and the neutralisation of conflict. The leaflet continued:

> "*To impose our demands, it is essential to organise ourselves within workplaces and unions. Only through the use of the strike, and by taking responsibility for actions ourselves within workplaces and unions, can we exploit our strength to compel the employers to meet our demands. This strength resides in our unity, in challenging discrimination between Swiss and migrant workers, and in our organisation*".

Here, the call to unity transcended the boundaries of nationality and legal status, insisting on a collective reappropriation of labour's political capacity. Yet this appeal to solidarity also marked a shift in the locus of power. What began as grassroots defiance soon required institutional translation. As Claus Offe (1985) reminds us, social movements that emerge from below are often absorbed into the very structures they challenge; their radical energy becomes

[23] See Chapter 3.

reframed through bureaucratic and representational mechanisms. Similarly, Richard Hyman (2001) argues that unions constantly navigate a tension between the logic of membership – rooted in participation and solidarity – and the logic of influence, which privileges institutional stability and negotiation. In this sense, the inclusion of migrants within Swiss unions was both transformative and disciplinary: it expanded the boundaries of representation while binding migrant activism to organisational norms that limited its disruptive potential.

Taken together, these moments reveal how the early 1970s intertwined structural pressures (economic crisis, precarious work) with migrant and leftist agency to contest the foundations of Swiss labour peace. May Day thus became not only a ritual of celebration but a performative space of negotiation, where alliances were made visible, political hierarchies unsettled, and the meaning of belonging redefined. Yet, as these performances of unity entered union discourse, their critical edge softened. Visibility was converted into recognition, and recognition into incorporation. Through these collective acts, migrant workers laid the groundwork for a reconfiguration of union practices – but also for their gradual domestication within institutional frameworks that prised integration over confrontation. For the unions, this evolution created a moment of cognitive and institutional dissonance. They could no longer treat May Day as a closed ritual of consensus; it had become an arena in which their representational monopoly was questioned, and their practices had to be redefined in relation to a broader and plural working-class subject.

At the same time, this transformation did not occur only through confrontation from the outside. Migrant workers and leftist militants were increasingly present within the unions themselves – as rank-and-file members, shop stewards, translators, and intermediaries between communities and union leadership. Their participation blurred the boundaries between external protest and internal reform, translating street-level demands into organisational debates. This dual position made the unions both a target and a vehicle of change: an institution under critique but also a terrain through which new political cultures of solidarity were articulated. What emerged was not a simple process of co-optation, but a gradual reconfiguration of labour politics from within, as migrants and their allies began to redefine what collective representation meant in a multilingual and segmented labour market. In this sense, the mid 1970s marked a decisive turning point for Swiss unions. Migrant participation in union activities grew and unions gradually rethought their language and political positioning. These changes were neither linear nor harmonious. Leaders often sought to contain mobilisations, preferring negotiation over confrontation. "*They told us to calm down… but if we had waited, nothing would have*

changed", Vincenzo explains. This tension defined the decade: Italians and other migrant workers both relied on unions for protection and pushed them beyond their established limits, exposing the fragility of the so-called *Paix du travail* and the need for renewal.

By the late 1970s and 1980s, migrants were no longer simply outsiders demanding recognition; they had become dues-paying members, militants and even representatives. As Vincenzo recalls: "*In the end, we entered the unions, we made them change. Slowly, they had to accept us, because we were the majority on the sites*". His words capture a dynamic repeated across Switzerland: migrants did not wait for inclusion – they forced their way into union life and, in doing so, transformed it from within. What had begun as pressure from outside now unfolded as an internal reconfiguration of union culture and practices, blurring the boundaries between 'migrant' and 'unionist' even as new hierarchies emerged.

Their numerical weight underpinned this transformation. By the mid-1970s, foreigners made up nearly 16% of Switzerland's total population (Wanner 2004), and in sectors such as construction, hospitality, or agriculture they often represented between one-third and one-half of the workforce (Degen 2006; Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000). In union assemblies, their growing dominance was palpable. At the FOBB section in Geneva, the president Charly Vogt noted in April 1965 "*the presence of a good fifty of our Italian comrades. This makes us happy*". Five years later, on April 1, 1969, he observed with some concern: "*at this assembly there are many foreign comrades, but not many Swiss*" (Cited in Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 43). Such reports reveal two parallel dynamics: the increasing reliance of unions on migrant participation, and the gradual desertion of Swiss members. Migrants, in other words, were not simply integrated into existing structures – they became indispensable for their survival.

This growth in participation is difficult to quantify precisely. As Von Allmen and Steinauer stress, unions only began keeping systematic registers of nationality in the 1990s, and even then, the data is misleading: those of migrant background who had naturalised as Swiss were no longer counted as 'foreigners' in union statistics. Apart from some one-off counts (such as one in 1986), "unions had no continuous way of distinguishing migrants in their membership before the 1990s" (Ibid., 39). Despite these limitations, the qualitative evidence leaves little doubt that the rise of migrant members more than compensated for the decline of Swiss membership, and that by the end of the 1970s migrants were shaping the internal life of unions in decisive ways.

Yet this growing presence unfolded within a framework of profound ambivalence. For years, the Swiss Trade Union Federation (USS) oscillated between exclusionary and inclusionary positions: "Let in as few foreign workers as possible into Switzerland, but as many

as possible into the unions" (Ibid.,149). This contradiction was not merely political but also economic. Migrant labour represented both a challenge to national labour hierarchies and a vital source of financial stability for union organisations. Already in the late 1950s, union leaders were perfectly aware of this. In a report from 1958 on the organisation of seasonal Italian workers, union official Antonio Maspoli wrote:

> "*It is necessary to increase our recruitment propaganda (…) Besides the many reasons of a trade union order, there is one particular motive that deserves special attention: the financial question. The presence in Switzerland of around 80,000 Italian construction workers represents the theoretical possibility of organising 80,000 members. In financial terms, the adhesion of all would bring in about 150,000 francs per week to the federal coffers, which amounts to 4.5 to 5 million francs per year*". (Cited in Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 145)

Migrant recruitment was therefore never framed solely as solidarity; it was also, crucially, an economic strategy for sustaining the union apparatus itself. What appeared as moral inclusion often masked a pragmatic calculus, where the integration of foreign workers secured not political equality but institutional survival. The Swiss case exemplifies what Vernon Briggs (1984) identified in American unions: a paradoxical dependence on migrant labour coupled with systematic marginalisation. Yet, reading this through Cedric Robinson's lens of racial capitalism complicates the story further. As Robin D. G. Kelly (2000) notes, Robinson situates capitalism within premodern European structures and demonstrates how racial hierarchies were embedded from the outset, shaping both labour relations and the very formation of working-class identities. The conditional inclusion of migrant workers mirrors this dynamic: just as the Irish were incorporated into the English working class under racialised logics that naturalised exploitation, foreign labour in postwar Switzerland was welcomed not as an equal participant but as a necessary yet subordinate element of the unionised workforce. Inclusion was thus predicated less on shared class identity than on structural imperatives – financial, organisational, and racialised – revealing an oscillation between dependency and exclusion that is not accidental but constitutive of the political economy of labour under racial capitalism (Robinson 1983, 39-40).

This instrumental logic was captured vividly during the 1960 USS congress, when delegates complained that many migrants were "*travelling without a ticket in the comfortable train of collective agreements*" (Cited in Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 149). Far from an

invitation, the phrase expressed frustration toward those benefiting from negotiated protections without paying dues. Yet this reproach also revealed a deeper gap: most migrants had little knowledge of the Swiss trade union landscape, of how collective agreements functioned, or of what membership actually entailed. The moralising tone of union leaders thus concealed a failure of communication and outreach, reinforcing hierarchies rather than solidarity. By the early 1970s, this tension led to proposals for compulsory contributions from migrants, effectively binding them to union financing whether or not they participated actively.

In practice, these contradictions often surfaced in everyday conflicts. In 1975, migrant women at the Portescap watch factory protested union dues deducted from their wages without explanation or consultation (Ibid., 51). Likewise, initiatives framed as humanitarian – such as welcome centres near Geneva's central train station for migrants awaiting medical checks – served partly as recruitment strategies but also as mechanisms of surveillance and control (Ibid., 155).

As Nandita Sharma (2020) reminds us, migrant labour has long been shaped by state strategies of control and differentiation. Union practices often mirrored these dynamics: by recruiting migrants while simultaneously managing their vulnerability, Swiss unions reproduced distinctions of temporariness and foreignness that underpinned state migration regimes. Humanitarian initiatives thus softened exclusion without dismantling it. At the same time, many migrants actively sought these forms of support, using institutional channels to navigate precarity and secure a foothold in the host society. Individualisation, in this sense, was not only imposed from above but also appropriated from below – a negotiated strategy of survival within the constraints of a restrictive system.

Such ambivalence also helps explain why, despite their numerical importance, many migrant workers remained at the margins of union life. This was particularly true for seasonal workers, who often perceived unions as distant or even untrustworthy institutions. As Von Allmen and Steinauer note, there were several obstacles: dues were considered too high and above all, workers feared dismissal if they were discovered to be unionised. Losing their job could mean returning to unemployment in Italy or Spain. In other words, the structural precarity of seasonal permits discouraged union militancy.

The inclusion of migrant workers within Swiss unions was never neutral: it followed selective and hierarchical patterns that reflected deeper assumptions about belonging and legitimacy. While formal barriers to membership gradually weakened, informal boundaries persisted, shaping who could be seen as a 'good' militant. In the 1950s and 1960s, union discourse often

portrayed Italian workers – by far the largest migrant group – as politically immature, undisciplined, or too impulsive for the consensual Swiss model of industrial relations. Such representations functioned as moral hierarchies that naturalised Swiss workers as rational and responsible, and migrants as apprentices in need of guidance.

Becoming a 'good militant' thus required migrants to perform not only commitment but a certain 'Swissness': moderation, discipline, and respect for institutional procedures. As one Spanish militant recalled, "*When you are a union representative, you are always under scrutiny. To be recognised equally, as a Spaniard and as a trade unionist, you had to be better than the others*" (Cited in Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 130). Migrant militants thus had to prove themselves doubly – first as competent workers, then as trustworthy representatives. Drawing on critical race theory (Goldberg 2002; Hesse 2000, 2007), this can be read as a process of racialised integration, where inclusion depended on conforming to norms coded as white, national, and respectable. The figure of the disciplined, reliable foreign worker – contrasted with the politicised or 'hot-headed' – embodied a politics of respectability that redefined militancy as a performance of moral and civic worth (Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 11). In this sense, union inclusion operated through what Sara Ahmed (2012) calls "conditional hospitality": an invitation extended under the condition of compliance with dominant values and the performativity of a certain kind of Whiteness (Cretton 2018).

At the same time, unions' dependence on migrant labour produced a quiet contradiction. The same institutions that demanded moderation also relied on migrants to sustain their everyday functioning. Foreign activists were indispensable as intermediaries – militants capable of translating leaflets, mediating disputes, and communicating with multilingual workforces that Swiss organisers could no longer reach. Many spoke two to four languages and acted as cultural brokers between union offices and the shop floor. Yet, as Von Allmen's interviews show, recognition remained selective. "*They sent me all the social cases*", recalled one Italian syndicalist, "*but honestly, I would have preferred to continue working on the construction sites rather than this social work*" (Cited in Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 127). Such testimonies show how migrant militants became indispensable, but also how their activism was often channelled into individualised assistance rather than collective mobilisation. The 'service militant' thus embodied both integration and containment – included through usefulness yet confined to supportive or welfare-oriented roles.

Still, some were able to pursue careers in the union hierarchy, sometimes aided by their organisations, which even intervened to secure them annual residence permits (B permits). But, as Von Allmen notes, this was not without difficulties. Migrant activists were not always well

treated, and while some chose to stay, others abandoned their union careers altogether (Ibid., 164). The union space offered possibilities for upward mobility, but these remained fragile, contingent on both institutional tolerance and shifting migration policies. The performance of loyalty and moderation that secured entry could just as easily limit one's political legitimacy within the organisation.

This transformation coincided with broader shifts in migration. Vincenzo recalls: "*After us Italians, there came the Portuguese, then the Yugoslavs. It was different for them. We had already fought some battles, but they arrived in another time, with more controls*". Italian and Spanish workers had spearheaded the explosive strikes of the 1970s, but later groups entered a more regulated and precarious labour market. Seasonal permits and restrictive asylum policies constrained their ability to mobilise collectively. "*The Portuguese were very exploited… and the Yugoslavs too. But the unions were more present by then, and at the same time, politics was harder against foreigners*".

Vincenzo observes that unions themselves began to change under the pressure of migrant participation. "*Before, they didn't want us. Then they needed us. In the 1980s, more Italians and Spaniards were in the unions, some even in positions of responsibility*". Historians note this as a slow but significant modification of union culture (Degen 2006, 102). Von Allmen and Steinauer's data give a sense of these shifts: among 1,210 cases of union cadres he studied, nearly half were Italians (617 people), followed by Spaniards (231), Portuguese (169), French (100), about thirty from ex-Yugoslavia (mostly Albanians from Kosovo), and a handful of Turks (Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 48). These figures, drawn from the late 1990s and early 2000s, reflect how successive migration waves left their imprint on union leadership. The very process of opening unions to migrants thus reproduced a layered system of belonging – one that combined inclusion with differentiation, solidarity with stratification.

The trajectory of migrant participation in Swiss unions reveals how the politics of labour, migration, and belonging intersected to reshape the very culture of trade unionism. Seen through the lens of Engin Isin and Bryan Turner's (2002) notion of "acts of citizenship", migrant workers' participation in unions was itself a political act – a claim to presence in spaces that had not been designed for them. By organising, translating, or simply demanding fair representation, they enacted forms of citizenship that exceeded their legal status. Vincenzo's observation – "*we entered the unions; we made them change*" – captures this everyday insurgency. Migrants transformed the unions not through grand revolutions but through the accumulation of small, persistent acts of presence. Migrant acts of citizenship reshaped the

everyday life of unions: multilingual meetings and newsletters, social events, etc. Practices of sociality offered forms of collective belonging at a time when broader society emphasised individual adaptation. In an increasingly individualised world of labour, migrants reinvented solidarity through everyday togetherness, embedding their presence into the texture of union life. Among those who revitalised union life in the 1970s were the 'agitators' – militants who combined organisational energy with cultural inventiveness. Figures such as Severino Maurutto exemplified this dynamic: by challenging routine practices and introducing new forms of sociability, they helped attract members and sustain the momentum of migrant mobilisations. Their activism blurred the line between social life and political work, embodying a collective creativity that was essential to the renewal of union culture during this period[24]. As Achille Mbembe reflects on Fanon, struggle is not merely a response to oppression; it produces culture itself. It is organised, conscious, and the product of a radical decision. It carries its own rhythm, emerges from the people as a collective subject, and produces new languages, gestures, and ways of being (Mbembe 2018, 51). In this sense, the Fanonian fight transforms culture and struggle into inseparable practices. The Italian agitators' efforts in Geneva – from newsletters and wildcat strikes to tea dances and choirs – illustrate this principle in action: their struggle was not only political but cultural, reshaping everyday union life while maintaining autonomy from official hierarchies. Through these interventions, culture and struggle were intertwined, creating new rhythms of collective life even when broader structures limited their ultimate success.

These evolutions, however, were not without difficulty. While migrants brought energy, multilingual skills, and new organisational practices into unions, sustaining these changes required ongoing effort and constant negotiation. During the 1970s, the momentum of mobilisations – strikes, collective action, and visible claims to representation – remained essential to push unions beyond routine practice and ensure that migrant voices were heard. Yet these gains were fragile: structural constraints, bureaucratic inertia, and implicit cultural expectations limited how far migrant-led innovations could reshape union life. Even as unions became more attentive to multilingual communication and social gatherings, deeper questions

[24] As Von Allmen (2000, 112-3) documents, Severino Maurutto arrived in Switzerland in 1963 and soon became active in the *Colonie Libere*. Confronted with racism toward Italian workers, he became a leading organiser in Geneva's *commission ouvrière des Charmilles*. His participation in a "grève sauvage" (wildcat strike) led the authorities to label him a "subversive agent" and attempt his expulsion, which was prevented only by a broad campaign of solidarity. Maurutto later recalled how he sought to "shake up" union routines by organizing outings, newsletters, and demonstrations, "*The methods of work were archaic, routine, I changed all that… The tea dances and birthday dinners were also my idea. For the choir, I didn't have time*". His case illustrates both the suspicion faced by politically active migrants and their central role in expanding membership and reshaping everyday union practices.

of authority, hierarchy, and procedural conformity began to impose boundaries on what could be achieved. This tension between transformative potential and structural limitation set the stage for the more formalised, conditional incorporation that would emerge by the late 1970s.

Migrant participation had brought significant transformations to union life during the 1970s, but these changes were neither unlimited nor permanent. Indeed, migrants did enter the unions – and, in many cases, transformed them – but always under certain conditions. Their participation was welcomed when it stabilised the unions' financial and organisational base, yet it was also regulated by implicit cultural expectations. As shown earlier, to be recognised as a 'good militant' required more than political conviction. It demanded the performance of Swissness: restraint, respectability, and procedural discipline. In Sara Ahmed's (2007; 2012) terms, union spaces were "orientated" around norms of whiteness – what counted as legitimate behaviour, credible speech, or proper militancy was defined through the lens of national and cultural familiarity. Migrants could enter, but only by learning to move within those orientations.

By the late 1970s, this form of conditional inclusion had become institutionalised. Migrants had proven indispensable but the militant energy that had once defined their struggles was increasingly channelled into bureaucratic and service-oriented roles. Vincenzo's words capture this turning point: "*After the big strikes, things calmed down… the unions took over, and negotiations became the norm again*". What had begun as a challenge from below – the collective assertion of visibility and dignity – was gradually absorbed into the more formal routines of the *Paix du travail*.

This transformation was not unique to Switzerland. Across Europe, the late 1970s marked a moment when industrial unrest gave way to the institutionalisation of conflict. In the Swiss case, the absorption of migrant struggles into legal and administrative frameworks mirrored a broader shift from collective mobilisation to individualised assistance. Permanent legal services, social counsellors, and migrant committees became the primary channels through which unions addressed the 'migrant question'. The language of solidarity was replaced – or at least softened – by the idiom of humanitarian concern and integration. As Zygmunt Bauman (2000) observed, modern societies increasingly privatise social risks: problems that were once collective are redefined as personal. In the unions, this took the form of 'case work' – individualised help with permits, residence papers, or health insurance – rather than the shared language of struggle.

This shift also helps explain the gradual decline of overt labour militancy among migrant workers. The end of the 1970s saw not only the institutional containment of conflict but also a profound change in everyday priorities. "*We fought to be recognised*", Vincenzo recalled, "*and when recognition came, the spirit of revolt was less. People wanted stability, papers, family life. The fights of the 70s opened the door, but after, life changed*". In fact,

> the most important thing for the Italian worker was to be able to count on the union to help resolve the problems he faced not as an employee, but as a migrant – vis-à-vis the state of origin as much as the host country. (Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 148)

The pursuit of stability was itself political: it expressed a collective desire for permanence after years of provisionality and exclusion. But it also aligned with a wider institutional logic that privileged negotiation over confrontation, integration over transformation. What had begun as a radical demand for equality was rearticulated as a moral and bureaucratic project of inclusion.

This dynamic can be read through the lens of Ahmed's theory of institutional "blockages". In *On Being Included* (2012), Ahmed argues that organisations respond to critique by incorporating it, turning demands for justice into administrative concerns. Swiss unions did something similar. Migrants' calls for equality were reframed as needs for integration, and racism – structural, everyday, institutional – was translated into a series of technical problems to be solved by social workers.

This also meant that unions functioned as spaces of production and reproduction of Swissness – or, more broadly, of whiteness – establishing cultural norms, hierarchies, and expectations that migrant workers had to navigate and perform in order to gain recognition and legitimacy. As Von Allmen's interviews suggest, union participation became a site of civic apprenticeship – an informal school of social and political learning. In this sense, unions acted as "*faiseurs de Suisses*" ("makers of Swiss citizens")[25]: they participated in the social

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[25] This notion of unions as "faiseurs de Suisses" is notably explored in the 1978 Swiss film *Les Faiseurs de Suisses* (*Die Schweizermacher*), directed by Rolf Lyssy. The film is a satirical comedy that delves into the bureaucratic processes and cultural assessments involved in granting Swiss citizenship to foreigners. Through the experiences of various applicants and the officials who evaluate them, the film critiques the arbitrary and racist standards applied in the naturalisation process.
Upon its release, *Les Faiseurs de Suisses* became a significant cultural touchstone in Switzerland. It was one of the most-watched Swiss films for many years, reflecting a broad public engagement with the themes of immigration and national identity it presented. The film's success underscores the relevance of its subject matter and the resonance of its critique within Swiss society.
However, the film's portrayal of the naturalisation process, while satirical, also highlights the underlying tensions and challenges faced by migrants in their pursuit of Swiss citizenship. It serves as a reminder of the complexities and often exclusionary practices embedded in the systems that govern belonging and identity.

naturalisation of migrants, offering both symbolic and practical pathways to belonging. Secretaries often helped secure residence permits, and for a few, even naturalisation itself.

From a sociological perspective, this process can be read as the reconfiguration of symbolic capital. As Pierre Bourdieu (1998) reminds us, institutions defend and reproduce forms of symbolic power – legitimacy, authority, protection – that are not neutral. The influx of migrant workers forced unions to renegotiate this symbolic economy: they could no longer claim to speak for the working class while ignoring those who composed its majority in key industries. Yet the very recognition of migrants' importance also reinforced hierarchies of respectability, belonging, and racialised norms, producing new criteria for what counted as legitimate participation and credible militancy. Anti-racist commitments were thus partially institutionalised: unions promoted inclusion and solidarity, but often within frameworks that contained or depoliticised racialised difference.

By the 1980s, unions had become more bureaucratic, formalising structures and routines to manage the increasing diversity of their membership. Integration was reframed as participation, and social work increasingly merged with political work, as migrant concerns were absorbed into standardised administrative practices. Yet this institutionalisation carried contradictions: the translation of migrant struggles into categories such as 'integration', 'rights', and 'diversity' both enabled recognition and constrained the radical potential of their demands. Anti-racist principles were invoked, but often in ways that emphasised administrative inclusion over structural transformation, managing racial difference rather than challenging it. The next section will examine this process more closely, situating unions within the broader landscape of humanitarian discourses and policy reforms. Understanding how migrant demands were translated, absorbed, and reframed allows us to grasp not only the transformation of unions but also the wider reconfiguration of solidarity, anti-racist practices, and inclusion in late 20th Switzerland.

4.2 The Changing Language of Anti-racism: Towards Institutionalisation

> "'*Furia' – that's how we used to call him*" Oscar told me, speaking of my grandfather. "*He never stopped, always working*". We sat in silence.
>
> A few weeks later, I was talking with Vincenzo. We were recalling the workers' years, their struggles, the hardness of those

days. He asked about my family, and I mentioned my grandfather's nickname.

Vincenzo paused. Then he said, "*He forged his personality on reality*".

A silence followed. Vincenzo had been a militant his whole life; my grandfather never. Yet in that pause, I knew he understood. The nickname had nothing to do with passivity. On the contrary.

In his home village, a statue was inaugurated in 1999 – *La Statua dell'Emigrante*, a memorial to the hardship of emigration. It depicts a family with few possessions, leaving with lowered eyes.

He hated it – the image of the immigrant as helpless, reduced to sorrow.

And yet, in the way he lived, in the relentless rhythm of work, he embodied another truth: dignity and resistance are not always loud, collective, or formally recognised. Sometimes they are forged in the quiet insistence of presence, of labour, of refusal to be reduced to pity.

(Renans, February 2025)

This reflection condensed, in a few words, the ambivalence at the heart of the migrant condition: the tension between movement and containment, visibility and silence, dignity and pity. My grandfather's rejection of *La Statua dell'Emigrante* – of the frozen image of suffering and helplessness – echoes a broader discomfort with how migration came to be represented since the late 1970s and early 1980s. What had been a language of struggle and collective affirmation was gradually replaced by a humanitarian gaze. Migrants were no longer framed as political actors demanding equality but as figures of compassion, recipients of care (Ticktin 2011). In this shift, the vocabulary of anti-racism changed as well: solidarity gave way to protection, justice to benevolence. The refusal embodied in "*Furia*", that insistence on agency within constraint, illuminates what was being lost in this transformation – the capacity to articulate resistance beyond the moral language of suffering. As Saitta (2015) emphasises, describing these acts of resistance is not intended to neutralise them or speak in place of the 'voiceless' but to restore dignity and challenge the categories through which law, politics, and social science organise the world (Saitta 2015, 16).

If it is true, as Foucault famously states, that "where there is power, there is resistance" and that such resistance "is never in a position of exteriority with respect to power"

> (Foucault 2003, 125-6), then speaking of resistance has less to do with otherness than with its opposite. That is, it means turning our attention to ourselves, to our own doctrines, and to the ways in which we define and organise the world. (Saitta 2015, 16)

In this sense, resistance is not merely oppositional but reflective. It is from this vantage that the changing language of anti-racism must be understood, not only as a policy shift, but as a reorientation of discourse and power.

This section explores how representations of migrants – both visual and discursive – shaped and were shaped by broader political and cultural frameworks in Switzerland from the 1970s onwards. Migrants were often constructed as the 'other' through multiple, sometimes contradictory, languages. As Maire observes in her discussion of Visual studies, representations are "an unstable form of communication, one that continually reinvents itself – a permanent evolution, influenced by the surrounding reality and by the specific moments that compose it" (Maire 2023, 24). This instability is crucial: in the Swiss context, visual and textual depictions of migrants functioned simultaneously as a means for the nation to define itself, as objects of humanitarian concern, and as subjects of moral and cultural instruction. These representations frequently paralleled dominant discourses on *Überfremdung* (over-foreignisation); they were articulated to manage, regulate, and morally situate migration within Swiss society. At the same time, they reproduced imaginaries rooted in colonial hierarchies, invoking the figure of the white saviour and asserting a subtle, persistent racial superiority.

The transformation of language and imagery can be traced across both public discourse and visual culture produced by left-wing and progressive actors, revealing a shift from the radical, confrontational language of early 1970s anti-racist activism to a more humanitarian vocabulary. This complicates the usual narrative: while much scholarship emphasises how the right constructed racist imaginaries in Switzerland, it is important to recognise that the left too produced hierarchies and subtle forms of racialisation, often through moralising, paternalistic, or 'compassion-driven' depictions of migrants. Visual and textual productions from the Swiss left and centre throughout the 1970s and early 1980s reveal a complex negotiation between solidarity, paternalism, and the persistence of racialised imaginaries. As Fassin (2011) reminds us, this dynamic is characteristic of the moral economy of humanitarian reason, where care and control often intertwine. The figure of the migrant – simultaneously indispensable worker and moral subject of compassion – became a terrain on which political identities were tested, as the language of solidarity sometimes reinforced hierarchies of voice and visibility even while defending migrants.

During the campaigns against the Schwarzenbach initiatives of 1970 and 1974, left-wing organisations mobilised strongly to oppose the exclusionary logic of *Überfremdung*. In this context, two discursive poles coexisted. On one side, communist and revolutionary groups such as the *Ligue Marxiste Révolutionnaire* promoted an explicitly internationalist and anti-bourgeois message (Maire 2023, 95-7). As discussed in Chapter Three, they grounded their discourse in a notion of solidarity forged through class opposition rather than nationality. Within this framework, the migrant ceased to be a foreigner and became a comrade – part of a collective body struggling against domination.

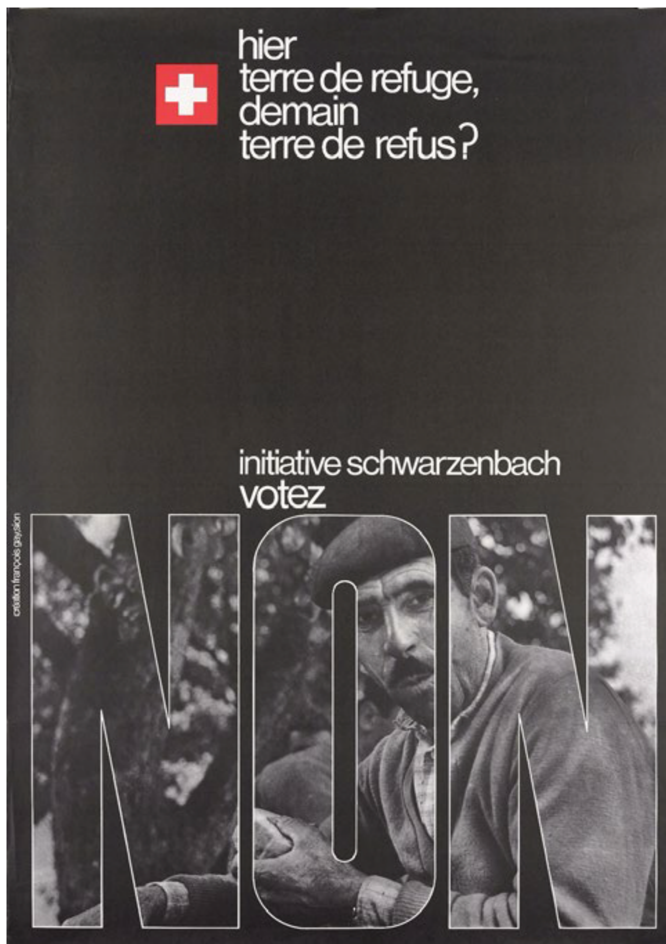
This militant internationalism, however, unfolded within a fragile historical moment. By the mid-1970s, the effects of the oil crisis began to reshape the political and economic landscape. The optimism of the early decade – when industrial growth and collective mobilisation made equality seem attainable – gave way to contraction and uncertainty. Between 1974 and 1977, industrial employment declined sharply, with nearly one in six jobs lost, and thousands of seasonal workers – mostly Italians – were forced to return home as their permits were not renewed. As Étienne Piguet notes, the crisis produced what he calls an "exportation of unemployment": joblessness was literally displaced across borders, externalising the social costs of recession (Piguet 2017, 36-9).

This moment marked more than an economic downturn; it signalled a transformation in the very language of solidarity. As the number of foreign workers decreased for the first time since the postwar boom, unions and left-wing groups were forced to rethink their strategies. By the end of the 1970s, the discourse of class unity – still articulated as a shared struggle – began to soften. The figure of the migrant comrade gradually gave way to that of the migrant worker as a social concern: someone to be assisted, represented, or integrated. What had once been a collective politics was increasingly reframed as a moral question of compassion and coexistence. As discussed in Chapter Three, this evolution was also reflected in union practices, which became spaces of assistance rather than laboratories of political experimentation (Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000, 127-8).

At the same time, the rhetoric of unity that emerged during these years – by placing Swiss and foreign workers on an ostensibly equal footing – also produced what might be described as a flattening of difference. The assertion of a common working-class identity, while aiming to counter nationalist divisions, often obscured the structural asymmetries that persisted within the labour market. In reality, unemployment and precarity affected foreign workers disproportionately, yet the discourse of equality tended to erase this racialised and hierarchical distribution of vulnerability. Crucially, this also reflected a broader trend within the radical left:

the term ‘racism’ gradually disappeared from the rhetoric, replaced by calls for ‘equality’ between Swiss and immigrants. In contrast, migrant communities themselves continued to deploy a critical language that emphasised structural regimes of power, highlighting the limits of leftist universalism. As scholars such as Stuart Hall (1980) and Paul Gilroy (1987) have shown, universalist appeals to class or nation can operate as colour-blind idioms that efface the specific ways race, citizenship, and labour remain intertwined. From this perspective, the egalitarian imaginary of the late 1970s left did not simply oppose discrimination – it also reformulated it, translating racialised hierarchies into neutral categories of social belonging and economic participation.

Alongside it, the militant counter-discourse coexisted with another, more ambivalent one, which, while seemingly secondary, is essential to understanding how the image of the ‘other’ was once again transformed: that of humanitarianism. This discourse did not emerge only in the late 1970s but was already present during the campaigns against the racist Schwarzenbach initiatives of 1970 and 1974. Many of the anti-Schwarzenbach posters relied not on the language of struggle, but on a vocabulary of compassion. The foreign worker was often depicted through the now-familiar iconography of the Italian labourer: dark moustache, modest clothing, and weary expression. One striking example is François Gay’s 1970 poster *Hier terre de refuge, demain terre de refus?,* which centred on a close-up photograph of an Italian man holding a piece of bread. His direct gaze invited empathy, yet the composition immobilised him as an object of pity rather than an agent of change. The textual appeal to Switzerland’s humanitarian tradition reinforced this tone. The argument was less about social equality than about preserving the moral integrity of the Swiss nation. As Maire (2023) notes, these images were not “a direct stance in favour of foreign workers, but the defence of a certain ideal of Swiss democracy” (Maire 2023, 95). In other words, even when rejecting racism, the humanitarian frame reproduced a hierarchy between the national subject and the migrant – between the one who gives help and the one who receives it.



François Gray, 1970.

The appeal to Switzerland as a *land of refuge* (*terre de refuge*) must also be situated within its longer historical and political genealogy (Arlettaz, Arlettaz 2004, 7). Since the Second World War, Switzerland had cultivated the image of a humanitarian nation – neutral, benevolent, and morally exceptional – a narrative reinforced by its reception of specific groups of refugees during the Cold War. The adoption of the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, ratified by Switzerland in 1955, marked not only a legal milestone but also a transformation in the moral and political grammar of displacement. Unlike the collective definitions of the interwar period under the League of Nations, the Convention's individualised formulation – centred on the "well-founded fear of persecution" – reframed the refugee as a singular, suffering subject, rather than as part of a collectively persecuted group (Piguet 2017, 71).

As Étienne Piguet (2017) notes, this shift mirrored a broader liberal process of individualisation that characterised postwar governance: social and political violence were translated into personal misfortune, and solidarity into compassion. The refugee's suffering

became a moral, not a political, category. In this process, structural hierarchies – including racialised ones – were rendered invisible, as exclusion came to be understood through the moral lens of individual experience. As theorists such as Wendy Brown (1995) and Didier Fassin (2011) have shown, the rise of liberal governmentality and biopolitical forms of care transforms systemic domination into questions of morality and empathy. The individualised refugee thus became the emblem of a new humanitarian order – one that displaced collective struggle and depoliticised the very inequalities it sought to redress.

Edgard Küng, *Schweizerisches Aktionskomitee Gegen di Auswisung won 500 000 Ausländern*, Luzern, 1974.

This logic of individualisation also shaped visual representations of migration in the 1970s. Küng's *human pyramid* poster, produced in the context of the campaigns against James Schwarzenbach's xenophobic initiatives, powerfully illustrates how the migrant was made both visible and solitary. The image depicts a human pyramid resting on the back of a single migrant

worker, identified by the label "*Gastarbeiter*" printed on his yellow shirt. He is visually marked as brown, with a dark moustache and black eyes – features that contrast sharply with the white Swiss figures above him, who wear identical red shirts emblasoned with the white cross, unmistakable emblems of the Swiss nation. This chromatic and symbolic contrast constructs a clear racial boundary: the migrant is both foundational to and excluded from the national community, his labour indispensable yet his belonging denied. The pyramid metaphor simultaneously conveys dependence and hierarchy: the economic and social edifice of Switzerland literally rests on his shoulders, yet he remains the only racialised and individualised figure within the composition.

From a critical race perspective, the poster visually enacts what Stuart Hall describes as the "marking of difference" through race (Hall 1997), where the migrant's bodily features become signs of otherness that sustain the coherence of the national 'we'. The Swiss workers appear as a collective, homogeneous body of whiteness – citizens unified by national symbolism – whereas the migrant is isolated, rendered as an exceptional figure rather than as part of a broader, organised class. This individualisation erases the collective agency that migrant workers had forged through labour struggles and transnational organising, especially during the 1970s (Mélo 2024), reducing the *Gastarbeiter* to an allegorical image of burden and dependence. As Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) argues, visuality functions to 'classify and separate', legitimising hierarchies through what is made visible. Küng's composition reproduces precisely this form of racialised visuality: the migrant is visible only as a supporting figure – indispensable yet subordinated. The Swiss viewer is invited to identify with national stability rather than solidarity, to feel gratitude or fear rather than equality. This ambivalence – between recognition of structural reliance and the visual reaffirmation of exclusion – captures the contradictions of anti-Schwarzenbach mobilisations themselves. While these campaigns opposed overt exclusionary politics, they often did so through a humanitarian and nationalist visual vocabulary that participated in, rather than dismantled, racial hierarchies.

By the late 1970s, this humanitarian imaginary found renewed resonance as Switzerland faced new arrivals: Ugandan Asians expelled by Idi Amin[26], the so-called "boat people" from Southeast Asia, and political refugees from Chile following Pinochet's coup. Initially framed as proof of Switzerland's moral leadership, this discourse began to fracture when the political and racial complexion of asylum seekers changed. As Piguet observes, solidarity proved far

[26] Idi Amin was the military ruler of Uganda (1971–1979), who in 1972 expelled tens of thousands of Ugandan Asians, some of whom were later received as refugees in Switzerland.

less consensual when refugees no longer embodied anti-communist heroism or European familiarity (Piguet 2017, 77). By the early 1980s, with the first federal asylum law (1981) and the growing politicisation of asylum policy, humanitarian compassion increasingly coexisted with administrative suspicion (Arlettaz, Arlettaz 2004, 125). The figure of the refugee – individualised, moralised, and racialised – became a key site where Switzerland negotiated the boundaries of its national identity and moral legitimacy (Weill-Lévy 2003, 84). It signalled the consolidation of a humanitarian regime that sought to regulate mobility and belonging through administrative categories rather than political claims (Ibid., 85). Within this framework, migrants and refugees were increasingly positioned by the left as subjects of care rather than as agents of transformation.

At the same time, the terrain of mobilisation was shifting. Workplace struggles had lost much of their earlier intensity. Migrant organising increasingly turned from the factory floor to legal-status issues, particularly the fight against the seasonal worker regime. The *Collectif pour l'abolition du statut de saisonnier* (CASS), founded in the late 1970s, embodied this shift, bringing together unions, church groups, and leftist associations in a transnational campaign to challenge a system institutionalising precariousness. Retrospectively, the CASS illustrates how the language of migrant activism was evolving: humanitarian appeals emphasising suffering, family separation, and protection gradually displaced the more confrontational discourse of labour rights and collective equality.

This transformation carried broader implications. A new language of 'solidarity' increasingly supplanted the older language of 'struggle'. In 1974, the *Mouvement des travailleurs catholiques* launched the initiative *Être solidaires en faveur d'une nouvelle politique à l'égard des étrangers*, explicitly aiming to abolish the seasonal worker status and secure equal social rights for migrants. Although politically marginal – ultimately rejected in 1981 by 84% of voters – its symbolic significance was considerable: for the first time, a popular initiative sought to improve the lives of foreigners rather than restrict them. The campaign also reveals the coexistence of two visual grammars, reflecting a deeper ambivalence in the left's approach to migration. While overt racist mobilisation by the far right had diminished, popular interventions on immigration and integration continued. Submitted on October 20, 1974, *Être solidaires* was the product of a coalition of 33 organisations and supported by both centrist and leftist groups such as the PDC, CSC, and PdT. The initiative nonetheless took three years to gather the necessary signatures.

The *Être solidaires* initiative represented a radical challenge to Swiss migration policy in the 1970s. While it maintained the principle of labour stabilisation – stipulating that the

number of foreigners permitted to enter Switzerland for employment could not exceed those who had voluntarily left the country the previous year – it simultaneously sought to abolish the seasonal worker status within five years, a structural demand that directly confronted the temporary and precarious positioning of migrant labour. Beyond this, the initiative extended a set of fundamental rights to foreigners, including freedom of expression, assembly, association, residence, and choice of employer and workplace, while limiting administrative powers over expulsion and actively promoting integration through consultation with migrants on issues affecting them. Yet, despite these ambitious reforms, the campaign carried inherent ambivalences: it relied on humanitarian and moralised appeals that emphasised vulnerability, family separation, and deservingness, revealing tensions between structural change and affective mobilisation. This ambivalence is clearly visible in many of the posters produced in favour of the initiative, where advocacy for migrants coexisted with visual strategies that reproduced hierarchies and paternalistic tropes.

Poster, *Syndicats Chrétiens*, Geneva.

The *Syndicats Chrétiens* poster confirm this ambivalence. The image depicts a mother carrying a suitcase and holding her child against a warm orange background. By foregrounding the human cost of the seasonal worker regime, the poster appeals to empathy and protection, framing migrants as recipients of support and reinforcing a subtle hierarchy between Swiss institutions and those they assist.

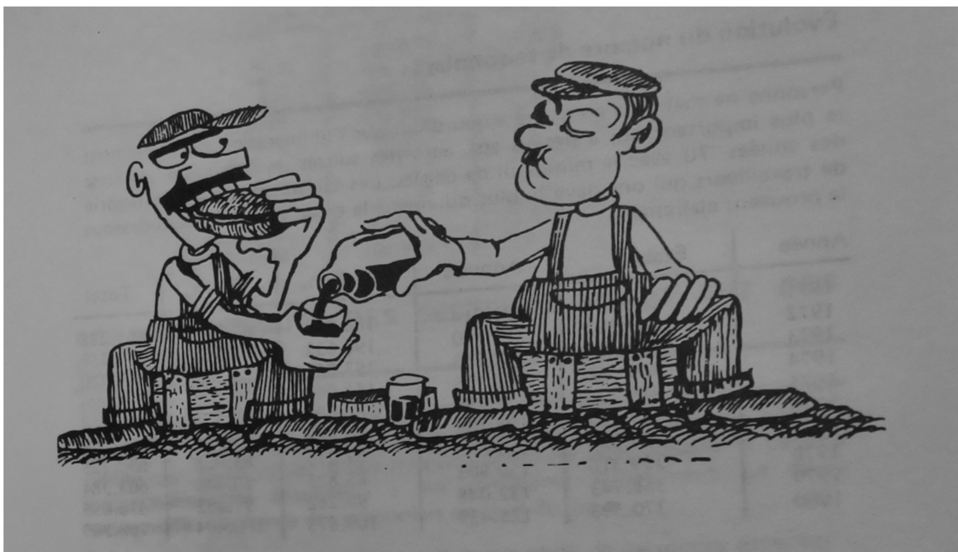
This moralised framing finds a parallel, yet more complex articulation, in the *Bulletin d'information* of the *Fédération des Syndicats Chrétiens de Genève* (FSCG), published in March 1981 in the run-up to the *Être solidaires* vote. The *bulletin* insists on the union's long-standing commitment to migrant workers, describing the struggle as "a long-term fight for the FSCG" and recalling its earlier interventions, notably the 1977 newsletter on foreign labour. By quoting its own 1974 communiqué – "It is inhuman and even criminal to treat workers as commodities that capital moves according to its own interests" – the FSCG constructs a moral genealogy of engagement, presenting itself as a consistent and principled actor within a broader field often criticised for hesitation or opportunism. This rhetorical self-positioning serves to build credibility at a time when other unions, as well as the Swiss Trade Union Federation (USS), remained ambivalent toward the initiative.

Yet the bulletin also reveals the linguistic and ideological shifts that characterised trade union discourse at the turn of the 1980s. While it at times adopts the radical vocabulary of anti-capitalism, denouncing the "divisive manoeuvres" that set Swiss and foreign workers against one another, it simultaneously translates the struggle into a framework of moral responsibility and unity. The section titled "Humanitarian? Unitary!" encapsulates this tension. This slogan is a rhetorical move that rejects a purely moral appeal while still operating within the emotional register of humanitarianism. In fact, in the text, migrant precarity is reframed as a threat to the entire working class: "As long as seasonal workers remain 'mobile' at the employer's will, all workers are in danger". In this formulation, solidarity is redefined as shared interest, absorbing migrant claims into a broader – and implicitly national – discourse of labour unity.

From a critical perspective, the FSCG bulletin thus performs a double gesture. On one hand, it extends the boundaries of union advocacy – calling for voting rights, fair taxation, family allowances, regularisation of residence permits, and access to decent housing – thereby recognising that social justice for migrants requires political inclusion. On the other hand, its framing re-centres the union as the privileged agent of struggle, erasing the plurality of actors that had shaped migrant mobilisation throughout the 1970s, such as *Les Colonies Libres*, the *Association des Travailleurs Espagnols* and other autonomous groups. By asserting that the defense of seasonal workers "depends on the defense of all workers", the FSCG recentres the

narrative around class unity rather than migrant agency and anti-racism. The result is a discursive compromise: humanitarian rhetoric is displaced but not overcome, replaced by a unitarist language that continues to rely on moral, paternalistic and racial codes. In this sense, the bulletin exemplifies the broader linguistic transformation of solidarity itself – from a practice of political alliance to a discourse of inclusion managed by established institutions.

Bulletin d’information, FSCG, 1981, Archives contestataires, Geneva.



Bulletin d’information, FSCG, 1981, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

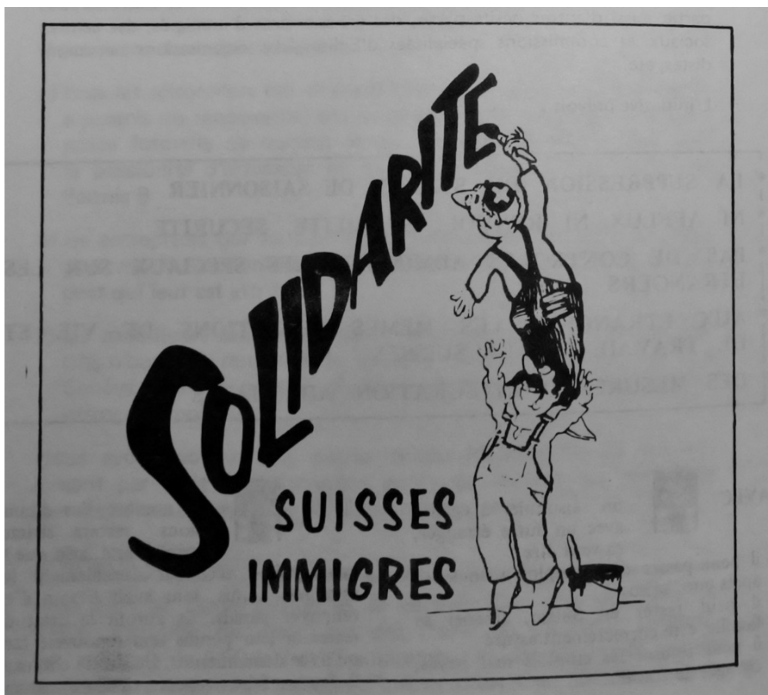
Bulletin d'information, FSCG, 1981, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

This ambivalence becomes even more evident in the visual language of the three cartoons that accompany the section. Each image depicts the same two figures: a Swiss worker and an Italian seasonal labourer. The Italian is easily recognisable through stereotypical features – a black moustache, darker hair, and expressive gestures – whereas the Swiss worker appears calm, fair, and self-assured. In the first image, the Italian seems to show something to the Swiss, initiating a conversation; in the second, the Swiss listens while pouring the Italian a glass of wine; in the third, the Swiss takes the position of the explainer, gesturing as he instructs the visibly surprised Italian.

Placed separately across the bulletin's pages, these vignettes visually enact the racial hierarchy implied in the text's discourse. The Swiss worker becomes the bearer of political

consciousness, the one who articulates the structural reasons for opposing the seasonal worker status – “The seasonal worker status must be abolished… and not only for humanitarian reasons” – while the Italian is depicted as naïve, pre-political, moved perhaps only by personal or familial motives. The comic form, with its everyday informality and humour, softens this hierarchy, yet simultaneously reinforces it. The Italian’s astonishment in the final frame suggests a moment of ‘enlightenment’, as though class consciousness must be transmitted to him from the Swiss worker, reproducing a civilisational narrative in which political maturity flows from the national subject to the racialised other.

This visual rhetoric mirrors the broader dynamics of the *Être solidaires* campaign: the migrant is central to the moral argument but peripheral to the political voice. The dialogue between the two workers replaces collective struggle with pedagogical explanation, turning solidarity into education rather than co-action. The result is a subtle paternalism: the Swiss worker, and by extension the Swiss union, occupies the position of political reason, while the migrant embodies affect. The vignettes thus reproduce, in miniature, the campaign’s ambivalence between humanitarian empathy and structural critique – reaffirming the asymmetry between those who speak ‘for’ migrants and those whose lived condition motivates the struggle itself.



Bulletin d’information, FSCG, 1981, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

One of the most revealing images in the FSCG bulletin shows two workers painting together the slogan "*Solidarité / Suisses-Immigrés*". The Swiss worker, recognisable by the red-cross on his hat, is perched above the migrant, who supports him from below. The composition suggests cooperation and common purpose, yet it also visually enacts the hierarchy that structures the bulletin's language. The migrant's body becomes the literal foundation of solidarity – indispensable but subordinated – while the Swiss worker, elevated and completing the inscription, embodies agency, articulation, and authorship.

While the text insists that the seasonal worker status must be abolished "not only for humanitarian reasons", its visual language continues to operate through humanitarian and paternalistic codes. The migrant appears as a supportive figure rather than a political subject, while the Swiss worker assumes the role of mediator and moral actor. What is presented as mutual solidarity thus remains asymmetrical. Political consciousness appears to emanate from the Swiss worker, while the migrant's understanding and agency are imagined as incomplete or derivative.

In this sense, the bulletin exemplifies the shifting languages of anti-racism in early 1980s Switzerland. The structural critique of the seasonal regime is voiced through a discourse that still racialises solidarity, imagining the migrant not as an equal partner in struggle but as a moral and physical base upon which Swiss social justice rests. The image thus says it all: it visualises how humanitarian reason and utilitarian class discourse intertwine, revealing both the aspiration to unity and the persistence of inequality within it.

Humanitarianism, as Irène Herrmann observes, is often taken for granted as an unambiguously 'good'. In *L'Humanitaire en questions* (2021), she warns that the term has become so ubiquitous that its political dimension is flattened and its meaning evacuated. What remains is a sanitised moral vocabulary that makes it hard to perceive how help is structured by power relations, how the giving of care may also reinforce hierarchies between giver and receiver. Humanitarian acts may soothe suffering, but they also delineate who is visible, who is valuable, and who remains silent. When this critique is extended into the visual field, the stakes become even sharper. Images are not neutral: they frame, select, emphasise, and omit. The *Syndicat Chrétiens*' poster positions the viewer in a moral economy of compassion. The viewer is invited to feel, but rarely to act politically. As Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) argues in *The Ironic Spectator*, humanitarian imagery creates a paradoxical relation between the "distant sufferer" and the "privileged viewer", transforming solidarity into a mediated moral performance. In this sense,

humanitarian images produce empathy while neutralising agency – they affirm our humanity, but through the spectacle of another's pain.

Theorists of migration and post-colonial studies have long shown that these visual tropes do not simply reflect empathy; they reproduce colonial legacies. The idea of the 'white saviour' – the benevolent helper who rescues the suffering migrant – continues to occupy a central place in the visual economy of migration. Liisa Malkki's work on refugee imagery (1996; 2015) shows that humanitarian discourse often transforms political subjects into "speechless emissaries": people whose suffering is legible only through others' narration. This process mirrors what Nicholas De Genova (2017) calls "the border spectacle", where migrants' precarity and death are repeatedly shown as proof of crisis, eliciting compassion while reaffirming the borders that produce that very suffering. Such representations, when repeated, sediment into a collective expectation – a visual grammar of migration that privileges vulnerability over agency, endurance over resistance.

Herrmann's warning that humanitarianism "divides while pretending to unite" is particularly relevant here. In Switzerland, as she notes, it is possible to celebrate humanitarian values while ignoring their political effects; to choose when and whom to help. This selective compassion underpins what Martina Tazzioli (2019) describes as the "humanitarian government of migration", where care and control are intertwined. Humanitarianism may appear to soften exclusion, but it also legitimises it: by managing the migrant as an object of intervention, it reproduces a moral hierarchy that separates citizens from those 'in need'. Within visual culture, this distinction is inscribed through composition, framing, and gaze – who looks, who is looked at, and who speaks.

One of the most enduring dangers of humanitarian visual culture, then, is its capacity to naturalise inequality. When suffering becomes the dominant visual register of migration, structural violence recedes into the background. De Genova (2017) has argued that the framing of migration as a 'crisis' serves to conceal the deeper crisis inherent in the ways migration is produced and governed. The seasonal worker may be depicted as tired, displaced, deprived of family life – but rarely as a worker with claims, with agency, or as part of a collective movement. The moral weight of pity eclipses the political force of equality. In this sense, as Chouliaraki and Orgad (2022) note, humanitarianism turns solidarity into a spectacle of virtue: it offers recognition, but only on the terms of the onlooker.

This critique does not reject humanitarianism outright; rather, it calls for its politicisation. It asks that the visual and discursive practices of help be understood as situated within relations of power, not outside them. The visual culture of solidarity in Switzerland – as

in the case of the *Être solidaires* initiavite – makes this tension visible. To understand this tension is to grasp the transformation of anti-racism itself – from a politics of confrontation to a politics of benevolence, from solidarity as common action to solidarity as a moral mission.

From a critical race perspective, this visual grammar reproduces hierarchies: the migrant is indispensable yet marginalised, a potential source of instability for the 'white' Swiss majority, whose social and economic security depends on his labour. Together, the posters and the FSCG *Bulletin* illustrate the coexistence of humanitarian and utilitarian visual strategies within the *Être solidaires* campaign: one mobilising moral and emotional appeals to support migrants, the other appealing to self-interest while racialising labour hierarchies and erasing migrant collectivity.

Seen from this perspective, the shift observed in the 1980s did not emerge ex nihilo. It was the outcome of a longer genealogy that linked class solidarity, humanitarianism, and moral national identity. The migrant had always been both a mirror and a measure: a figure through which Switzerland defined its own democracy, modernity, and compassion. These visual codes anticipated the humanitarian turn that would dominate the 1980s and 1990s, as the migrant question became entwined with that of asylum, and the 'refugee' replaced the 'worker' as the emblematic figure of migration (Arlettaz, Arlettaz 2004, 128-130).

This evolution helps explain the reception and eventual rejection of the *Être solidaires* initiative, while also highlighting the actors involved in these debates. Over the late 1970s to the 1990s, new organisations dedicated to immigrant integration and anti-racist work emerged, including commissions, associations such as the *Centre Contact Immigrés*, and the evolving involvement of trade unions. Taken together, these developments illuminate broader cultural, visual, and linguistic shifts that defined the period, showing how anti-racism and solidarity practices were reoriented from radical confrontation toward institutionalised frameworks.

After the defeat of the *Être solidaires* initiative, the *Centre Contact Suisses-Immigrés* (CCSI) – which remains active today – became an important site for sustaining anti-racist engagement in Geneva. Emerging from networks of Swiss and migrant activists, the *Centre* sought to produce counter-knowledge about migration and integration, combining cultural events, legal assistance, and publications that reflected ongoing negotiations over the meaning of solidarity. Its newsletters from the early 1980s reveal both the persistence of critical voices and the gradual transformation of the discourse itself. While the *Centre* continued to denounce the injustices of the seasonal worker regime, it increasingly framed exclusion in moral and cultural terms, emphasising integration, understanding, and coexistence over structural critique.

A 1985 newsletter announced the creation of a new working group titled "Group for the Fight Against Racism and Xenophobia". The article reads:

"*Everyday news shows us what a threat racism and xenophobia represent for collective life, through the wall of misunderstanding, mistrust, and hatred they build between immigrants and 'natives'. They are also a serious threat to the struggle against discrimination, against inequality of rights, and for the integration of immigrants. The resurgence of xenophobia – a widespread phenomenon from which Geneva unfortunately does not escape – poses the difficult problem of developing appropriate responses.*

It is in this spirit that the working group has discussed, in its first meetings, the organisation of an anti-racist hotline. The group will respond to calls received by the CCSI from people who have been victims of racism. Case by case, we will have to find the appropriate means to defend these individuals through informational work aimed at alerting public opinion, if necessary through legal action, or by denouncing abuses committed by a state authority.

Beyond this essential work of immediate defense, we must also find ways to develop anti-racist vigilance. This will include counter-information efforts (such as the exhibition on 'Press and Immigration' presented on 10 November), and campaigns to raise public awareness on specific occasions such as referenda and elections. In this perspective, contacts have been established with SOS Racisme / 'Touche pas à mon pote'. As a recent Libération *editorial put it: '"Touche pas à mon pote" has taken the response off the lofty plane of principles and brought it down into the streets, into everyday life – precisely where racism spreads and feeds. With its youthful and dynamic look, SOS Racisme has undertaken perhaps the most urgent task: to banalise anti-racism'. Since the goals of 'Touche pas à mon pote' are of course also our own, we will strive to support its initiatives while allowing each organisation to retain its specificity and originality. In this spirit, we could, for example, collaborate on exhibitions in schools and community centers.*

In conclusion, we call on you to join this working group. We await your ideas and active participation to fight the plague of intolerance and racism, and to develop forms of solidarity".

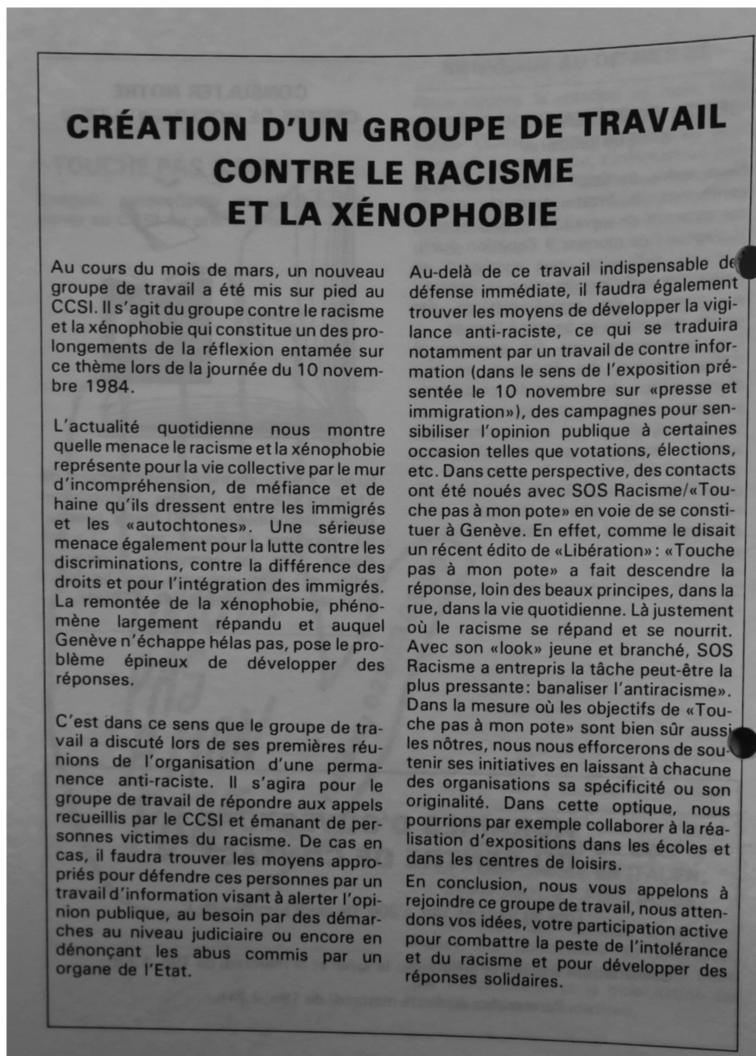
This text is emblematic of the discursive transformation of anti-racism during the 1980s. Racism is here conceptualised not as a structural or systemic force but as an "individual pathology" – a "plague of intolerance" to be treated through vigilance, education, and moral persuasion. The proposed "anti-racist hotline" addresses discrimination on a 'case-by-case' basis, locating the problem in personal prejudice rather than in the institutional mechanisms of exclusion – migration law, labour regulation, or border policing.

The influence of SOS Racisme's discourse – "Touche pas à mon pote" ("Don't touch my friend") – is evident in the language of moral empathy and friendship. SOS Racisme was founded in France in 1984, in the aftermath of the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racisme* (*Marche des Beurs*), which mobilised racialised youth from working-class neighbourhoods to demand equal rights and recognition. While the march articulated a politically charged, bottom-up critique of racism, SOS Racisme rapidly emerged as a centralised organisation promoting a republican and pedagogical form of anti-racism. Alana Lentin has critically analysed this transformation, highlighting how SOS Racisme contributed to the moralisation and depoliticisation of anti-racism and to the marginalisation of youth-led and structurally grounded struggles (Lentin 2004, pp. 109-125). The prominence of SOS Racisme within transnational anti-racist frameworks of the period underscores both the circulation of discourses, repertoires, and programmes across national contexts and a broader shift in the European anti-racist landscape during the mid-1980s. This model of anti-racism constructs a relationship of protection rather than 'interdependence': the majority subject ("the friend") becomes the moral actor defending the racialised other, whose agency is framed through vulnerability rather than political participation. In the CCSI text, the street becomes the site where racism 'spreads', displacing attention away from the structural racism embedded in the state and the economy.

In this framework, racism appears as a moral failing rather than a power technology – an attitude to be corrected through awareness, rather than a relation of power to be dismantled. This shift signals the move from a structural to an individualised understanding of racism: from the collective and labour-based analyses of the 1970s to the depoliticised humanitarian and cultural idioms of the mid-1980s. This CCSI example therefore illustrates a broader transition: the reconfiguration of anti-racist practice within institutional, state-compatible frameworks. What had once been conceived as a struggle against systemic inequality became reframed as an ethical project of inclusion and civic coexistence.

Following Sara Ahmed's (2012) insight, we can see how such transformations operated as institutional mechanisms through which critique is absorbed and neutralised. In Switzerland, this dynamic extended beyond unions to the broader associative field: migrant committees,

church-based initiatives and emerging NGOs adopted humanitarian vocabularies that aligned with state frameworks. Anti-racism, in this process, became less a practice of contestation than an administrative and moral project of integration articulated within state priorities.



CRÉATION D'UN GROUPE DE TRAVAIL CONTRE LE RACISME ET LA XÉNOPHOBIE

Au cours du mois de mars, un nouveau groupe de travail a été mis sur pied au CCSI. Il s'agit du groupe contre le racisme et la xénophobie qui constitue un des prolongements de la réflexion entamée sur ce thème lors de la journée du 10 novembre 1984.

L'actualité quotidienne nous montre quelle menace le racisme et la xénophobie représente pour la vie collective par le mur d'incompréhension, de méfiance et de haine qu'ils dressent entre les immigrés et les «autochtones». Une sérieuse menace également pour la lutte contre les discriminations, contre la différence des droits et pour l'intégration des immigrés. La remontée de la xénophobie, phénomène largement répandu et auquel Genève n'échappe hélas pas, pose le problème épineux de développer des réponses.

C'est dans ce sens que le groupe de travail a discuté lors de ses premières réunions de l'organisation d'une permanence anti-raciste. Il s'agira pour le groupe de travail de répondre aux appels recueillis par le CCSI et émanant de personnes victimes du racisme. De cas en cas, il faudra trouver les moyens appropriés pour défendre ces personnes par un travail d'information visant à alerter l'opinion publique, au besoin par des démarches au niveau judiciaire ou encore en dénonçant les abus commis par un organe de l'Etat.

Au-delà de ce travail indispensable de défense immédiate, il faudra également trouver les moyens de développer la vigilance anti-raciste, ce qui se traduira notamment par un travail de contre information (dans le sens de l'exposition présentée le 10 novembre sur «presse et immigration»), des campagnes pour sensibiliser l'opinion publique à certaines occasion telles que votations, élections, etc. Dans cette perspective, des contacts ont été noués avec SOS Racisme/«Touche pas à mon pote» en voie de se constituer à Genève. En effet, comme le disait un récent édito de «Libération»: «Touche pas à mon pote» a fait descendre la réponse, loin des beaux principes, dans la rue, dans la vie quotidienne. Là justement où le racisme se répand et se nourrit. Avec son «look» jeune et branché, SOS Racisme a entrepris la tâche peut-être la plus pressante: banaliser l'antiracisme». Dans la mesure où les objectifs de «Touche pas à mon pote» sont bien sûr aussi les nôtres, nous nous efforcerons de soutenir ses initiatives en laissant à chacune des organisations sa spécificité ou son originalité. Dans cette optique, nous pourrions par exemple collaborer à la réalisation d'expositions dans les écoles et dans les centres de loisirs.

En conclusion, nous vous appelons à rejoindre ce groupe de travail, nous attendons vos idées, votre participation active pour combattre la peste de l'intolérance et du racisme et pour développer des réponses solidaires.

Bulletin du CCSI, April 1985, Archives contestataires, Geneva.

To make sense of these transformations, Alana Lentin's concept of a "continuum of proximity-to-distance from the public political culture of the nation-state" (2004, 1) provides a productive analytical lens. By the late 1970s, migrant activism in Switzerland operated along this continuum in distinct ways. At one end, organisations and collectives sought legitimacy and recognition by articulating their demands in the moral and legal language of the Swiss democratic order: rights, fairness, and humanitarian concern. This reflects a position of

proximity, in which anti-racism is framed as an extension of state principles rather than a critique of them. At the other end, the position of the *saisonniers* as non-citizens – whose residence and work were conditional and revocable – placed them structurally at the margins of the same political culture. Mobilisations from this position of distance highlighted the exclusions embedded in national norms, oscillating between participation within the system and critique of the systemic constraints it imposed. In the Swiss context, this continuum illuminates how anti-racist discourse could recognise suffering without politicising domination. This tension was particularly visible in the campaigns of the early 1980s, such as the *Collectif pour l'abolition du statut de saisonnier* (CASS) and the *Être solidaires* initiative. Both campaigns expressed a deep continuity with the militant aspirations of the early 1970s – the demand for equality, family life, and recognition – yet they also reflected a transformed political language. Migrants were represented as victims of unjust laws rather than as political subjects confronting structural domination. This framing resonated with public morality but weakened the link between anti-racism and social conflict.

The failure of the *Être solidaires* initiative, rejected by more than 80 percent of voters, was symptomatic of this changing context. By the early 1980s, the composition of the migrant population had changed: many Italians and Spaniards had secured permanent residence and family reunification, while newer groups – Portuguese, Yugoslavs, Turks – arrived in a harsher economic and political climate, marked by unemployment and restrictive immigration controls. The solidarities that had underpinned earlier mobilisations had fractured, and the humanitarian language of solidarity was too moralised, too abstract, to rebuild them.

This transformation can also be understood in light of Stuart Hall's (1980) insight that racism is not an aberration but "an integral part of the social formation". The Swiss case demonstrates this with particular clarity: racism was embedded not only in attitudes or prejudices but in the organisation of labour, residence, and belonging. The *Paix du travail* regime, the seasonal permit system, and the bureaucratic logic of 'integration' all functioned to reproduce hierarchies of value and respectability while presenting themselves as rational or humanitarian. The new anti-racist idiom – shaped by the cultural-relativist legacy of UNESCO (Lentin 2004, 74-7) and reinforced by the moral economy of Swiss humanitarianism – could recognise suffering but not domination. It could humanise migrants but rarely politicise their condition.

Seen through Lentin's continuum, migrant activism during this period occupied a paradoxical position: it moved closer to the symbolic centre of the nation, adopting the language of rights, integration, and tolerance, yet in doing so, it lost the critical distance from which it

had once exposed the racialised foundations of Swiss citizenship itself. Migrants and their allies sought visibility and legitimacy within the public political culture, but the price of proximity was a partial depoliticisation of their critique. If the nickname of my grandfather, *Furia,* embodied resistance through labour, endurance, and dignity without recognition, the visual and discursive languages of solidarity that emerged in this period embodied another kind of forging: the transformation of political struggle into moral sentiment. By displacing the question of equality from the terrain of collective struggle to that of compassion, the left's visual culture inadvertently prepared the ground for the moralised, post-political anti-racism that would dominate in later decades.

Part III

5. (De)codifying Race

We sat down for a quick coffee before starting the day. On the counter, a few newspapers. I picked one up and began to read.
An article about a new asylum centre, in my neighbourhood.
A few days earlier, at home, we had received a letter from the communal authorities. An invitation to visit the centre before its opening. The words were soft, reassuring: come and see, meet the team, discover the new facilities.
A showroom for pity, I thought. And somewhere between the lines, a discourse on security.
The migrant will be there – but don't worry, everything is under control.
Omar looked at me and said: "*These are not centres of hospitality, these are fucking prisons*".
He paused. "*I know, I've been there, when I arrived. They treat you like criminals, like animals. I left – I preferred illegality*".

In Geneva, one asylum centre once made the front pages of the newspapers: *Le Foyer des Tattes.*
The fire broke out in the night between the 16th and 17th of November 2014. The firefighters arrived too late. Some of the residents had jumped from the windows to escape. Many were injured. One died.
His name was Fikre Seghi.
The authorities spoke with distance, with condescendence.
Mauro Poggia, then State Councillor, said[27]: "*Many residents come from countries where they are not used to being rescued*".
The responsibility was on them.

Archival sources from the 1990s reveal a strange continuity. The *Foyer des Tattes* was, from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, a dormitory for seasonal workers.
There, the reconfiguration of racial regimes becomes visible, inhabiting not only policies, discourses and images, but also the very spaces of the city.
A newsletter from the communal authorities of Vernier announced the transformation in 1996[28]: an "open day" for residents to discover the new centre, to visit the rooms, meet the

[27] Tribune de Genève, 21 February 2015
[28] The document is accessible online on Vernier's city archives: https://www.vernier.ch/actualites/informations-vernier-aout-1996

staff, and share "music from different countries" and "exotic food". The tone was eerily familiar.

Alongside the letter I received decades later, words seem to repeat themselves.
Between humanitarian voyeurism and security concerns.

Everything is under control.

(Geneva, Decembre 2023)

This note encapsulates something anthropologically profound. The letter, the article, the invitation, these are not merely bureaucratic gestures; they are sites where moral, political, and racial logics intersect. They embody a "moral economy" (Fassin 2011) of migration governance, where inclusion is offered as care, and exclusion is rendered legitimate through a discourse of control and protection. Reading and reflecting on these documents, alongside Omar's lived experience, reveals the persistent tension between institutionalised compassion and structural violence, between visibility and erasure, between moralised concern and everyday exclusion. It traces how systemic inequalities are lived, mediated, and internalised in interactions, objects, and spaces.

This tension is not new. Archival sources from the 1980s and 1990s reveal a striking continuity in the governance of migrant bodies and spaces. The *Foyer des Tattes*, for instance, shifted from housing seasonal workers to accommodating asylum seekers, yet the moral and spatial logics that structured the site remained remarkably similar. Invitations to "discover the facilities" programs of cultural display, and the management of residents' behaviour echo across decades. The languages of integration and hospitality coexist uneasily with subtle forms of surveillance and segregation. Through such continuity, it becomes possible to trace the deeper, structural ways in which race – as a set of hierarchies and differential rights – has been reconfigured rather than erased.

The 1990s and post-2000 period in Switzerland reflects a broader transformation of these racial regimes (Lentin 2025). Traditional solidarities forged between migrant workers and Swiss allies in factories and unions gave way to more fragmented, bureaucratised, and moralised engagements. Racism itself did not vanish; it shifted from overt racism to new civilisational vocabularies of integration and diversity, where the problem of exclusion was increasingly

framed as a matter of culture, behaviour, or values. Migrants were no longer primarily understood as a collective workforce but as individual subjects to be guided, assessed, and morally disciplined.

At the same time, the legal and institutional landscape of migration became increasingly stratified. The decline of long-term guestworker regimes and the rise of new temporary permits, conditional refugee statuses, and "inadmissibility" ("*non-entrée en matière*") procedures produced new forms of "differential inclusion" (De Genova 2017): a system in which migrants are incorporated selectively and precariously, included only through their subordination. Asylum seekers, seasonal workers, and cross-border labourers each came to occupy distinct positions within the moral and racialised geography of the nation, governed by varying degrees of visibility, vulnerability, and disposability.

Yet, the field of labour highlights a critical dimension of these transformations. Trade unions faced the challenge of addressing racialised inequalities in increasingly fragmented and precarious workplaces. Outsourcing, subcontracting, and the expansion of service and care sectors complicated class-based solidarities, leaving racialised workers both overrepresented in precarious jobs and underrepresented in leadership. The question of whether anti-racism could be integrated into labour struggles – or remained a separate moral concern – emerges as a central tension, reflecting broader dilemmas of solidarity, inclusion, and structural transformation.

This chapter therefore traces the recalibration of race in Switzerland along two interconnected axes: the evolving governance and moralisation of migration, and the responses of labour organisations to racialised inequalities. Together, these perspectives illuminate how racial hierarchies are reproduced, contested, and negotiated in the intertwined spaces of everyday life, policy, and work.

Inferfoto. Foyer pour saisonniers, may 1988, Geneva.

5.1 The Evolving Face of Racism in the Context of Changing Migrations

The closing years of the 1980s marked a turning point in Switzerland's migration regime and, with it, in the configuration of racialised boundaries within the national space. Following the economic turbulence of the 1970s, which had temporarily slowed the entry of foreign labour, the Swiss economy in the 1980s experienced renewed demand for a flexible and segmented workforce. As Piguet notes, "between 1985 and 1995, nearly 50,000 new work permits were granted each year, and more than 130,000 seasonal workers entered the country annually" (Piguet 2017, 42). This expansion, concentrated particularly in the construction, tourism, and restaurant sectors, revived what he calls a "return to the old migration regime" (Ibid., 43), a system reminiscent of the postwar decades when immigration was governed by economic cycles and rigidly hierarchical work permits.

However, by the end of the decade, the structural conditions underpinning this regime were already beginning to erode. International economic integration, the liberalisation of European labour markets, and the new normative force of human rights conventions were transforming both the practical and the symbolic terms of migration governance. As

Switzerland faced the prospect of isolation from an integrating Europe – the European Community was moving toward free movement of persons and the Schengen framework – the domestic debate on migration became inseparable from questions of sovereignty and belonging. At the same time, the signing of international conventions, such as the European Convention on Human Rights (1974) and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ratified by Switzerland in 1994), forced the Swiss state to justify or adapt certain exclusionary practices. These instruments contributed to the establishment of the Federal Commission against Racism (CFR) in 1995, which would become a key interlocutor in the contestation of discriminatory policies (Ibid., 47-9).

Yet the apparent liberalisation of migration policy concealed a more complex process: the gradual internalisation of racial hierarchies within a technocratic framework, which in the 1980s and 1990s produced a discursive shift toward a sharply culturalised form of differentiation. This was the vocabulary that increasingly structured public discourse on migration in Western Europe and, as Weill-Lévy et al. (2003) observed, in Swiss debates as well: where anxieties about *Überfremdung* were rephrased in terms of cultural compatibility, identity, and social cohesion. As Alana Lentin has argued in *Racism and Antiracism in Europe* (2004), this shift did not signal the erosion of racism but rather its rearticulation through a liberal grammar of difference, in which culture displaced race as the primary idiom of exclusion.

When Switzerland finally committed to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in the mid-1990s, the Federal Council framed its engagement in explicitly cultural and pedagogical terms:

> "*It is above all necessary to take measures in the fields of education and culture, to promote understanding between the different groups of the population, and to integrate foreigners into our society without obliging them to renounce their foreign identity. A number of manifestations of bad temper that have for some time been a source of concern in our country and have been labelled – perhaps wrongly – as racism, are due to fears of foreign overpopulation, particularly in relation to illegal immigration. It is evident that, from a sociological point of view, there is interaction between racism and the problem of migration. The rejection of foreigners and their isolation in a kind of ghetto would contribute to their permanent marginalisation, with all the secondary effects that this entails, and, consequently, to a renewed rejection by the Swiss population. In a state governed by the rule of law, one cannot tolerate everyone giving free rein to their aggressive impulses. It is therefore clearly necessary to legislate in this*

area, particularly in the penal domain. The State must set limits not to be crossed, in order to prevent social discontent and latent xenophobia from gradually increasing and ultimately leading to arson and acts of violence. It is particularly serious that such acts are often regarded, in the perpetrators' circles, as a kind of self-defense". (cited in Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 98-9)

The passage offers a telling illustration of how official anti-racism was framed within a managerial, moral and cultural register. Racism appears here not as a system of power, but as an 'epiphenomenon' – a regrettable social disturbance that can be contained through pedagogy, civic education, and, ultimately, penal intervention. What presents itself as tolerance thus conceals a deeper depoliticisation: the reduction of racism to a matter of social mood and individual excess. The task of the state becomes not to transform the racial order, but to regulate its expressions – to draw the line between acceptable prejudice and punishable hate. In this emerging framework, equality is replaced by the management of difference: diversity becomes an object of governance. Once race becomes unsayable, culture provides a legitimate vocabulary through which hierarchy can persist. As Hall observed, cultural difference thus emerges as the acceptable register of racialisation in the neoliberal era, producing figures such as the 'unintegrated' migrant, the illiberal Muslim, the incompatible non-European neighbour.

This reconfiguration of anti-racist discourse resonated with broader European debates around the emergence of a 'new racism', particularly those initiated by Pierre-André Taguieff. When first formulated in *La Force du préjugé* (1987), the concept of *racisme différentialiste* constituted an important attempt to grasp the mutation of racist discourse beyond biological essentialism. However, as Lentin has argued, the subsequent trajectory of this framework reveals a significant displacement, shifting attention from the structural reproduction of racism toward the alleged failures of anti-racism itself (Lentin 2004, 87-8). In this sense, Taguieff's later defence of republican universalism against what he terms 'differentialist multiculturalism' illustrates how a concept initially intended as a critique of racism could become aligned with a depoliticised understanding of it (Ibid., 90).

This drift becomes particularly visible when read against the work of Weill-Lévy and colleagues (2003). Drawing on Taguieff's theoretical vocabulary, they diagnosed the deep culturalisation of Swiss racism while maintaining a rigorous commitment to historical, institutional, and policy analysis. In doing so, their work effectively exposed the limits of Taguieff's own framework: it could serve as a critical tool only insofar as it remained anchored in an analysis of the state and its modes of governance. Ironically, it is precisely this form of

structurally grounded anti-racist analysis that would today risk being dismissed, within Taguieff's later polemical register, as a form of 'woke moralism'.

Incorporating later critiques such as those of Lentin, allows us to see how Taguieff's '*racisme différentialiste*' prefigured the ideological convergence between culturalism and security. What began as a respect for difference easily morphed into suspicion of those whose cultural practices were deemed incompatible with Western norms. In Switzerland, as in France or Germany, the figure of the veiled woman, the Roma traveller, or the asylum seeker became central to the moral economy of difference. These were not merely cultural anxieties; they were racialising technologies that linked social worth to proximity with whiteness and Europeanness.

It is precisely this structural dimension that Piguet (2017) makes visible in his analysis of Swiss migration regimes. The Swiss case shows how the moralised language of 'integration' translated the cultural logic of differentialism into administrative practice. What appeared as a concern for cohesion and adaptation was, in fact, a mechanism for sorting populations along racialised lines. As Piguet notes, the new "integration problem" among the foreign population was less a demographic reality than a discursive construction – one amplified by right-wing parties and media outlets eager to pathologise migrant communities. During the economic downturn of the mid-1990s, unemployment among foreign residents rose to 10 percent, compared with 3.7 percent among Swiss citizens (Piguet 2017, 51). These figures were mobilised to recast economic precarity as cultural failure, producing an image of migrants as unassimilable others whose difference threatened the moral fabric of the nation.

This rearticulation of race through culture coincided with a major demographic transformation. Whereas the earlier waves of labour migration had been dominated by Italians and Spaniards – groups later absorbed into a shared European identity and Whiteness – the 1980s and 1990s saw the arrival of migrants from the former Yugoslavia, Portugal, Turkey, and, increasingly, Africa, Asia and Latin America. Public discourse framed this diversification as a crisis of cultural distance, echoing sociologist Hoffmann-Nowotny's 1992 warning about the risks of a too great incompatibility between the natives and the various communities of immigrants (Ibid., 53-4). Although such claims had little empirical grounding, they proved extraordinarily effective in transforming older anxieties about *Überfremdung* into a moralised narrative of failed integration.

In this sense, the Swiss racial regime did not abandon the logic of exclusion; it recalibrated it (Lentin 2025). It found its institutional form in a policy apparatus that governs through the language of culture while reproducing the structural hierarchies of race. Weill-Lévy et al. together with Piguet's analysis thus allows us to move beyond Taguieff, situating these

mechanisms within the material practices of governance through which racism persists in neoliberal Europe.

The political class responded to these transformations by attempting to re-engineer the apparatus of migration control. Between 1989 and 1997, five official expert reports were commissioned by the federal government to rethink immigration policy (Ibid., 46). Several competing models were proposed, including a 'quota' system reminiscent of the contingent logic of the 1970s. However, such approaches were ultimately rejected as incompatible with Switzerland's humanitarian obligations and its emerging relationship with the European Union. The model that gained traction was the infamous system of the three circles, officially adopted in the early 1990s (Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 96).

Under this scheme, potential migrants were classified into three concentric circles according to their presumed proximity to Swiss society. The first circle comprised nationals of the European Union and EFTA countries, considered culturally and economically compatible; the second included states with comparable economic structures; and the third encompassed the rest of the world – particularly Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Balkans. Migration from this third circle was heavily restricted, except for a few "highly qualified specialists" (Piguet 2017, 62-3). While official rhetoric gradually shifted from 'cultural distance' to individual qualifications, as Weill-Lévy and colleagues note, the underlying racial logic remained intact: the reference to distance was replaced by reference to merit, but the hierarchy of belonging persisted, reproducing colonial tropes reproducing colonial tropes and linking inclusion to economic productivity, thus embedding racialised logics within capitalist valuation of labour and skill (Weill-Lévy 2003, 96-7).

We could consider this moment as a crystallisation of the long Swiss tradition of *Überfremdungspolitiks* – the policy of guarding against 'foreign overpopulation'. Far from being an innovation, the 'three circles' simply reactivated an older colonial imaginary that ranked human groups according to their degree of assimilability. "The vigour of this ideology" Weill-Lévy and colleagues write, "and the danger it represents call for a new consciousness: the debate on history joins the political present" (Ibid., 44). Their analysis situates the 1990s within a broader genealogy that links the *Office fédéral des étrangers* (founded in 1917) and the 1931 Law on Foreigners' Stay and Settlement (LSEE) to contemporary migration policy. From this perspective, the 1990s were not a rupture but a moment of adaptation: racism reinvented itself to conform to democratic and humanitarian norms while preserving its hierarchical structure.

> Today, European immigrants have passed through the successive stages of the obstacle course imagined by the *Überfremdungspolitik*. Since June 1, 2002, they have ceased to be foreigners. From now on, only non-Europeans will be considered 'foreigners', whom a new draft law even plans to forbid from Switzerland. Asylum seekers at the various stages of procedure, rejected applicants, and 'non-Europeans' will thus suffer the long-term subjugation once reserved for Italians fifty years ago. (Ibid., 63)

This passage is crucial because it refuses to treat Swiss racialisation as a contingent response to contemporary migration pressures. Instead, it historicises race as a continuum of state practice, showing how categories of foreignness and belonging were continually redefined to maintain the same structural asymmetry. Indeed, the 'three circles' policy institutionalised a racial geography of belonging in which 'Europeanness' functioned as a proxy for whiteness and civility. The inclusion of the former Yugoslavia in the third circle – despite decades of labour migration in Switzerland – illustrates how racialisation operates through political geography. In fact, many Yugoslav workers who had been long integrated into the Swiss labour market suddenly found themselves unable to renew their residence permits (Piguet 2017, 59-61; Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 100-1). In this sense, the racial regime did not simply exclude; it also produced new forms of precarious inclusion, whereby certain groups were tolerated as temporary labour but denied the symbolic status of belonging.

This selective hierarchy of belonging also reveals how whiteness itself operated as a movable frontier within Swiss migration regimes. The inclusion of Southern Europeans in the European Economic Area, and their subsequent social ascent, coincided with the racialisation of new 'undesirable' groups such as Yugoslavs. As whiteness expanded to accommodate Italians and Spaniards, it simultaneously hardened against those coded as culturally Balkan or Muslim. In this sense, Swiss migration policy not only managed labour but also produced graduated whiteness: a stratified field in which proximity to Europeanness conferred moral and economic value. This dynamic is clearly audible in the oral histories of first-generation Italian migrants. As Oscar, reflected:

> "*If at work they have the skills, there's nothing to say – of course they should have the same rights. Only that when they gather in groups, they form gangs that can cause trouble, damage things, even hurt people. They say they're used to it in their country, so they keep behaving that way – not all of them, but a small part. Still, it's hard to choose them*".

(Oscar)

He went on to recount an incident involving a Yugoslav worker who had killed someone during a fight, concluding with a broader reflection:

> "*There were also problems with the Southerners* [Italians from the South] — *a different mentality. They would meet at the station, block the corridor, cheat people. They didn't realise they had to learn to behave a little more… in line, you know. A little order*".
>
> (Oscar)

These fragments reveal how racialised boundaries are reproduced horizontally, among migrants themselves. The fact that Oscar remarks that "*it's hard to choose them*" also signals a shift in his own class position: from a once-stigmatised worker to someone implicated in managerial hierarchies, participating in the selection of "good" workers. His narrative performs what could be called a moral conversion – from exploited subject to evaluator of others' worth – mirroring the racial neoliberal conflation of merit, civility, and productivity.

As Italians moved from stigmatised foreignness to accepted Europeanness, they increasingly identified 'others' – particularly Balkan workers – as culturally deficient or disorderly. The language of 'order', 'mentality', and 'decency' echoes the moral lexicon of the Swiss state, revealing how migrant respectability became intertwined with whiteness. This shift cannot be understood apart from the postwar institutionalisation of assimilation as a political project. From the mid-1960s onward, assimilation was promoted not only as a cultural ideal but as a regulatory response to perceived overpopulation, mobilised through schools, employers, and associations with the explicit aim of producing 'Swiss' future generations (Niederberger 2004, 98-100). In this sense, assimilation functioned as a moral technology of governance, recalling earlier discourses on national values articulated in interwar debates on *Überfremdung*. This process mirrors what Bhattacharyya (2018) describes as the economisation of race: the translation of moral worth into a measure of labour discipline, civic conformity, and differential belonging.

In a broader perspective, as Wolf Bukowski argues in *La buona educazione degli oppressi* (2019), the neoliberal emphasis on merit and decorum operates through the erasure of class visibility:

> There is a kind of necessary preparatory work for decorum and security, aimed at erasing the recognisability of social classes. It is preliminary, but it must also be continually reaffirmed, because the visibility of class differences reemerges at every step and must each time be confused and blurred again. Once class is erased, people are, on the one hand, isolated in individualism and, on the other, confusedly reunited in nationalism – thus combining within themselves the two poles of neoliberalism: the progressive and optimistic one, and the angry and sovereigntist one, which do not succeed one another but rather complete each other. (Bukowski 2019, 15)

This mechanism, Bukowski suggests, transforms social inequality into a moral problem: merit and decorum replace solidarity and struggle. In Oscar's account, this logic intersects with race. His discourse reflects how the erasure of class difference – the illusion of having 'made it' through hard work – is sustained through the racialisation of others who now occupy the stigmatised position once held by Italians themselves. The whitening of Italian migrants, in other words, is inseparable from their incorporation into a moral economy that disavows class while reproducing racial hierarchy (Roediger 1991). To speak of 'merit', as Bukowski reminds us, "is already to speak of *decorum*" (2019, 21); and to speak of decorum, in Oscar's case, is also to speak of race.

Yet Oscar's words also index a deeper, internalised stratification – what Anna Curcio (2020) calls the "double trace of racism" (*doppia traccia del razzismo*). Curcio identifies how colonial hierarchies, "against the backdrop of the Eurocentric thinking of the time and the pseudo-scientific interpretations of positivist anthropology" (Curcio 2020, 37), helped construct a narrative of "two Italies", in which people from the South were imagined as undercivilised and morally inferior. This discourse of internal racism, she argues, was later reinforced through Italy's colonial expansion and violence abroad, which allowed the nation to enter the 'civilisational order' of Europe by displacing its internal others and distancing itself from colonised populations, especially Arab and African peoples.

Curcio extends this genealogy, showing how the internal and colonial traces of Italian racism intersected again in the 1980s, when Italy transformed from a country of emigration to one of immigration. As she writes,

> When, starting from the 1980s, the presence of workers – especially from North and Sub-Saharan Africa – begins to multiply in Italy, Italian society is neither culturally nor institutionally prepared. The colonial past has never been processed, and a normative

> framework is missing. However, it is after 1989, with the massive flows from the countries of the dissolving Soviet bloc, that the new hierarchies of race begin to take more fully defined shape. (Ibid., 47)

Oscar's distinction between "Northern" and "Southern" mentalities thus recalls the internal racism of Italian modernity, in which Southerners were historically constructed as backward, emotional, and undisciplined – an otherness contemporarily projected outward onto new migrant groups. In this sense, the respectability that Italian migrants claimed in Switzerland rested on displacing the stigma of racialisation onto others. His words exemplify precisely what Curcio describes as the 'double trace of racism': the intertwining of internal and colonial racisms that continued to shape Italians' self-perception across borders, in the diaspora as well as in Italy. Oscar's words need to be understood within this framework.

It is however important do underline the role of memory and temporality in this matter too. Oscar speaks decades after the events he recounts, in a context where Italians have become symbolically integrated into Swiss whiteness. His narrative thus performs what we might call a retrospective normalisation (Assmann 2011): a reordering of past suffering into a moralised story of adaptation. What was once humiliation is retold as a lesson in discipline; what was once racial stigma becomes a badge of virtue. The memory of discrimination is preserved, but its political charge is neutralised – transformed into proof of having learned to behave. Selective whiteness, then, is not simply a social position but a temporal process: it unfolds through narratives that convert racial trauma into evidence of moral maturity. In this sense, to decolonise anti-racism means confronting how the language of tolerance and integration can itself reproduce hierarchies – both between groups and within collective memories of migration.

If selective whiteness emerged at the level of everyday discourse and self-perception, its institutional counterpart lay in the selective migration system that underpinned Swiss economic growth. From a theoretical standpoint, this reconfiguration corresponds to the recalibration of racial capitalism (Robinson 1983), a system that continuously rearticulates racial difference as a means of regulating labour and maintaining social order. By the late 1990s, as Piguet emphasises, the traditional rotation model was effectively dead – whereas in 1970, 70 percent of foreign residents held short-term permits, by 1990, 75 percent were on long-term residence permits (Piguet 2017, 46-7). But the end of rotation did not mean the end of hierarchy; it marked its transformation into a differentiated regime that originated in the post-colonial reorganisation of European labour markets during the 1960s. In fact, when former colonial subjects became

potential migrants to Switzerland, the federal authorities explicitly restricted access to the labour market according to racialised national origin:

> Discrimination among ‘guest workers’ according to their national origin was rapidly instituted from the early 1960s, when the colonial empires collapsed. (…) Former colonial subjects were now citizens of newly independent states, and therefore potential candidates for immigration to Switzerland. By means of a circular dated April 10, 1963 (no. 14/63), the Federal Department of Justice and Police instructed the cantons ‘*not to admit, in principle, seasonal workers from Portugal and Turkey, as well as from countries outside Europe*’. This was valid except in exceptional cases and with the agreement of the Federal Police of Foreigners, or within the framework of ‘*special actions undertaken by professional and economic organisations*.” (Weill-Lévy 2003, 65)

This passage exposes the racial logic that would be formalised in the three circles policy: a system that organised labour mobility through hierarchies of civilisation and culture. What appears as an administrative distinction between regions – European, semi-European, and non-European – was in fact a continuation of colonial ordering of white supremacy within the language of economic pragmatism. In Robinson’s terms, Swiss racial capitalism did not merely extract value from migrant labour; it produced racial categories as instruments of accumulation. The ‘desirable’ migrant was defined not only by productivity but by the capacity to embody the moral codes of discipline and civility that underpinned the national self-image.

By the time the three circles were implemented in 1991, this racial cartography had been thoroughly naturalised. It was no longer necessary to invoke explicit racial hierarchies; difference could now be managed through the vocabulary of integration, skills, and cultural proximity. The Swiss government explicitly reserved the right to apply its domestic rules on the admission of foreigners “*based on the capacity of foreign nationals to integrate into Swiss society*” (Cited in Weill-Lévy 2003, 100), thereby codifying a racialised distinction within the law itself. What was framed as a pragmatic differentiation according to integration capacity was, in fact, the rearticulation of racial boundaries in juridical form – a quintessential case of what David Theo Goldberg (2002) calls raceless racism, the inscription of racial hierarchy in ostensibly neutral legal and bureaucratic language of the state.

In this sense, the late 20th century reconfiguration of migration policy represents what Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) call the ‘border as method’: a technology of differentiation that

governs populations by distributing them across varying gradients of precarity and belonging. The three circles did not replace the racial state – they made it governable within the moral economy of neoliberal Europe. As Aníbal Quijano (2000) reminds us, modernity itself is structured through a "coloniality of power": a matrix that links race, capital, and knowledge in a global hierarchy originating in colonial domination but persisting long after formal decolonisation. In Europe, this coloniality operates not only through overseas empires but also through the internal organisation of migration and citizenship, where racialised categories of humanity are continually reinscribed under technocratic and economic logics.

By the turn of the millennium, Switzerland's racial regime had undergone another metamorphosis. The older model of exclusion through rotation and temporariness gave way to a new logic of stratified inclusion, justified by appeals to merit, integration, and European identity. Yet civil society and international actors quickly exposed the racial foundations of this emerging order. In 1995, ACOR SOS Racisme[29] publicly denounced the 'three circles' policy as inherently discriminatory – a critique echoed by legal scholars such as Andreas Auer at the University of Geneva. In 1999, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) similarly condemned Switzerland's asylum practices and the proliferation of problematic imagery in public campaigns. That same year, Switzerland submitted its first report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). While CERD welcomed the introduction of Article 261bis criminalising racist acts, it nonetheless observed that Swiss legislation continued to reproduce structural inequalities (Weill-Lévy 2003, 109-116).

These converging critiques contributed to the gradual abandonment of the 'three circles' terminology, which had become politically untenable. As Weill-Lévy and colleagues note, it was precisely in response to these accusations that the Federal Council adopted what it considered a more acceptable framework – the so-called 'dual system'. The shift was not a rupture but a rebranding. Official communication campaigns by the Federal Council and the Federal Department of Justice and Police celebrated the progress represented by the dual system, presenting it as a modernisation of migration management. Yet, as Weill-Lévy and

[29] ACOR–SOS Racisme (Association romande contre le racisme – SOS Racisme) was created in French-speaking Switzerland in the 1990s, inspired by the French SOS Racisme movement. Based in Geneva, it participated in local anti-racist initiatives and took part in the creation of the *Centre Écoute contre le racisme* (C-ECR), established in 2011 and operational since 2012. It appears, however, that the association is no longer active today.

colleagues note, the new system maintained the same exclusionary architecture: recruitment of workers from the third circle remained effectively impossible, except for highly qualified specialists unavailable within the domestic or European labour markets. Even these exceptions were limited in duration – justified, in the Federal Council's words, to "avoid encouraging brain drain" (Ibid., 97). The measure thus reproduced a colonial logic: selecting individuals whose skills were vital to their countries of origin while instrumentalising them for Swiss economic needs.

The 2002 draft of the Law on Foreigners (LEtr) sought to legalise this regime by introducing a point-based system. As Jean-Michel Dolivo and Giuliano Carobbio of ACOR SOS Racisme observed, the project was presented as "progress in foreigners' rights" but in fact entrenched a discretionary and discriminatory framework:

> The proposed mechanism legalises the discrimination of 'foreigners', a term now reserved for anyone outside the first circle. The LEtr abounds in indeterminate legal notions, leaving wide room for administrative discretion and interpretive arbitrariness – prolonging the rule of exception that has characterised this field of law since its inception. (Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 124)

The LEtr, adopted in 2005 and entering into force in 2008, replaced the 1931 Law on Foreigners' Stay and Settlement (LSEE) yet reproduced its exceptional character: "a law of exception that replaces another law of exception" (Ibid., 125-6). The statute of the seasonal worker was nominally abolished but effectively maintained through the new "short-term residence permit" (art. 34 al. 1), limited to one year and renewable for a maximum of two, without rights to family reunification except under restrictive conditions.

From a theoretical perspective, this reform exemplifies what scholars of critical migration studies describe as the neoliberalisation of borders – the transformation of racial hierarchies into marketised regimes of selection. In official discourse, racial exclusion was reframed as capitalist rationality: Switzerland claimed the need to control low-skilled migration while attracting global talent. The semantic shift from foreign overpopulation to management of migration flows did not mark the end of racism but its bureaucratic normalisation. The state no longer presented itself as protecting national identity from contamination, but as managing diversity for national prosperity. The criteria of admission were increasingly based on flexibility – a moralised form of economic value that implicitly selects along racial and social lines. Following Étienne Balibar (2009), this dual regime can be understood as a form of European

apartheid: juridical equality combined with differentiated mobility rights. In Switzerland, the LEtr instantiated precisely such an apartheid of circulation. EU citizens moved freely as quasi-members of the national community, while migrants from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Balkans were rendered hypervisible as security threats or welfare burdens.

This period also witnessed the consolidation of 'integration policy' as a governmental technology. In 2001, the Federal Council defined integration as both a "mutual process" and a "duty of participation" by foreigners. In practice, however, the burden of integration was overwhelmingly placed on migrants themselves, measured through indicators such as linguistic competence, civic knowledge, and 'respect for Swiss values'. Integration courses and language requirements became instruments for moral regulation, producing new 'moral economies' (Fassin 2009). In these systems in which moral sentiments and social values regulate the distribution of compassion, rights, and legitimacy, inclusion and exclusion are not justified biologically, but ethically – through narratives of merit, effort, and civility. Fassin shows that contemporary forms of governance increasingly operate through moral criteria: the 'deserving' migrant is the one who conforms to dominant norms of behaviour and self-presentation, while the 'undeserving' one is cast as irresponsible, dependent, or threatening. Thus, the rhetoric of integration transforms structural inequalities into moral failures, legitimising exclusion in the name of shared values and civic virtue.

Weill-Lévy, Grünberg and Glaus anticipated this development when they warned that the "spirit of equality" risked being neutralised by technocratic procedures. "Switzerland's image as a humanitarian nation" the authors wrote, "masks a deep continuity of discriminatory structures, concealed beneath the administrative language of order and efficiency" (Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 102). Two decades later, this diagnosis appears prophetic. The bureaucratisation of integration allowed racial hierarchies to persist without explicit reference to race, transforming what was once an ideology of foreign overpopulation into a moral economy of civility and discipline.

The consequences of Switzerland's evolving migration policies become visible in a series of political campaigns spanning from the late 20th century to the present. These campaigns illustrate not isolated episodes of racism, but rather its normalisation within public life. In fact, ACOR SOS Racisme (2014) described in a public statement this period as one in which "the life of the political sphere was polluted by racist and xenophobic slogans that raised no wave

of national indignation"[30]. The absence of broad resistance signalled not apathy but normalisation: racism had become a legitimate idiom of political expression, sanitised by appeals to security, sovereignty, and cultural integrity.

Long before highly visible campaigns such as the 2007 "black sheep" poster or the 2009 minaret ban (discussed in Chapter One), racist initiatives circulated within the political landscape, shaping debate and public perceptions even when they failed to pass. During the 1980s and 1990s, movements such as the Action Nationale repeatedly mobilised against 'foreign overpopulation' and mass immigration, while other proposals aimed to tighten asylum rules, citing risks of abuse. While many of these initiatives did not reach the ballot, they left a lasting imprint on the public imagination, signalling the persistence of hierarchical and racialised imaginaries that categorised foreigners according to presumed cultural and moral worth.

Maire (2023) highlights the continuity of this dynamic in the decades that followed. The UDC increasingly succeeded in bringing anti-foreign measures to a popular vote, culminating in the 2014 "Against Mass Immigration" initiative, which narrowly passed with 50.3% of the vote (Graf 2018). From a socio-historical perspective, the 2014 vote represented not a rupture but the culmination of long-standing patterns. The very vocabulary of "mass immigration" echoes the earlier fear of *Überfremdung*, updated for the neoliberal age. Piguet's statistical analyses confirm that this fantasy bears little resemblance to empirical reality. Between 2002 and 2014, immigration from EU countries consistently accounted for more than 60 percent of arrivals, while non-European migration remained stable or declined (Piguet 2017, 74-6). Nonetheless, public discourse portrayed the situation as an invasion of 'non-integrated' foreigners. The gap between data and perception underscores how xenophobia functions as a symbolic structure: a collective narrative that organises anxiety and projects it onto racialised others, while the underlying racial logic remains intact: a fantasy of national purity threatened by the uncontrolled influx of culturally alien bodies.

The rhetoric of these campaigns consistently invoked the dual framing typical of populist discourse: the first part of the message affirms support for 'real' refugees, thereby deflecting accusations of racism, while the second part condemns alleged abuses by 'fake' refugees, presenting strict measures as a solution to the supposed laxity of asylum enforcement. In this way, campaigns naturalised distinctions between deserving and undeserving migrants, embedding racism in the very logic of national belonging (Maire 2023, 11).

[30] https://asile.ch/2014/02/09/acor-sos-racisme-le-fantasme-de-limmigration-de-masse-sest-impose/

This continuity demonstrates that what is often labelled as 'xenophobia' in scholarship is not a series of isolated incidents, but a persistent and structurally racist feature underpinning migration governance. Piguet describes this phenomenon as a "background, yet controlled" element, suggesting that while xenophobic discourse did not always manifest in formal policy, it framed the terms of debate and justified administrative measures (Piguet 2017, 66-7). However, reading xenophobia merely as "controlled" risks underestimating the ongoing structural reproduction of racial hierarchies: legal reforms, administrative adjustments, and public rhetoric operated within a selective and hierarchical system, preserving patterns of inclusion and exclusion while appearing neutral or progressive. Seasonal workers were now legally allowed to reunite with family, and Switzerland's accession to the UN in 2002 required formal alignment with international norms, yet these changes coexisted with continued differentiation according to nationality, skill, and perceived cultural compatibility, effectively privileging those closest to Western, 'white' norms while maintaining the marginalisation of non-European or racially coded populations (Ibid., 69).

Thus, the evolution of Swiss migration policy demonstrates the coexistence of formal neutrality with systemic inequality. The rhetoric of integration, merit, and European identity served as instruments to justify differentiated treatment, codifying some migrants as fully legitimate members of the national community while relegating others to precarious, conditional, or symbolic forms of belonging. From the establishment of the *Office fédéral des étrangers* in 1917 to the implementation of the LEtr in 2008, Swiss institutions have continuously reproduced racialised hierarchies, adapting them to new demographic realities, international pressures, and neoliberal discourses of efficiency and competitiveness. Even as overtly racialised language receded from legal texts, the mechanisms of exclusion, stratification, and selective inclusion remained firmly embedded in the administrative and political machinery.

In this sense, the Swiss case illustrates how racial hierarchies can persist invisibly, through procedures, categories, and moralised expectations, rather than explicit declarations of superiority. Switzerland's migration policies embody a regime of differential inclusion: on one hand, the economy depends on a vast pool of foreign labour – over a quarter of the resident population holds foreign nationality. On the other, the discourse of integration continually re-inscribes them as provisional guests. This oscillation between dependence and exclusion is the constitutive contradiction of the Swiss racial order. Political campaigns, public discourse, and legal reform interact to normalise these hierarchies, making them appear as rational and technical. By integrating historical analysis with contemporary socio-political observation, this

continuity challenges the myth that Swiss racism is a recent populist aberration; it is an enduring structural force that shapes both the governance of migration and the moral imagination of the national community.

Furthermore, the Europeanisation of migration control has externalised Swiss racism beyond its borders. The country's participation in the Schengen/Dublin framework allows it to delegate asylum responsibilities to peripheral states while maintaining an image of humanitarianism. Piguet notes that deportations under the Dublin Regulation increased steadily after 2008, targeting primarily asylum seekers (2017, 80-1). These practices reproduce at the continental scale what can be identified domestically: a logic of graded humanity, in which rights are distributed according to geographic and racial proximity.

This externalisation also affects internal politics. As the boundaries of Europe harden against the Global South, the symbolic value of European identity rises, reinforcing domestic hierarchies. Migrants from Syria, Eritrea, or Afghanistan for example occupy the new frontier of alterity. The racial regime thus re-organises itself dynamically, preserving its structure while rotating its targets.

If the evolution of Swiss migration governance reveals the persistence of racial hierarchies beneath a veneer of neutrality, the institutional history of anti-racism exposes the same paradox from the opposite side. At the turn of the 21st century, the political and affective landscape of anti-racism in Switzerland was profoundly reconfigured. The solidarities forged in the factories and unions of the 1970s – where migrant and Swiss workers once confronted exploitation together – gradually gave way to more fragmented, bureaucratic, and institutionalised forms of engagement.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, Switzerland, like many European states, formalised its commitment to equality. The creation of the *Commission fédérale contre le racisme* (FCR) in 1995 epitomised this transformation. Emerging in the wake of the ICERD ratification and inspired by continental initiatives such as the Council of Europe's ECRI (1993) and the EU's EUMC (1997), the FCR embodied what Gargi Bhattacharyya (2020) calls the "managerialisation of anti-racism": the translation of moral and political struggle into administrative expertise. As part of a wider European moment that saw the emergence of equality bodies and anti-discrimination frameworks, the FCR signalled Switzerland's alignment with the global language of tolerance and human rights. Yet, as scholars such as Bhattacharyya (2020) and Lentin (2004) argue, this institutionalisation of anti-racism also

marked its conceptual narrowing. Anti-racism became managerial – a matter of awareness campaigns, intercultural dialogue, and expert reports – rather than a political struggle against structural domination. This redefinition confirmed Europe's transition toward a 'post-racial' self-image (Lentin 2020).

The coexistence of humanitarian rhetoric with racialised governance thus reveals the enduring limits of European anti-racism. Switzerland's commitment to fighting racism has produced valuable tools for documentation and awareness, yet it also stabilises a moral narrative of national innocence. In this sense, the afterlife of anti-racism, as Bhattacharyya (2020) suggests, lies in its capacity to reconcile moral accountability with structural continuity.

If the FCR and related initiatives represent the bureaucratic face of Switzerland's anti-racist turn, the world of labour reveals its material underside. The depoliticisation of anti-racism coincided with profound transformations in the Swiss labour market: the decline of the industrial sector, the flexibilisation of employment, and the growing stratification of migrant labour. Yet the workplace remains a key site where racial hierarchies are reproduced, contested, and sometimes reimagined. It is in this shifting terrain that trade unions are compelled to redefine their role: could anti-racism be understood not as a moral supplement to labour politics, but as one of its essential foundations?

5.2 Labor's Stand: Trade Unions and the Anti-Racist Imperative

> May Day in Geneva.
> The march had barely ended when I slipped away. I followed the sound of music toward the Parc des Bastions, where the mobilisation was meant to conclude. I was meeting members of the Geneva Collective of the Feminist Strike. Help them at their stand.
>
> There, the celebration was already underway. Rows of tables stretched on the grass – a patchwork of colours, banners, and smells. Each union had its own space: cooked dishes, leaflets, t-shirts and caps. The park was alive with the soft fatigue of the day's marchers, their voices mingling with the smell of grilled meat and fish and the hum of a sound system.
>
> Someone told me that if I wanted to understand anti-racism in the unions, I should speak to the people at the SIT stand. The *Syndicat Interprofessionnel des Travailleuses et des Travailleurs*.

I found them near the end of the row, under a white tent. A few members sat behind a table, smiling, unhurried. Their leaflets were stacked in careful piles. When I introduced myself, one of them smiled softly.
"*I don't know about anti-racism*," she said. "*Maybe because this union has always been with migrants*".

What does it mean, today, to be 'with'?

(Geneva, May 2025)

The SIT's origins trace back to the *Syndicats Chrétiens* (Cristian trade union), founded in the early 20th century in response to industrial transformations and the growing influence of socialist unionism. Influenced by the Catholic encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Christian unionism sought to reconcile labour rights with moral order, promoting dignity, justice, and cooperation rather than class conflict (Göldi 2012). In Geneva, the Federation of Cristian Trade Unions gradually expanded across sectors – from metalworkers and construction labourers to shop assistants and office employees – always emphasising the social vocation of work and mutual aid[31].

Yet, by the 1960s and 1970s, the Christian syndicalist framework began to lose traction. The cultural and political upheavals of the postwar decades – decolonisation, the rise of new social movements, secularisation, and growing migration – challenged its moral and organisational boundaries. Within the Geneva context, the *Syndicats Chrétiens* underwent a process of internal reflection and transformation, resulting in the founding of the *Syndicat Interprofessionnel des Travailleuses et des Travailleurs* (SIT) in 1986. As the SIT later recalled, this transformation was not a rupture, but a "necessary change" born of a desire to remain socially relevant in an increasingly plural society (SIT 1996, 7).

The decision to adopt an interprofessional structure – uniting workers across branches and trades – marked a profound redefinition of unionism. Rather than reproducing the corporatist logics that segmented labour representation, the SIT positioned itself as a transversal actor, capable of connecting struggles across occupations, genders, and nationalities. This interprofessionalism was not only a technical choice but an ethical one: it asserted that solidarity

[31] In this section, I draw on a combination of primary materials produced by the SIT itself, including texts written by union activists, and secondary academic analyses. For example, the publication "Histoires de Syndicats", *Bulletin d'information*, SIT, n. 3, 1996 provides first-hand insight into the union's perspective and practices. When read alongside interviews and scholarly works, these sources allow for a more nuanced understanding of the SIT's discourse and activities.

could not be limited to professional identity but must extend to all workers. As the SIT's 1996 leaflet put it, "the union is not a sum of trades, but a shared space of defence and dignity" (SIT 1996, 8).

Today, most unions are interprofessional in form, but in the late 1970s and 1980s – when the FSCG (*Fédération des Syndicats Chrétiens de Genève*) was beginning to interrogate its structure and define its future objectives – this was a significant innovation, a response to an urgent need for unity: "in practice, the mobilisation of activists tends to weaken as soon as its object moves away from the everyday framework of the company or of work" (Von Allmen, Steinauer 2003, pp. 230-1). The challenge was how to sustain collective engagement beyond the immediate, familiar space of one's own profession.

Equally important was the moral dimension of this project. As Von Allmen and Steinauer explain,

> the interprofessional ideal (...) would require that the efforts of the best-organised categories of workers and professional sectors make it possible to extend the union's action to the peripheries of the world of work, into zones of illegality and precarity. (Ibid., p. 231)

Their analysis follows the FSCG's general secretary's words, spoken at the 1981 congress, where he expressed this dilemma with striking clarity:

> "*There are saleswomen earning 16,000 francs a month, cleaning women working only a few hours a week, seamstresses, seasonal workers, undocumented workers, the unemployed – how can we possibly create a little unity among all of that? (…) How can we give substance to the obvious fact that the priority of trade union action is the defence of the weakest, of those least equipped to defend themselves, even if profitability suffers, even if the organisation gains little in prestige or in the number of members?*" (Cited in Von Allmen, Steinauer 2003, 231).

This passage captures the tension between unity and heterogeneity that lay at the heart of the SIT's interprofessional project. The FSCG leadership recognised that the social composition of the workforce had shifted: the paradigmatic industrial worker – male, stable, and unionised – wasn't representative of the working class as a whole. The challenge, as articulated here, was

to give 'body' to a new kind of unity, one capable of encompassing the fragmented realities of women, migrants, part-timers, and those excluded from formal labour protections.

Von Allmen and Steinauer's analysis is revealing. It conceives the "peripheries of the world of work" not as external to the labour movement, but as its ethical frontier – the point where solidarity is most tested and most necessary. From a theoretical standpoint, the notion of 'periphery' invoked in these debates resonates with broader discussions of marginality and invisibility in labour studies. Scholars such as Beverley Silver (2003) and Saskia Sassen (2002) have shown how global capitalism continuously produces new "zones of labour informality" – spaces of economic necessity and political disposability. As Silver argues in *Forces of Labor* (2003), capital's mobility and restructuring processes constantly relocate exploitation, creating peripheral sites where labour power is cheap, flexible, and unprotected. Sassen similarly observes that the 'informalisation' of work under globalisation does not occur outside the system, but 'within it', as a necessary counterpart to the formal economy (Sassen 2002). These peripheries are not geographical margins but social ones: they appear in the heart of prosperous urban centres, in the homes of the wealthy, in the subcontracted layers of hospitals and cleaning services, and in the hidden networks of care and reproduction.

In these spaces, workers – often women, migrants, or those without secure legal status – become structurally invisible even as their labour sustains the visible world of value and comfort. The 'periphery of work' is therefore not a distant frontier but a relational condition: it defines what counts as central by rendering other forms of labour precarious and unrecognised. To extend the union's reach to these peripheries, as the FSCG's documents proposed, was to confront this fundamental contradiction between visibility and invisibility, productivity and exclusion.

The FSCG's call to bring union action into zones of illegality and precarity thus anticipated a broader redefinition of solidarity. It meant rethinking the working class not as a stable or homogeneous subject, but as a heterogeneous assemblage of social positions – fragmented by status, gender, and citizenship, yet linked through relations of interdependence and exploitation. This vision aligns with Silver's analysis of labour movements adapting to structural transformations: when older forms of organisation lose efficacy, new forms of collective action emerge from the margins. For the FSCG, and later for the SIT, this was not only a strategic necessity but a moral imperative – an attempt to transform the union from a representative of established workers into a collective presence among those rendered peripheral by the economy and the law.

The general secretary's words are thus interesting here for two main reasons. First, they foreground the gendered reconfiguration of work that was transforming the social and political landscape of labour. The workers' struggles of the 1970s saw the active participation of many women, many whom were migrant, employed in the low-paid or invisible sectors of the economy: textile and watch-making industries, cleaning, retail, and the broader domestic economy. Their presence challenged the union's traditional boundaries, forcing it to recognise that the margins of labour were also its most vital frontlines. These forms of work were not only 'reproductive' in the sense of unpaid housework: they occupied a structural position – what Silvia Federici (2004; 2012) calls the "hidden infrastructure of accumulation". By organising cleaners, caretakers, and service workers, the FSCG and later the SIT began to politicise the domestic economy – the labour of maintenance and care that underpins both household and market economies. Federici's analysis is crucial here: she insists that the struggle to make reproductive and care work visible is not only about recognition but about redistribution – the demand that these forms of labour be valued, protected, and collectively defended.

Second, the FSCG's discourse was deeply marked by its Christian social heritage, a legacy that shaped both its moral vocabulary and its representational politics. As Von Allmen and Steinauer note, the Federation's ideological foundations lay in "social Christianity" (*christianisme social*), a tradition that combined moral concern for the vulnerable with a commitment to justice and cooperation (Von Allmen, Steinauer 2003, 229). Yet, as historians of Catholic social thought have shown (Hatzfeld, 1987; McLeod, 2007), this form of engagement was never free of hierarchy. Its call to defend 'the weakest' was inseparable from a paternalistic ethos that positioned the helper as morally superior to the helped. In seeking to humanise capitalism rather than transform it, social Christianity often moralised inequality instead of politicising it.

This ambivalence was clearly visible in the FSCG's own campaigns. As discussed in Chapter Four, the *Être Solidaires* materials and public leaflets reproduced a visual and discursive grammar of compassion that cast the migrant – particularly the seasonal worker – as a figure of need, dependence, and gratitude. Such representations fit within what Luc Boltanski (1999) describes as the "politics of pity": a moral relationship that makes suffering visible but keeps the sufferer in a subordinate position, an object of empathy. This ambivalence was not incidental: it reflected the broader logic of social Christianity, where care and control were intertwined. The ethical duty to defend 'the weakest' could easily slip into a politics of benevolent tutelage.

At the same time, this moral repertoire provided the affective and organisational infrastructure through which the SIT would later emerge. The union inherited from the FSCG both its language of compassion and its capacity for proximity – the insistence that solidarity must be enacted in the everyday, not merely proclaimed in principle. However, as Geneva's labour landscape diversified and secularised, the SIT gradually sought to move beyond the paternalistic moralism of Christian social action. The 1986 name change, from the *Syndicats Chrétiens* to the *Syndicat Interprofessionnel des Travailleuses et des Travailleurs* (SIT), marked this transition. It signalled not only the formal abandonment of denominational identity but also a deeper reorientation: from a moral duty to 'help' the poor and migrant toward a secular ethics of equality, grounded in political empowerment and collective agency. The SIT thus transformed a tradition of care for others into a practice of 'being with others' – a shift from charity to political solidarity.

This re-orientation allowed the SIT to enter domains often excluded from traditional labour organising. During the 1980s and 1990s, it developed significant activity in the construction, cleaning, and domestic work sectors, where Geneva's dependence on migrant labour was most visible yet rendered invisible. The union's presence in these sectors was grounded in a practical recognition: precariousness and informality were not marginal aberrations but structural features of the economy. As the SIT described retrospectively, its mission was to be "alongside those whom other organisations ignored" – advocating for groups frequently disregarded by both government institutions and major trade unions (SIT 1996, 11).

This orientation required an organisational style attuned to difference and relationality. The SIT's offices became multilingual and intercultural spaces, hosting meetings where many languages mingled in the same room. Legal counselling, collective bargaining, and informal mediation were interwoven in everyday practice. The union became a node linking workers, associations and other institutions and human rights organisations. The SIT was an ally capable of translating street-level mobilisation into durable negotiation.

The SIT's identity thus evolved as a hybrid between social movement and professional institution – a position that made it both agile and vulnerable. Its members invoked a "*solidarité à bas seuil*", a low-threshold solidarity, meaning accessibility without bureaucratic gatekeeping. In this sense, the SIT embodied a politics enacted through accompaniment and witnessing, rather than detached representation. To be "with migrants" meant maintaining a proximity that enabled collective agency.

By the early 2000s, as Switzerland integrated further into the European economy, the social geography of work in Geneva became sharply polarised. The liberalisation of labour mobility for EU citizens contrasted with the restrictive regime imposed on non-European migrants. In the city's domestic and cleaning sectors, thousands of undocumented people – many of them women from Latin America, the Philippines, and West Africa – worked in private homes.

For the SIT, this situation raised both practical and political questions: how to represent workers who do not legally exist as workers? How to articulate claims to rights in a framework that criminalises the subjects of those claims? The union's long experience in interprofessional organising provided one answer: through visibility as a collective practice. In campaigns and legal interventions, undocumented workers appeared not as isolated victims but as workers with names, occupations, and demands. This strategic visibility, however, coexisted with the persistent risk of exposure and deportation.

Here, the SIT's work illuminates the complex interplay between visibility and invisibility that structures contemporary anti-racism. Following Alana Lentin (2020), racism in liberal contexts operates not through open exclusion but through conditional recognition – the right to be visible only under certain moral or civic terms. The SIT's engagement with undocumented workers thus navigated this paradox: it sought to make exploitation visible while protecting individuals from punitive scrutiny. The tension between legalisation and surveillance, between empowerment and control, was never fully resolved.

This tension reached its most institutional expression in the *Papyrus Project*, launched in 2017 as a pilot program to regularise undocumented workers in Geneva. Officially, the project was a collaboration between the Canton of Geneva, the Swiss Confederation, the SIT, and several local associations. Unofficially, it represented the culmination of two decades of bottom-up advocacy by migrant organisations and the union's persistent documentation of informal work.

To grasp how this process was lived and interpreted from within the union, the following testimony by Thierry, a long-standing SIT trade unionist, captures the trajectory of *Papyrus* as both culmination and turning point. His reflections illuminate the militant memory and affective labour behind the initiative – its origins in local organising, its compromises with state rationalities, and its enduring contradictions.

> "*Honestly, Papyrus was extraordinary. It represents twenty years of struggle. It shows that it works. It brings money into the public coffers, and it gets people out of precarity. We launched this around 2000, maybe 2001. That's when we opened the offices with the collective. For fifteen years, we fought every single case, step by step, intervening with*

the State Council, asking for experts, everything. It was a long fight, but we built something solid".

(Thierry)

The SIT's archives and publications complement Thierry's account and reveal how the project drew directly on the union's accumulated expertise. Its members meticulously collected cases, contracts, and testimonies to demonstrate that Geneva's economy relied on the systematic exploitation of undocumented labour, particularly in domestic and cleaning work. These data became crucial in the negotiations that eventually led to *Papyrus*.

"*The SIT has always defended the most precarious workers – it's written in our statutes. First, we fought against the seasonal-worker system and the barriers it created. Later, we started seeing more and more undocumented workers, especially in domestic work. They were being expelled overnight. That's when we began organising differently.*

We created the 'bureaux des sans-papiers', the offices for undocumented workers, and introduced the idea that if someone was arrested, they could say, "*Call my union, they will defend my rights, my wages*". *It started spreading by word of mouth. People came to fill out forms, to make themselves known. Around 2003, we submitted the first 250 files collectively. That's how it began.*

Whenever there was a refusal, we didn't tell people, '*Too bad, you have to leave*'. *We fought. We called the police, we argued – it was always a struggle. It's part of our history.*

Later, other organisations took over, and we regret that a bit. I don't want to criticise Unia Geneva or Unia National – they had their reasons – but they never really pushed for regularisation. For us, that was essential. Even in joint inspection commissions, we always said: inspectors will never report undocumented workers. That principle comes from the SIT, twenty years ago. Now it's embedded in the system.

For undocumented people, those first offices were incredible. Of course, the paperwork was heavy – six-page forms – but the key was trust. We told everyone: "*We don't check, we don't report. We just want to know who you are, how long you've been here, what you do*". *At the first General Assembly, people asked if they had to give their real names. At first, a few stayed anonymous, but soon everyone wanted to come out of the shadows. They trusted us.*

We kept all the files in our offices – 4,500 of them. It was crazy. But it worked. Today in Geneva, undocumented workers know that we won't denounce them. In the past, inspections could cause panic – people even jumped out of windows thinking they were being checked. Once, we had to shout from the windows to stop them. It shows how far we've come".

(Thierry)

Under the *Papyrus* scheme, workers who had resided in Geneva for several years, maintained stable employment, and demonstrated integration could apply for a temporary residence permit. Between 2017 and 2019, over 2,300 people were regularised, most of them women in cleaning or care jobs. The project was presented by cantonal authorities as both humanitarian and pragmatic: it promised to clean up the labour market – by replacing irregularity with legality.

Yet from a critical perspective, the *Papyrus Project*, especially once defended by the authorities, also reproduced certain ambiguities of liberal anti-racism. By translating the struggle for equality into a question of integration and respectability, it extended recognition only to those who met the criteria of moral worthiness – continuous employment, family stability, etc. Those who failed to fit these norms remained invisible.

The SIT's role in *Papyrus* was both instrumental and ambivalent. On one hand, it provided the trust infrastructure that made the scheme possible: helping workers assemble dossiers, verifying contracts, and mediating with employers. Its offices became sites of bureaucratic empowerment – spaces where migrants could translate their lived experience into administrative legibility. On the other hand,

> "*after Papyrus, the State Secretariat for Migration said they were open implement to similar projects elsewhere. But that was it: no follow-up, no new programs. Still, we established criteria that didn't exist before: five years of residence for families, ten for individuals, no criminal record beyond irregular stay, and proof of employment and integration. Those criteria remain today, at least informally.*
>
> *In practice, though, many people still fall through the cracks. Now, to be regularised, you need to be "cleaner than the Swiss" – no mistakes, no debt, no problems. The Papyrus report was good, the evaluation was positive, but everything stopped there. It's like we have to start all over again*".
>
> (Thierry)

The SIT's experience compels a rethinking of what anti-racism means within the world of work. Rather than a discourse of moral correction or cultural sensitivity, it emerges here as a practice of redistribution and recognition, enacted through concrete struggles over wages, contracts, and residence permits. In the union's everyday work, the vocabulary of anti-racism rarely appears explicitly, yet its material stakes are omnipresent.

From this perspective, the SIT's position can be understood as a form of embedded anti-racism – an orientation that acts upon the racialised structure of labour without always naming race itself. This resonates with Étienne Balibar's idea of "borders within" (2009): the diffusion of border regimes into everyday spaces of work and welfare. The SIT's interventions – whether

in a domestic worker's kitchen, a construction site, or a cantonal office – directly confront these internal borders, seeking to transform the social conditions that sustain racial differentiation.

At the same time, the SIT's trajectory highlights the limits of institutional anti-racism. The very mechanisms that enable recognition can also neutralise critique. *Papyrus*, for all its successes, risked depoliticising migrant struggles by translating them into administrative categories of integration. As Sara Ahmed (2012) warns, diversity and inclusion often function as technologies of comfort, absorbing dissent into bureaucratic forms of care. The SIT's challenge, then, is to maintain a politics of solidarity that resists this moral domestication – to remain 'with migrants' not only as advocates of their inclusion, but as allies in their critique of the system that produces exclusion in the first place.

The SIT's century-long evolution – from Christian syndicalism to interprofessional unionism, from moral duty to militant solidarity – offers a lens through which to understand the contemporary recalibration of race and anti-racism in Switzerland. Its interprofessional model prefigured an understanding of labour as relational and transnational, while its collaborations with migrant redefined the boundaries of collective action. Projects like *Papyrus* demonstrate both the potential and the paradoxes of institutionalising solidarity: they make visible the racialised foundations of the labour market while simultaneously translating them into governable forms.

If the SIT's trajectory reveals the possibility of an embedded anti-racism – while also acknowledging its limits – it is worth looking at other trade unions that operate within less exceptional frames. In many cases, race and migration have remained structurally central to the composition of the workforce, yet marginal in the vocabulary through which unions describe their own activity.

> "*One of my colleagues is really great, she's done a lot of work on anti-racism and intersectionality, which are very real and important issues. She's the one who really pushed for the union to take a position on Black Lives Matter. She's always the one insisting, 'We need to talk about anti-racism, we need to stop framing everything as just about migration'. Meanwhile, our head of department, who's also the secretary for migration, doesn't have a critical discourse like that at all. His approach is much more standard, traditional union talk.*
>
> *When I first started working in unions, in Unia*[32] *more specifically – and I sort of expected it, but still – I realised they had never even heard the term 'racialised'. So obviously, some issues are just not framed in that way here.*

[32] Unia is the largest trade union in Switzerland. It represents the interests of employees in the private sector.

Same thing when in February 2020 I had to make a text for March 8th. I wrote it the way I was used to, coming from my activist background – I wrote things like 'women', then 'migrant women', etc. And the head of communications at the time literally took the paper from me, crossed out every time I mentioned 'migrant women', and told me 'No, no. We want to speak to everyone here'. That was his position – and it reflects what others think too, clearly. And that, to me, says a lot about the whole situation.

So basically, it is a non-topic – which is all the more interesting when you consider, and this is backed by numbers, that Unia is actually the largest organisation of migrants in Switzerland. If I'm not mistaken, about 60% of Unia members are not Swiss. And that doesn't even count binational people or those who've been naturalised. How many white Swiss people do we really have in Unia? Not many.

And yes, there was a time in history when unions were more directly involved in migrant struggles. But today, it's an issue that comes even after feminism in terms of priority.

In general, militantism fades. It is more about membership. Unions are actors fully integrated into the framework of social partnership. They defend the social partnership. We're not really organising that many strikes – because it often stalls when it comes to actually organising strikes on the ground. In discourse, it's all: yes, we're combative, we want to act, we want to do things, etc. Okay. But I have colleagues on the ground who've told me: 'I wanted to launch a strike, and my supervisor said: wait, not like this, not like that,' and so on. And it's kind of the same thing when it comes to feminist or anti-racist issues. It's like: 'Yes yes, that's great', but then nothing follows, and there's no in-depth work being done. And it is worse when it comes to racism".

(Aude)

Aude, a militant within Unia and the Swiss Trade Union Federation, speaks from within the institutional heart of organised labour. Her testimony exposes what Sara Ahmed (2012) calls the "non-performativity" of institutional commitments to diversity: the way organisations can invoke equality or inclusion without transforming the structures that reproduce inequality. Within Swiss trade unions, race operates through what Alana Lentin (2020) identifies as "not racism", a depoliticised and ahistorical grammar that displaces the systemic nature of racism. This silence, or more precisely, this erasure, is not neutral; it is an active form of institutional whitening, sustained by the social partnership model that privileges consensus over conflict. The absence of race from the union's official discourse is thus not a void but a structuring condition or an "orientation" (Ahmed 2007) shaping who can speak, who is heard, and whose struggles become legible within the frame of legitimate labour politics.

In the congress hall, around three hundred people from across Switzerland had gathered: trade unionists, militants, delegates. For three days, they debated, voted, discussed.

When I introduced myself, many smiled kindly and said, half-joking, half-apologetic, "*I'm not sure you will find much about anti-racism here*". During the first days, I began to wonder if they were right. The sessions moved from one procedural motion to another – membership, budgets, recruitment, by laws.

I sat, listened, took notes. I started to think that perhaps the meaning of this fieldwork lay elsewhere – not in the topics of the discussions, but in the words that were missing, precisely in this absence, in what could not be said.

Then, one afternoon, the tone shifted. A "break" from bureaucracy, they announced – a moment to remember the strikes. A handful of trade unionists took the stage, one after another, to recall recent moments of struggle: of the care staff at the hospital, of the workers at the airport, and others. Each had only a few minutes. Behind them, on the large screen, photos appeared: women, men, arms raised, faces proud, tired, joyful. The room clapped. Another photo, another short speech, more applause. Then the session ended, and we returned to membership.

But something stayed with me. On the screen, most of the workers were racialised. In the room, almost everyone was white. For a moment, the contrast was visible – almost painfully – and then it dissolved again into the calm of the congress hall. The applause covered the silence. The victories were celebrated, but the bodies that carried them – their colours, their stories, their precariousness – slipped back into the background.

In that moment, race was everywhere, even if not named. It was in the photographs, in the room, in the quiet continuity of a structure that could look at these images and not see them.

(Locarno, Novembre 2023)

This moment condensed what might be called the racial unconscious of trade unionism: a structure of perception that makes race both hypervisible and unspeakable. The congress celebrated strikes led largely by migrant and racialised workers – those who clean hospitals, load planes, and care for the elderly – yet their racialised positions within the labour hierarchy remained unacknowledged. Instead, these struggles were absorbed into a universal vocabulary of 'workers' unity' and 'collective strength'. Such language, while appearing inclusive, effectively reproduces the "colour-blind regime of the political" (Lentin 2020) – a mode of

solidarity that denies the structuring role of race in the very composition of the working class. In this sense, the congress's silence was not incidental but symptomatic: it reflected a form of post-racial unionism in which exploitation is recognised, but its racialisation is disavowed.

This colour-blindness is not simply ideological; it is institutional. As Bhambra (2015) argues, the European social imaginary remains anchored in a conception of citizenship and labour that presumes a homogeneous national subject, even as post-colonial and migrant workers sustain its material foundations. The tension I observed in Locarno – between the racialised figures on the screen and the white delegates in the room – made this contradiction visible for an instant before it was reabsorbed into the grammar of class.

Throughout the Congress, the most significant political expressions often emerged outside the institutional frame. While the official discourse appeared anesthetised – procedural, managerial, and couched in the neutral language of membership and representation – informal conversations among delegates revealed a much denser political texture. It was in these peripheral spaces that experiences of migration, precarity, and solidarity were articulated more openly, as lived histories rather than abstract positions. Beyond the formal proceedings of the congress, everyday trade-union activity unfolds in a far less codified terrain – one that mixes the pragmatic and the political, negotiation and conviction. Conversations with trade unionists such as Jamshid (SSP), a long-time organiser at Geneva Airport, reveal the lived contradictions of contemporary unionism: the tension between bureaucratic reproduction and the desire for collective struggle.

> "*These congresses are full of beautiful resolutions – support for this cause, or that campaign against pesticides – but most of them remain on paper. What really matters is how we mobilise people on the ground to win concrete gains. That's the union, really – something very down-to-earth*".
>
> (Jamshid)

Jamshid contrasted this pragmatic ethos with what he saw as a drift toward depoliticised managerialism in parts of the Swiss labour movement. He criticised recruitment methods that rely on external agencies to sign up members in the street, without building collective consciousness:

> "*Some unions pay companies to recruit. They send people in branded jackets to collect signatures. But that's not how you build a union. People join when they feel the fight is*

> *theirs – when they believe that struggle is worth it, that we decide together what we demand*".
>
> (Jamshid)

For Jamshid, membership grows from struggle, not from marketing. Trade unionism is not an administrative structure or a moral stance, but a concrete practice of unity in a world organised to divide. He recalled the strike at Geneva Airport, the one he presented at the Congress in Locarno. What stayed with him was not only the victory but the transformation of those who took part:

> "*Many had never been on strike before. They used to say, 'This is my job for life, I'll leave at sixty-five'. But then they were attacked – a 2.5% pay cut, despite record profits – and something changed. Through assemblies, open debates, votes – they became brave. They realised they could resist*".
>
> (Jamshid)

The airport itself, he explained, functions as a laboratory of division: layers of subcontracting, multiplicity of employers, cross-border workers commuting daily from France, and a complex hierarchy of wages and statuses. These structural fragmentations are visible – those who occupy the most precarious and lowest-paid positions are predominantly migrants and racialised workers, often invisible within the institutional imagination of the labour movement. Against this backdrop, Jamshid insists on a form of organising that reclaims proximity and participation as political tools:

> "*The union must give people the feeling that the struggle is theirs. That we decide together what we demand, and that fighting is worth it. That's what makes people join – not campaigns or leaflets, but the sense that we can win together*".
>
> (Jamshid)

His account situates the collective experience of struggle as the foundation of solidarity. The strike at Geneva Airport, he recalled, was unprecedented: for the first time in the history of Swiss aviation, all flights were grounded. "*You could hear the birds*", he said, evoking the uncanny silence that followed the cessation of engines. Many of the participants had never been on strike before. The courage that emerged among them marked by a process of political subjectivation (Rancière 1992) – the moment when those previously unseen as political actors assert themselves collectively, disrupting the existing distribution of visibility and power. His

reflections connected the experience of the strike to broader questions of political agency – how fear turns into courage, and passivity into collective agency. Drawing on his memories of the Iranian revolution, he continued:

> "*I was eighteen during the revolution. One day, people who had been silent for years became courageous. They went into the streets, saying 'freedom, democracy'. How does a silent, oppressed mass suddenly become courageous? What makes people, one day, say 'enough'? I saw it there, and I saw it here – when the workers voted, almost unanimously, to strike. That's the moment of transformation*".
>
> (Jamsid)

In this reflection, the strike becomes a space of political subjectivation, echoing Frantz Fanon's (1952; 1963) description of struggle as the moment when the colonised subject becomes visible to themselves and to others. For Jamshid, solidarity must also be sustained beyond moments of confrontation. He dreams of creating spaces of sociality and mutual recognition:

> "*In other countries, there are houses of the unions. Here, we have none. Why not create a space where workers can meet, drink something, and talk – even if they belong to different unions? We share adversaries; we should share a space*".
>
> (Jamshid)

Such a vision of conviviality contests the neoliberal fragmentation of time, work, and belonging that defines the airport's spatial logic. Yet, Jamshid's commitment to solidarity also takes the form of individual anti-racist struggles, often against the inertia of institutions. He recounted the case of a Senegalese worker, the only Black woman in her team, who was dismissed after denouncing racist and sexist harassment in a workplace WhatsApp group:

> "*She sent me hundreds of screenshots – nauseating messages. She never reacted, she just tried to keep a good atmosphere. When we defended her, I made enemies. Three of those men are still there. They say the union attacked them, that we went too far. But what matters is that the management did nothing. They have excellent rules on paper, but nothing changes on the ground. She was fired for speaking up*".
>
> (Jamshid)

The episode[33] reveals the structural dimension of what he calls "the culture of silence" surrounding racism and sexism at the workplace – a silence protected by managerial neutrality. When Jamshid denounced this in the press, invoking "a culture of racism and rape", the airport's director responded publicly, accusing him of "French-style trade-unionism", a phrase loaded with national and racist undertones in the Swiss context. Jamshid and a colleague later traced the director's lineage to the slave trade in Le Havre, bringing to light how colonial histories remain sedimented in contemporary labour relations.

In this confrontation, the personal, the institutional, and the colonial intersect. The airport appears not only as a node of global circulation, but as a microcosm of post-colonial Europe – where the racialised division of labour, managerial whiteness, and economic competition between workers reproduce older hierarchies of domination. Jamshid's militant practice thus enacts a form of anticolonial trade unionism, one that connects everyday struggles – against subcontracting, wage disparity, or racist dismissal – to the longer histories of exploitation that underpin them.

His insistence that "*racism and sexism have no place here*" does not derive from ideological proclamation but from the lived ethics of solidarity: an attempt to make the workplace a space of equality in practice, not only in discourse. In doing so, he challenges both the neoliberal economy of division and the inherited universalism of European trade unionism, suggesting that the future of labour politics may well depend on those who, like him, learn to organise across difference – in the shadow of colonial continuities, and in the pursuit of a shared dignity.

As revealed through Jamshid's interview, many of the trade unionists encountered in this research, are themselves first- or second-generation migrants, and in some cases third. Their biographies exemplify how contemporary unionism is shaped by post-migratory experiences that blur the distinction between 'native' and 'migrant' labour. Attending to these situated accounts makes it possible to understand race and migration not as external to class politics, but as constitutive of its everyday forms and vocabularies. Thierry, for instance, recalled that his first encounter with racism occurred during childhood, when he played football with Italian boys who were routinely excluded and mocked – at a time when Italians occupied the position

[33] The worker, supported by the Public Service Union (SSP/VPOD) and her lawyer, Leïla Batou, later won her case. The Geneva Court of Justice confirmed the abusive nature of her dismissal (*RTS Info*, 21 October 2025). See: https://www.rts.ch/info/regions/geneve/2025/article/geneve-aeroport-licenciement-abusif-confirme-apres-harcelement-moral-et-sexiste-29035328.html

of stigmatised outsiders in Swiss society. Such early experiences of marginalisation informed his later commitment to anti-racist practices within the workplace. Attending to such biographies reframes the understanding of trade unionism itself. Rather than an abstract field of institutional negotiation, it emerges as a living fabric woven from multiple, intersecting trajectories of displacement, work, and struggle. The everyday politics of solidarity described by Jamshid, Thierry and many others are carried through the narratives of those who have traversed the marginalised categories. In their words, the boundaries between the personal and the political collapse into one another. This attention to lived experience leads to the stories of organisers such as Mirella, whose trajectory further exemplifies how gender, migration, and class intersect in the making of an anti-racist and feminist union practice.

> "*After finishing university, I registered for unemployment. I chose the SIT's unemployment fund, and so I joined the union. When I completed my master's degree in gender studies – thirty years ago now – I was looking for a place where theory could actually be applied. The SIT had a women's commission, so I joined it as an activist. For several years, I was active in the union through this commission – participating in meetings, in congresses, in everything.*
>
> *For me, the SIT was a place that defended undocumented workers and manual workers. I come for a masons' family, so it made sense for me to be there.*
>
> *Later, I worked for about ten years at the Université ouvrière de Genève* [the Workers' University of Geneva], *teaching French to migrants. So there's a whole professional path linked to migration.*
>
> *From the beginning, I had studied sociology and gender studies. And then, at some point, a position opened up here. In my previous job, as coordinator of volunteers, I didn't have the freedom to stay close enough to people – to accompany them fully, all the way through.*
>
> *Someone said to me,* '*Why don't you come and work here?*' *Since I was already somewhat involved in the milieu, that's how I started working here fifteen years ago.*
>
> *At first, I was in the public sector team – everything related to public administration, health, and social care. I moved through several sectors for about eight years. Then, there was the possibility to take charge of organising – because that's the term we use – organising and defending the people who work in domestic labour.*
>
> *For me, that brought together everything I had done before at the UOG: teaching French, working with migrants, being in the union, organising workers in sectors that are hard to organise but that have real potential.*
>
> *Many of the women who arrive and work as domestic employees – a large part of them, at least – have university education in their home countries, or professional experience. After a rupture in their life paths, they migrate around the age of forty.*
>
> *There's commitment, there's potential. So, about six or seven years ago – I think in 2019 – I changed sectors and took charge of organising in domestic work*".

(Mirella)

This shift toward the everyday and the biographical is not simply methodological; it also reflects the very texture of trade unionism in contemporary Switzerland. The boundary between professional activism and lived experience is often porous, and many union organisers come to their roles through trajectories marked by migration, care work, and political education. Mirella's account of everyday union practice further reveals how this work is sustained through a combination of case-by-case defence and collective organisation:

> "*Of course, there is the individual defence work – people come to tell us about what happened to them, we contact employers, we try to put things back in order. Often, these workers are undeclared, which creates gaps in their social security or unpaid wages. We try to recover what we can – never 100%, but at least to restore a bit of balance with respect to the past.*
>
> *Then there's the organising work: trying to understand what the real problems are. Some are transversal, others are specific to a community. Once a month, on Saturday afternoons, we hold a meeting where we discuss working conditions – what needs to be updated, what's missing from the collective agreement. Even if it's difficult, we try to name things, because that's how we learn to defend ourselves. Around ten to twenty people come regularly.*
>
> *These meetings mix communities – Latin American, Filipino, African. Some don't speak French very well, but it becomes a space to share, to find words, to strengthen our ability to resist.*
>
> *Since 2019, the domestic work sector has delegates who sit on the central committee of the SIT, which meets every month. They bring the positions from our meetings to the central level and take part in union-wide decisions. That's how the structure works: sectorial committees feed into the central committee, and we, at the secretariat level, coordinate.*
>
> *This also creates encounters – for example, domestic workers meet members from construction or public administration. It creates energy. Everyone then participates in major demonstrations – March 8, June 14, May 1. We also organise specific days for domestic work, on June 16 and October 18, the international day against trafficking, because domestic work is one of the sectors most exposed to this kind of exploitation. Each year we remind the public that, in Switzerland too, labour exploitation is a reality we confront daily*".

(Mirella)

Mirella's account can be read through the lens of what has been described as infrastructures of solidarity – the everyday forms, networks, and affects that sustain collective life within precarious worlds of labour (Featherstone 2012). These infrastructures do not merely respond

to exploitation; they constitute alternative modes of political presence and belonging. As Nicholas De Genova (2017) has argued, the politics of migration often emerge in the tension between invisibility and insurgent visibility – between the racialised management of labour and the practices through which workers assert their existence as social and political subjects. Within the SIT, these dynamics take material form: in the weekly meetings, in the translation of rights into shared vocabularies, and in the slow construction of mutual recognition among workers who occupy different yet connected positions within Switzerland's segmented labour regime.

While Mirella's narrative illuminates the solidaristic infrastructures that sustain collective action in precarious and feminised sectors such as domestic work, the experience of workers and organisers within larger trade unions such as Unia opens another perspective on visibility, precarity, and the politics of labour representation in Switzerland.

Unia is the largest trade union in Switzerland, representing more than 180,000 members across diverse sectors including construction, industry, retail, and personal services. It emerged in 2004 from the merger of several federations and has since played a central role in collective bargaining and in defending labour rights in contexts increasingly shaped by sub-contracting, cross-border labour mobility, and the deregulation of working conditions. While Unia possesses considerable institutional recognition and bargaining power – especially in sectors such as construction – its organisers also face the growing challenge of reaching workers whose labour has become fragmented, informal, and spatially dispersed.

It is in this context that Maurizio, a trade unionist of Italian origin working within Unia's construction branch, reflects on the transformations of visibility and control in his daily work. His testimony points to the ways in which even historically 'strong' sectors of trade unionism – such as the building industry – are affected by new forms of invisibilisation linked to the dynamics of subcontracting, informalisation, and the privatisation of labour spaces.

> "*In the end, it's the authorities who can exert real pressure. If the canton tells a company, 'either you regularise your chain of subcontractors or you lose access to public works', then things move, because there is political pressure that we manage to exert thanks to our sustained presence and the legitimacy of our union work. Yet, legally, our power has weakened.*
>
> *There was a campaign – effective to a certain degree – but it didn't solve the problem, it merely shifted it. The very precarious workers we used to see on large construction sites a few years ago, doing ironwork, have not disappeared. But now we*

find them elsewhere: in painting, tiling, and renovation work, hidden inside apartments. These are spaces that are… not visible to us.

On big construction sites, visibility is total – you walk by, you see the scaffolding, the cranes, the workers. But in private apartments, even large ones, people can work for years without anyone knowing. That's why I would say that undeclared work hasn't disappeared, it has simply moved. We no longer have access to the kind of 'public' worksites where labour violations were once visible and denunciable".

(Maurizio)

Maurizio's account underscores a profound transformation in the material and spatial organisation of labour – and consequently, in the very terrain of trade union intervention. Whereas construction work historically constituted a paradigmatic visible form of labour – public, collective, and symbolically charged as a locus of male industrial presence – many of its contemporary forms have shifted toward private and invisible sites. This process of invisibilisation does not simply refer to the physical seclusion of workplaces; it also entails a social and political disconnection. The undeclared or informal labour that Maurizio describes escapes the institutional gaze of both the state and the unions. As subcontracting chains multiply, responsibility becomes diffused: principal contractors outsource tasks to intermediaries, who in turn employ workers informally or through opaque arrangements. In this fragmented landscape, accountability is systematically displaced – no actor appears directly responsible for the conditions of those at the bottom of the chain.

For trade unionists such as Maurizio, this shift generates a double challenge. On the one hand, it restricts access to workplaces, making it difficult to meet workers face-to-face, to build trust, and to weave networks of collective organisation. On the other, it erodes the symbolic visibility of labour struggles themselves, complicating the traditional infrastructures of solidarity that unions rely upon: public presence, physical co-presence, and shared occupational identity. Whereas Mirella's organising among domestic workers involves the patient construction of collective voice within a sector historically devalued and hidden, Maurizio's experience shows how invisibility also emerges within sectors that were once central to the visibility of the labour movement itself.

In both cases, invisibility is not a mere absence but an effect of power – a condition actively produced through legal, spatial, and economic arrangements that displace responsibility and obscure exploitation. Reconstructing visibility, then, becomes a key task of contemporary trade unionism in Switzerland: a work of reweaving connections across fragmented labour spaces and people.

The case of Aymen reveals another dimension of invisibility and experimentation within Unia, this time in the logistics sector. Aymen's trajectory is itself emblematic of the porous boundaries between research, activism, and organising. Coming from an academic background, where he had conducted ethnographic work with workers and unemployed people in post-revolutionary Tunisia, Aymen joined Unia as part of a newly created team charged with developing experimental forms of organising in precarious and hard-to-reach sectors – most notably logistics and platform-based delivery work. This initiative emerged from a resolution voted at a congress in 2017-2018. For several years, around ten organisers across Switzerland were freed from standard bureaucratic duties to focus exclusively on community-building and grassroots organising. Although the project has since been discontinued, it left a strong legacy in regions such as western Switzerland, where Aymen and his colleagues managed to establish durable networks among logistics and delivery workers. In his account, Aymen describes the specific opportunities and constraints of this work:

> "*What interested me was precisely that, in logistics, there were no predefined boundaries, where you could experiment freely as long as you could capture workers' attention. Precarity is concentrated in spaces that escape collective agreements, such as Uber. During the campaigns we ran – like the Smood strike*[34] *– we experienced levels of radicalism that would be unthinkable in the traditional Swiss union landscape. It was a moment of controlled openness: everyone knew that these sectors had escaped both state and union control. So when a possibility for mobilisation appeared, even the union bureaucracy supported it – there was nothing to lose, everything to gain.*
>
> *These workers come from everywhere, the post-colonial South of all continents, as I like to say: Maghrebi, Sub-Saharan African, Latin American, some Eastern Europeans, but few Swiss. Organising them was difficult because the work was completely atomised. The few moments of collective mobilisation were always linked to forms of sociability outside work: workers waiting together for deliveries, helping each other move apartments, meeting for coffee. Those small ties were crucial for breaking isolation.*
>
> *The strike gave them a different kind of visibility. Suddenly, the public heard the voices of single mothers, young migrants, retiree – stories that are usually unheard. We started to publish anonymous testimonies online and in the media, and some workers even spoke publicly on television or at events. The idea was to make them visible not only as victims but as political subjects capable of speaking for themselves.*
>
> *Most of my work happened outside the union office – 70% of my meetings took place in cafés, public spaces, even in my own garden. This approach was specific to our*

[34] https://unia.ch/fr/actualites/article/a/18588

*mandate: we were tasked only with collective organising, not case-by-case defence work. Unfortunately, the national project ended after a few years, but here, locally, we've managed to keep the spirit aliv*e".

(Aymen)

Aymen's account offers a vivid insight into the experimental side of contemporary unionism. The logistics sector, encompassing parcel delivery, ride-hailing, and food distribution, represents one of the most precarious and rapidly expanding domains of the Swiss economy. It is shaped by platform capitalism and the reorganisation of labour through digital infrastructures that fragment and individualise work. Unlike construction or manufacturing, logistics lacks a stable workplace or collective space of encounter: work is performed 'in transit', on the move, or within algorithmically managed systems that obscure relations of subordination and responsibility.

In this context, Aymen's organising practice had to unfold largely outside the physical and institutional walls of the union, where trust could emerge and a fragile sense of community could take shape. These practices reflect what has been described in the literature as "community unionism" or "social movement unionism" (Wills 2002; Milkman, Voss 2004): forms of organising that rely on affective bonds and shared experiences rather than on formal membership or collective agreements.

As in Mirella's and Maurizio's cases, the question of visibility and invisibility is central. Yet here, invisibility operates differently. While construction workers become invisible through the privatisation of their workplaces, and domestic workers through the intimacy of care relations, logistics workers inhabit a paradoxical form of hypervisibility and invisibility at once. They are visible as moving figures in urban space – riders, couriers, drivers – but socially and politically invisible, lacking recognition, voice, or continuity. Their mobility becomes a mechanism of dispersal, preventing the formation of durable solidarities.

Aymen's experience also highlights the temporal instability of organising in such sectors. Many couriers and drivers work only temporarily, supplementing income between jobs or studies. This high turnover makes it difficult to sustain long-term collective structures. As Aymen notes, organising in logistics resembles "*organising the unemployed*": the goal of mobilisation is not to consolidate a stable workforce but to fight against a condition that everyone seeks to escape. Union engagement must therefore be conceived as transitory yet recurring, capable of maintaining continuity through networks of former workers who return to mentor and support new ones.

Finally, the story of this project within Unia exemplifies both the potential and the institutional fragility of such experiments. For a limited time, the union created a structural space for innovation, freeing trade unionists from bureaucratic constraints to develop new repertoires of action. Yet once the project ended, much of this autonomy disappeared. This reflects a broader tension in contemporary unionism: between the bureaucratic rationality of large organisations and the flexible, relational, and affective practices required to reach workers at the margins of formal employment.

To conclude, Tamara's experience within Unia opens a further reflection on the contemporary condition of trade unionism. In her case, invisibility takes on a specific form, one shaped by the gendered hierarchies that structure the union field and by the broader devaluation of feminised and racialised service labour. Her trajectory reveals how certain forms of work, care, and militancy remain peripheral to institutional recognition, even as they sustain the everyday life of the organisation. Through her experience, the contradictions of contemporary unionism become visible: between representation and erasure, participation and marginalisation, visibility and voice.

Tamara works within the tertiary sector of Unia, one of the four organisational branches of the union, and by far the most feminised. It includes retail, personal services, and hospitality, sectors marked by what she calls a "structural precarity". This expression encapsulates how feminised sectors remain caught in a paradox: they are socially indispensable yet economically and symbolically devalued. Tamara highlights how difficult it is to organise workers there, not only because of employer hostility, but because "*they have been forgotten by trade unionism*". This sense of neglect, she explains, reflects a broader history of who has been considered a "*real worker*" within the labour movement. Within Unia itself, she observes, the asymmetry of resources remains striking:

> "*If I step outside the tertiary sector, Unia looks much more like a construction workers' union. And in terms of the resources put there – team size, staff – it's much bigger. I understand the logic, but it is still problematic*".
>
> (Tamara)

The gap she identifies is not merely financial or logistical, it is epistemic and political. The symbolic centrality of male workers has long structured the priorities of collective bargaining,

leaving behind feminised, racialised, and often part-time or temporary workers. Their fragmented employment relations fall outside the traditional frameworks of union protection.

Tamara's testimony also offers a glimpse into the everyday micro-politics of organising in these conditions. Like Mirella, she works with women in invisibilised service jobs, whose labour sustains the tourism and hospitality economy yet remains largely unseen. "*Their work is not recognised*," she stresses, "*even though it is essential. Masons earn 5-6,000 francs, because they were always organised, always a priority for the union. The maids, no one cared until now*". Tamara's political commitment is also deeply personal:

> "*My mother is a cleaner. She doesn't work in a hotel but privately, and that's even harder. She has two contracts. For me, it's something that really matters, because how can we talk about feminism or anti-racism inside the union if we don't give resources to a project like the housekeepers?*".
>
> (Tamara)

Her struggle thus extends beyond representing women workers – it is also about redefining what counts as 'union work'. Invisibility here is reproduced not only in workplaces but inside the union itself, through its priorities, metrics, hierarchies and spaces. Meetings "*are always in the evening*", she notes, "*and who keeps the children? It's the women*". Without childcare, the organisation of women is constrained by the very gendered and racialised division of reproductive labour that unions often ignore. Through the national women's commission of Unia, Tamara and others fought successfully to obtain reimbursement for childcare costs, a small but crucial institutional recognition. Yet, the informal masculinities still shape general internal decision-making: "*important decisions are made after meetings, over a drink… and that's mostly men*". The temporalities of union life thus reproduce exclusion. Faced with these constraints, Tamara and her colleagues experiment with feminist infrastructures of solidarity. One example is the women-only French classes for hotel workers, spaces where language learning becomes a tool for empowerment and collective belonging:

> "*It's amazing, because these are women of the same origin, doing the same job, who meet at the union school and take a language course together. And I think the tool of non-mixity, or chosen mixity, is important. Sometimes people in the union don't understand it, but for me it's obvious, you don't sit with the boss to discuss your exploitation, so why can't women also meet among themselves to speak freely?*".
>
> (Tamara)

Non-mixed spaces, inspired by feminist practices, allow women to articulate shared experiences and build trust across differences. Tamara even recalls her first encounter with such spaces:

> "*At first, I didn't really understand what chosen non-mixity meant. But then I realised it was one of the most beautiful experiences, because you feel freer, you can really talk about how you feel*".
>
> (Tamara)

Her organising practice reconfigures what counts as political labour, transforming spaces of sociability and care into arenas of collective action.

> "*We didn't meet at the union office. We met in a small restaurant, ate pizza, and talked. That was the union meeting. We laughed, we talked about their experiences, about what signs they wanted to make for the demonstration. That's how we move forward, little by little*".
>
> (Tamara)

In these informal and convivial spaces, care itself becomes political work, a form of organising that builds solidarity through everyday gestures of attention and mutuality. As Lauren Berlant (2016) reminds us, such infrastructures of care are not simply emotional or interpersonal – they constitute alternative political formations, fragile yet durable, that sustain collective life amid precarity and fragmentation.

Tamara's commitment to connecting struggles extended beyond national borders. Through exchanges with French chambermaids and the CGT, she helped build what could be described as a feminist internationalism from below: a transnational network rooted not in abstract solidarity but in shared experiences of invisibility, exhaustion, and resistance. By inviting her French counterparts to Lausanne and to the Unia women's congress, she sought to open the union to other geographies of struggle and to forge ties that bypassed institutional hierarchies. In this sense, her practice of the "politics of translation" emerges across borders (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) where solidarity is made through movement, negotiation, and the reworking of difference.

This movement outward – from local workplaces to transnational circuits of feminist labour activism – found its most powerful expression in the streets. During the 2021 Feminist Strike, she recalls, "*we stopped the march in front of the Palace Hotel… I took the microphone to say that behind those walls, women were cleaning the rooms, unseen*". Through this performative gesture, invisibility itself becomes politicised: the hotel – symbol of luxury and

consumption – turns into a stage for feminist labour visibility. As Judith Butler (2015) argues, collective presence in public space constitutes a performative act of appearance: to gather, to be seen, is already to claim the right to appear as political subjects. In bringing the struggles of chambermaids into public space, Tamara transformed care and service work into acts of collective appearance, extending union politics beyond the institutional frame and into the embodied, insurgent politics of the street.

Tamara's experience reveals that the struggle for visibility is both a goal and a method. Where Maurizio faced the erosion of visibility in male-dominated industries, Tamara confronts a historical invisibility that has long structured feminised and racialised work. Her challenge is therefore double: to make visible what society devalues, and to transform the very institutions that reproduce that invisibility. Visibility here is not just about being seen, it is about redistributing resources, legitimacy, and time. Feminist and anti-racist unionism, as Tamara practices it, is a politics of infrastructure: it redefines what counts as work, what counts as organising, and which forms of care, learning, and collective presence are recognised as political.

Taken together, trade unionists' experiences reveal the multiple scales and textures of race and marginalisation that shape trade union work in Switzerland today. Whether in domestic work, construction, or logistics, the challenge lies in reconstructing spaces of encounter and recognition within fragmented labour regimes. The everyday, relational, and embodied dimensions of organising – listening, meeting, sharing coffee, translating experiences – emerge as vital infrastructures of solidarity in a world where work has become increasingly invisible, mobile, and precarious.

These forms of practice-oriented anti-racism contrast with the anesthetised tone of official union discourse observed in Locarno. They reveal another grammar of solidarity, one grounded not in abstract universalism but in what Bhattacharyya (2018) describes as the interdependence of survival under racial capitalism, where social reproduction, migration, and class struggle are inseparable.

Taken together, these narratives expose the coexistence of two distinct registers within contemporary Swiss trade unionism. On the one hand, the institutional surface – as seen in the Locarno congress – operates through a colour-blind language of class and collective representation that conceals the racialised and gendered foundations of labour. On the other hand, the everyday practices embodied by organisers such as Jamshid, Thiery, Mirella, Aymen

and Tamara, articulate an alternative, grounded form of anti-racist politics – one that emerges not from ideological declarations but from situated relations of care and struggle.

These practices render perceptible what might otherwise remain part of the union's racial unconscious: the unspoken yet constitutive role of migration, race, and gender in sustaining collective life. By tracing these militant practices, it becomes possible to see how post-migratory experiences reconfigure the very grammar of solidarity, pushing unionism beyond the limits of its institutional speech and towards a more embodied, relational politics of anti-racism. This politics does not unfold within fixed boundaries but navigates across them. In doing so, it points to a unionism-in-motion, one that inhabits the shifting spaces where everyday life, activism, and political imagination meet.

6. Navigating Spaces

In Switzerland, neutrality, whiteness, and the myth of the absence of social conflict together contribute to producing a form of 'racelessness' (Salamat, 2024; Michel, 2020), one that conceals structural inequalities and delegitimises the lived experiences of migrant and racialised groups. This erasure raises a crucial question: where, and how, can resistance emerge today?

Bell hooks' theorisation of the margin offers a critical lens through which to approach this question. For hooks (1984; 1989), the margin is not merely a site of exclusion, but also a space of radical possibility, a place where alternative worldviews and subversive practices are nurtured by those systematically pushed to the periphery. The margin holds transformative potential precisely because it exists in tension with the centre, sustaining an oppositional gaze that both observes and resists the norms of dominant institutions. In this sense, the margin can be understood as an infrastructure of solidarity and imagination, a site where the otherwise is not only theorised but lived.

Earlier chapters have examined how the radical margins of anti-racist and labour movements in Switzerland were progressively absorbed into institutional frameworks. The militant energies of the 1970s – once rooted in migrant and working-class mobilisations – were translated into bureaucratic procedures and sanitised discourses. While militancy played a formative role, and migrant workers in the 1970s contributed to the radicalisation of trade union activism (Von Allmen, Steinauer 2000), this militancy is now largely constrained, and mass mobilisation has become rare. This institutional logic helps explain the ambivalent experiences of union members today, where formal representation exists alongside political stagnation, and where the term "xenophobia" replaced "racism" in public debate, muting the structural critique of racial capitalism. Within trade unions, anti-racist interventions often take the form of punctual projects rather than sustained structural transformation. Yet, the question remains: where are the margins from which alternative politics can arise?

Trade unions continue to be central to this inquiry, not in spite of their institutionalisation, but because of it. Many of the activists who shaped earlier radical movements transitioned into union work as other formations declined, carrying fragments of militant histories with them. In fact, unions continue to hold symbolic and practical significance in the European political imagination, understood as arenas of collective emancipation and sites where social struggles are historically articulated, even as they contend with precarity, organisational fragmentation, and the limits of representation (Höltmann et al. 2025).This chapter focuses on those who

navigate between these worlds – activists and trade unionists who move between the structures of organised labour and the experimental politics of the Feminist Strike Movement. Through their practices, the chapter examines how infrastructures of solidarity are continually rebuilt from the margins: fragile, partial, but profoundly alive. The union thus remains a contested terrain: a place where institutional constraints coexist with the potential for insurgent rearticulation.

> The room buzzed with institutional rhythms – debates over motions, anxious talk about the union's future, and the ever-repeated urgency of recruiting new members. The atmosphere was thick with procedure and protocol. But then something shifted. A group of women stepped outside, and others followed. What unfolded there broke from the script. They gathered not in confrontation, but in conversation – moving to a different cadence, one that felt more urgent, more intimate. Though all were union members, this encounter felt unlike anything inside the congress hall. It was less about rules and resolutions, and more about connection, solidarity, and shared discontent. In that spontaneous act of stepping out and coming together, I glimpsed a different kind of power – a politics that breathed. It was there, on the margins of the official space, that something vital began to stir.
>
> (Locarno, Novembre 2023)

Moments such as this one reveal how the meaning of the margin takes form not as a fixed periphery but as a living, generative space. As bell hooks writes, "to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (hooks, 1984). The gesture of stepping outside did not represent a withdrawal from the union, but a reconfiguration of its boundaries. It exposed the possibility of another kind of political practice – one that unfolds in the interstices of formal structures, in the embodied rhythms of conversation, and in the everyday labour of connection.

The ethnographic fieldwork from which this chapter draws followed these shifting margins between institutional and grassroots terrains. The Feminist Strike Movement became a key site of observation – a space where unionists and autonomous activists intersected, exchanged, and sometimes clashed. The limitations that arise within institutional spaces could, in this context, be interpreted as 'gaps', in the sense expressed by Sack, Meier and Bürgisser:

> Gaps need not be intimidating entities but opportunities, a third space or an in-between space where ideas can be explored and celebrated outside of the limitations set by particular social standards. (Sack et al. 2025, 27)

While union halls continued to host official deliberations, these affective and horizontal spaces made visible the tension between institutional logics and lived experiences, particularly for those positioned at the intersections of gender, race, and class. Such in-between zones of engagement are not structured by coherence or hierarchy but by continuous negotiation, what Braidotti (2014) calls a "complex strategic operation of positioning".

Shifting focus to the dynamics of political cross-pollination, this part of the research looks at trade unionists' involvement in more radical and self-organised spaces that do not remain isolated; rather, they become catalysts for change within trade unions themselves. As activists move between settings, they bring with them new political horizons and practices that challenge the boundaries of what is possible within traditional labour structures, compelling unions to confront their own limitations and blind spots.

This line of inquiry offers a nuanced exploration of how the margins become sites of resistance, creativity, and political redefinition. These are not grand ruptures, but rather a cumulative series of situated gestures that articulate alternative futures. By foregrounding the affective, performative, and anti-racist dimensions of collective action, this chapter contributes to a broader reflection on the transformative potential of labour struggles as they unfold within – and through – these spaces of in-betweenness.

6.1 The Feminist Strike Movement: A Permeable Space of Action

> "*My name is Tamara, I'm of Croatian origin, and I'm 29 years old. I joined this trade union when I was 25. So yes, I'm a foreigner; I have a B permit in Switzerland. I came here in 2011 for economic reasons.*
>
> *My father had already been here in the late 1990s because he was a seasonal worker himself, and there was the war in the former Yugoslavia. My mother, my sister, and I could not obtain residence papers at that time. So, I basically lived in Croatia until I was 17.*
>
> *I was always open-minded, but in Croatia there was nothing to really be politically active about. I come from a small town. We have a cinema, a hotel, a school, that is about it.*

I always dreamed of studying law and started developing a strong interest in history. That's how I decided to study political science. I'm telling you all this because that's how I became politically active – through my studies in political sciences.

I became politically active during my second year of the bachelor's degree. At that time, I didn't know that these student groups were actually run by people from leftist political parties, which have student sections at the university.

Later, I joined one of these parties – SolidaritéS, with a capital "S" at the end – which comes from that same tradition. It's part of the lineage of the Revolutionary Marxist League (Ligue Marxiste Révolutionnaire). There were several splits and tendencies over time.

At first, I wasn't very active. Between 2011-2012 and 2014-2015, before university, my only focus was finishing high school, succeeding in my studies, and learning the language. I didn't really have a social life.

When I arrived at the university, it was great – socially mixed. In high school, everyone was rich, so integration had been hard for me. At the university, I thought, 'this is amazing'! During my first year, I was very focused on my studies.

In the second year, I allowed myself to start attending public lectures. I remember skipping one class to go to a conference about Syrian refugees organised by Amnesty International, moderated by my professor of Middle Eastern studies. And honestly – it's embarrassing – but I didn't even know what Amnesty was. Even though it's famous, I had never heard of it. And that's how I started my activism.

Together with some comrades from the 'Regards Critiques' group (Critical Perspectives) and Amnesty, we decided, within two or three days, to organise a rally. That was my very first activist experience. I thought I was just organising a small event. I created a Facebook event from my personal account. We held the rally on a Sunday at La Riponne square [Lausanne], and I wrote: 'Bring your candles!' I didn't even know the right activist vocabulary : I said 'panneaux' instead of 'pancartes' for protest signs. When I look back at it now, I laugh.

Some people, especially from SolidaritéS, contacted me, asking, 'Do you have a press release?' And I was like, 'What's a press release?' Anyway, around 500 people came. Political parties showed up too. We held a beautiful gathering, and I thought, 'this is something I'll never forget'. After that, the party started reaching out to me regularly. I hesitated for about a year. Coming from Croatia, I had a different political background – back home, political engagement is often seen in a very negative light.

Yes, I'm a migrant. Others around me were born here. But in the end, we all did the same social sciences studies. Still, I often felt delegitimised. I was constantly reminded of my social class. It's not a tragedy – it's just that we unconsciously reproduce certain things. The same way we reproduce sexism or racism without realising it, we also reproduce classism in leftist spaces. In that party, I always felt illegitimate. For one or two years, I didn't even speak up in meetings, even though I'm someone who talks a lot.

That changed thanks to the Feminist Strike, to the sense of empowerment it brought. I was still a student in political science when, in 2019, suddenly this incredible thing happened – the Feminist Strike. It was a huge moment that actually emerged from

trade union bases. I was just a party activist, but somehow, I became one of the faces of the Feminist Strike – without really meaning to.

When the Feminist Strike first began, around 2018-2019, people in radical left circles were just starting to talk about it. At that time, it was still very niche. Today, it's a mass movement, but it actually started with four women in trade unions.

Thanks to the Feminist Strike, I became much more visible. Many trade unionists started to know me, and together we built collectives and mobilisations. People began telling me: 'You should really work as a union organiser'.

I wrote my master's thesis about my internship in Unia: '*Logics and Methods of Trade Union Intervention at Unia Vaud: What Perspectives for a Union of the Future?*'

And now it's been four years since I've been working as a union organiser here".

(Tamara)

Tamara's story crystallises the entanglement between migration, class, and gender that underlies contemporary forms of trade union and feminist activism in Switzerland. Her trajectory can be read as an embodied expression of infrastructures of solidarity – the situated networks, practices, and affects that sustain political life across precarious conditions and spaces (Hampton 2025; Massey 2007). The daughter of a seasonal worker and herself a migrant navigating temporary residence status, Tamara stands within a continuum of mobility and constraint that has long structured Switzerland's labour market. The seasonal system, which shaped her father's migration experience in the 1990s, institutionalised a form of cyclical invisibility: migrant bodies rendered indispensable to the economy, yet excluded from full social and political recognition. Tamara's own trajectory extends this history into the present, revealing how the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion persist through the differentiated legalities of residence, work permits, and linguistic belonging. In this sense, her life narrative exposes the sedimented infrastructures of invisibility upon which Swiss prosperity has historically depended.

Yet, it is precisely through these precarious infrastructures that new solidarities take form. Tamara's political awakening – through student activism, feminist mobilisation, and ultimately union work – demonstrates how spaces of collective organisation can reconfigure visibility from below. The Feminist Strike, which she identifies as a transformative moment of empowerment, offered not only a site of protest but an infrastructure of recognition: a space where voices often marginalised within traditional parties and union structures could appear as legitimate political subjects. Following De Genova's (2017) discussion of the political visibility of migrants, Tamara's experience can be read as a form of insurgent visibility: the moment

when those relegated to the social margins render themselves publicly present and politically audible. The Feminist Strike thus operated as a counter-space of social intelligibility, challenging both the patriarchal hierarchies of the workplace and the institutional logics of established political arenas.

In parallel, Tamara's position within the Feminist Collective of Canton Vaud (Lausanne) illustrates how feminist and labour organising have become increasingly interwoven through everyday practices of translation, care, and negotiation. Her trajectory exemplifies a broader pattern of cross-pollination between movements, or movement interdependencies, where activist knowledges circulate across domains and reshape the internal cultures of traditional institutions. Within the unions, figures like Tamara become mediators between distinct yet overlapping political grammars: the procedural, legalistic world of collective bargaining and the affective, horizontal ethos of feminist organising. This bridging role highlights how contemporary infrastructures of solidarity are not confined to any single institution but instead emerge in the interstices between them, sustained by the circulation of people, ideas, and affects across formal boundaries.

From this perspective, Tamara's personal journey mirrors the broader transformations within Swiss labour politics, where the Feminist Strike has acted as a catalyst for reimagining the relationship between visibility, representation, and collective power. Her experience allows us to see how the boundaries between unionism and feminism, between migrant struggle and institutional politics, are increasingly porous. It is in these crossings – between the visible and the invisible, the individual and the collective, the institutional and the insurgent – that new possibilities for political solidarity take root.

The Feminist Strike Movement in Switzerland did not emerge in a vacuum. Its roots stretch back to the historic Women's Strike of June 14, 1991, which itself followed decades of mounting frustration (Kiani 2019). In 1981, the Swiss Constitution had been amended to include Article 4.2, formally enshrining gender equality. But by the early 1990s, it had become clear that this legal recognition had not translated into substantive change. In response, women across the country mobilised, forming alliances between workers, trade unionists and feminist collectives. The 1991 strike brought hundreds of thousands into the streets – not only to protest wage inequality, but to demand recognition for domestic labour, care work, and unpaid responsibilities traditionally assigned to women[35].

[35] This section draws on a combination of primary and secondary materials. In addition to fieldwork and interviews, it integrates online materials (press releases, videos, and social media content) produced by the *Feminist Strike*

This historic mobilisation laid a foundation for the resurgence of feminist mass action nearly three decades later. On June 14, 2019, the Feminist Strike returned – not as a commemoration, but as a reinvention. Initiated by the women's group within the Swiss Trade Union Federation and formally supported by most affiliated unions, the Strike rapidly spilled beyond the institutional confines of organised labour. It responded to persistent wage gaps and structural underrepresentation, but also to broader conditions of precarity, flexibilisation, and the erosion of social protections.

Across Swiss cities and towns, a wide range of participants joined the mobilisation: teachers, healthcare workers, hospitality staff, cultural practitioners, students, retirees, part-time workers, and care providers. Beyond professional or institutional affiliations, what drew them together was a shared refusal of the intersecting violences embedded in the structures of everyday life. Queer activists, anti-racist organisers, environmentalists, and others mobilised alongside feminist collectives to articulate demands for a society free from racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Their convergence gave shape to spaces of political articulation that defied traditional divisions – between paid and unpaid labour, public and private, institutional and grassroots. Through demonstrations, care practices, performances, and workplace disruptions, the Strike became a living expression of solidarity across differences. In doing so, it gave rise to what might be called a feminist common (Federici 2018): a shared space for resistance, care, and the reimagining of collective life beyond patriarchal and capitalist institutions. The 2019 Feminist Strike mobilised an estimated 500,000 people, making it one of the largest political demonstrations in Swiss history. While trade unions played a crucial role in providing logistical support and legal legitimacy, they were also challenged by the Strike's demands and its organisational style. Horizontal forms of decision-making, the refusal to separate paid and unpaid labour, and the amplification of marginalised voices all pointed to limitations within the traditional institutional framework.

Unlike the Women's Strike of 1991, which culminated in a single, powerful day of mobilisation, the 2019 Feminist Strike marked the beginning of a sustained and organised presence. Many of the collectives that emerged during the preparation for June 14 have since established themselves as enduring political actors. They meet regularly in assemblies and

Collectives between 2019 and 2025. It also makes use of archival and activist publications following the *1991 Women's Strike*, including pamphlets and reports authored by participants at the time. The analysis is further informed by Sarah Kiani's historical research on Swiss feminism and by the collective volume *Travail gratuit et grèves féministes* (Federici, S., Simonet, M., Merteuil, M., Kuehni, M. (Eds.) (2020), Geneva: Éditions Entremonde), which traces the genealogies and transnational resonances of Feminist Strike movements.

working groups – not only to plan specific actions for dates such as March 8, May 1, June 14, or November 25, but also to debate strategy, share resources, build alliances, and sustain political relationships. These collectives have embedded the Strike into the fabric of everyday political life, moving beyond episodic protest to cultivate lasting forms of militant practice.

This continuity has helped the Feminist Strike remain a vital counter-power in the Swiss political landscape. Yet its relationship with trade unions remains complex. While unions provide necessary infrastructure and legal legitimacy they are also shaped by hierarchical logics and formal negotiation processes that can constrain more radical demands. The Feminist Strike challenges these embedded structures, exposing their paternalistic underpinnings. Nevertheless, this work remains fraught. Feminist actors operating within union bodies must navigate, confront, and unsettle the enduring patriarchal norms that continue to shape Swiss trade unionism.

> During the Union Congress, the women's group took the stage, their voices carrying the weight of a collective triumph – the success of the Feminist Strike, that since 2019, continues to be a site for collective struggles. They spoke of resistance, of power reclaimed, of the long fight that had led to this moment.
> But they were not the only ones.
> One after another, men stepped forward – leaders, comrades, allies in name. They took the microphone, marking the significance of this strike for the unions, speaking of gender discrimination. Their words filled the room, thick with self-importance, a performance of solidarity that felt hollow.
> "*I'm so angry, I am crying,*" she says, fists clenched, voice shaking.
> "*Why do they feel the need to speak for us?*
> *We speak, and they speak after us –*
> *So white, so men, so cis*".
> "*The Strike is our victory –*
> *They didn't care to support*,
> *And now they are 'proud'.*
> *Fucking paternalists!"*
> The weight of their words lingers, but so does the bitter taste of erasure.
>
> (Locarno, Novembre 2023)

Yet within these constrained spaces, feminist union members are actively reshaping the terrain. They foster intergenerational dialogue, introduce new rituals of solidarity, and push for the inclusion of queer, racialised, and LGBTQ+ perspectives. These efforts aim to reimagine unions not merely as service providers or bureaucratic entities, but as dynamic arenas of political transformation. Aude, a member of the Swiss Trade Union Federation's Women's Commission, described its significance:

> "*A lot of what the unions do is surface-level feminism. But still, you can see something has shifted. Back in 2019, they joined reluctantly – at the last minute, just to save face. Now, at least, the issue is on the table. For many in the commission, it's the only feminist space they have in their union. There's no women's commission, or they're the only ones interested in these questions. So this becomes a space where they get politicised – where something starts. Some women in the group have been doing this all their lives – inside and outside unions. That changes the tone*".
>
> (Aude)

She recounted how the proposal for the 2019 strike emerged from the commission, despite active resistance from within the federation itself:

> "*The equality officer at the time actually tried to block it. The leadership put the proposal right before lunch at the congress – like a joke. No one listened, no budget, no support. They passed it just because they didn't think it would amount to anything. We weren't seen as competent. We still aren't. The secretariat is basically all men. But we kept going*".
>
> (Aude)

Despite these dynamics, the commission persists as a crucial site of feminist organising within the union structure – not bound by sector or function, but by shared political commitments. These commissions act as bridges between institutional frameworks and activist militancy: spaces of counter-power that allow for collective reflection, democratic participation, and transformative potential.

> "*Take Unia, for example: it's so centralised, and there's barely any democratic space. These commissions let us create those spaces, where members can actually decide for themselves*".
>
> (Aude)

From its inception, the 2019 Feminist Strike was marked by a distinctly intergenerational character. Women who had participated in the 1991 strike – many of whom had also been active in the feminist and leftist movements of the 1970s – joined forces with a younger generation influenced by international mobilisations and movements such as *#MeToo* and *Ni Una Menos*. This convergence generated not only a renewed feminist energy, but also a form of collective memory work often absent from official political and historical narratives. Through shared assemblies, workshops, and street actions, participants from diverse linguistic, generational, and cultural backgrounds forged solidarities that bridged past and present forms of struggle.

The Feminist Strike highlights how social movements evolve without losing their historical grounding. The 1991 Strike, widely recognised as a foundational moment in Swiss feminist activism, was primarily centred around issues of legal equality, wage justice, and the recognition of women's contributions to paid labour. This earlier mobilisation took place at a time when shared workplaces and community networks enabled more consistent, place-based solidarities. Many of the activists who organised the 1991 Strike came out of the feminist and worker movements of the 1970s, including the Swiss New Left (*Nouvelle Gauche*), which had developed strong ties with migrant labour struggles (Mélo 2024; Déshusses 2014). These earlier experiences left a legacy of collective practice and political imagination that continues to inform feminist organising today.

In the Geneva Feminist Strike collective, older activists play a vital role in sustaining continuity with past struggles while actively shaping present forms of resistance. Their presence offers more than historical memory – it creates space for intergenerational dialogue, deep political reflection, and long-term commitment. Among these figures is Françoise, a trade union activist and member of the SSP (Public Service Union), whose trajectory bridges union spaces and more autonomous or non-institutional forms of organising. She exemplifies how connections can be forged between traditional labour structures and broader feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist movements. Her path through the feminist and radical left movements of the 1970s offers a powerful perspective on the transformations and challenges facing contemporary activism. In the following interview excerpt, she reflects on her early involvement in feminist and anti-capitalist organising, the atmosphere of political and intellectual intensity in Geneva during the 1970s, and her ongoing engagement in today's Strike movement. Her words highlight both the continuities and disjunctures between generations, and the importance of sustaining spaces for collective thought, joy, and struggle.

"*I was a hippie. I really started to rebel when I was a teenager. It was the 70s, things were moving everywhere. There were anti-war movements, and in Geneva, a huge scene at the Youth House. There was a strong artistic movement too: collages, weaving... It was the revolution. That's how I got into activist groups.*

First, I joined the CLAC – the Committee for the Struggle for Abortion and Contraception – which was the equivalent of the MLAC in France. Then I got involved in the MLF. In '75, there was this horrifying case in Spain five people sentenced to death[36]. Geneva had a large Spanish immigrant population, so there was a major mobilisation, with the Spanish Communist Party and others. After that, I joined the Revolutionary Marxist League.

At that point, I was getting scolded from all sides. The League didn't like that I was in the MLF, and the MLF didn't like that I was in the League. But I was 20 and I loved life. I believed I could do both, and I did. It sharpened my sense of conviction, my ability to stand firm. It was great.

We really believed the revolution was close. We were preparing for it. It felt like the world was buzzing, like something fundamental was about to change. Women were waking up. Immigrant communities too – the Spanish, because they were refugees and workers; the Italians, with the struggles around housing, work, and the economy. Things were moving. And students too. There was an incredible intellectual energy in those years.

That energy hasn't disappeared. I see it in younger generations. What's changed is the pace of life. It's not that people don't want to think deeply – it's that they barely have time. Work, family, the pressure to do everything fast and well... It leaves little space for long conversations, for theory, for sitting with ideas. That's something I miss.

For the Strike in Geneva, we tried to create a discussion group – to do readings, organise conferences. The desire is definitely there. But people are overwhelmed. Even I'm overwhelmed, and I'm retired. Jobs and kids. It's a lot.

The world of labour has really changed. It's more fragmented, more precarious. That makes organising harder too. But still – we mobilise.

Some time ago, I was invited to speak during Heritage Week, on a panel about matrimoine – women's heritage. I brought a photo from the Strike with a banner that said 'feminist hopes' in the plural. There were lots of young people in the audience. It was beautiful. Many of them were the same young women who shout our slogans during the Strike mobilisations – out in the streets with us, marching, chanting, showing up. Seeing them there, engaged and energised, feeling that intergenerational strength – it was powerful. They're incredible".

(Françoise)

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[36] On 16 September 1975, the third military tribunal convened in Hoyo de Manzanares sentenced five FRAP members – Manuel Cañaveras, María Jesús Dasca, Concepción Trisián, José Luis Sánchez-Bravo, and Ramón García Sanz – to death for their alleged involvement in the killing of civil guard Antonio Pose in Madrid on 16 August 1975. These trials, part of the Franco regime's final wave of repression, were widely condemned for their lack of due process and use of military courts to silence political dissent. The sentences sparked international outrage and marked one of the regime's last violent assertions of power before Franco's death later that year.

With activism as a way of life, Françoise's testimony underscores the tension between intergenerational memory and the erasure of radical histories. Her reflections offer a window into the shifting terrain of feminist organising in Switzerland. The landscape in which the 2019 Feminist Strike operates has changed dramatically. Processes of precarisation, flexibilisation, and labour fragmentation have eroded the working sites and communal ties that once sustained organising efforts.

> "*I feel that the world of work has become much more fragmented. There aren't the same working hours. Everything is different. You no longer have a career in the same sense. Before, you entered a job and stayed there your whole life. Now that's unthinkable. It's very different*".
>
> (Marina)

These words belong to Marina, a Spanish-born activist deeply involved in Geneva's labour struggles of the 1970s, whose testimony has already appeared in earlier chapters[37]. Her reflection echoes Françoise's reflection, bridging the past and present of feminist and labour mobilisations, and revealing how the conditions for collective struggle have transformed. Marina recalls:

> "*I was a member of the SSP – I still am, now in the retirees' group. Later, I got involved in women's activities, though at the time we didn't call it feminism. In the late 1980s, within the Geneva Federation of Trade Unions (USCG), a small women's commission was created. It was an attempt to establish a women's space – something that barely existed then. Through that, I first encountered the issue of sexual harassment at work. I had no idea what it really meant, until I followed a case: a Spanish woman harassed by her supervisor. Watching her struggle to even describe what she endured – the humiliation, the pain – opened my eyes. That was in the late 1980s, and from there, I joined the women's groups.*
>
> *From that commission, we began organising the* Collectif du 14 juin *for the 1991 Women's Strike. It worked incredibly well – we managed to bring together trade union women, feminists, even the Christian and industrial unions. The more bourgeois associations didn't join; they couldn't even hear the word 'strike'. But among us, something powerful happened, a kind of junction. The energy of women was extraordinary. Once women move, nothing can stop them.*
>
> *It was very, very dynamic. For me, it was like discovering a whole new universe. We realised that, although the collective had been created only to organise the strike,*

[37] See Chapters Two and Three.

we had actually built a network worth keeping. So, we kept it, and the Collectif du 14 juin *remained active for years*.

After the Strike, the collective survived for years, meeting monthly, organising around March 8th, or other issues like women without legal status. We even published a brochure linking the lack of recognition for domestic work in Switzerland to the exploitation of migrant women doing that labour. That connection was crucial. It still is.

I think it was only in the mid-1990s that I really said to myself: yes, I am a feminist. Because the 1991 Strike was a strike by women, not feminist in name. Back then, feminism was still marginal, even suspect. But today, it has become a much broader and more accepted word".

(Marina)

Marina's trajectory unfolds as a living archive of feminist and labour struggles in Switzerland, an embodiment of intergenerational continuity and transformation. As in Françoise's case, her account situates the Feminist Strike, but in a slightly different way: as part of a longer genealogy of migrant women's organising. Spanish and Italian women, many employed in domestic or industrial sectors, stood at the forefront of earlier mobilisations. Once targeted by exclusionary immigration policies – such as those of the Schwarzenbach era – they gradually underwent a process of relative social integration. By the 1990s, they were no longer viewed through the same racialised lens that had once marked them as outsiders. This shift illuminates how racial boundaries are historically contingent, reconfigured through changes in labour regimes, citizenship policies, and political participation. It also underscores the need for contemporary feminist movements to confront the ongoing operations of whiteness within their own spaces, where certain migrant or racialised women remain invisible or precariously included.

In this light, Marina's continued presence in today's mobilisations is not simply symbolic. It reactivates a lineage of struggle often written out of dominant feminist narratives. Her memory work recalls how cross-movement infrastructures were built through trade unions, migrant networks, and feminist collectives – blurring distinctions between institutional and non-institutional spaces. These hybrid formations exemplify what Doreen Massey (2007) describes as the relational production of space: a terrain shaped by overlapping trajectories and negotiations rather than fixed boundaries.

Within contemporary collectives such as the Geneva Feminist Strike collective, this legacy continues to resonate. As Marina reminds us, "*We need to leave room for the new generations, but never let them unfold in isolation*". Her words capture the delicate balance between renewal and continuity that defines the current moment of feminist organising in

Switzerland. They also underscore how migrant women's histories are not peripheral to feminist politics but constitutive of its very fabric, an inheritance of struggle, care, and political imagination that continues to shape the contours of collective life.

In preparation for recent mobilisations, activists have sought to translate this inheritance into concrete practices of conviviality and inclusion. The decision to begin the June 14th, 2025 Strike with a collective picnic exemplifies this effort. Emerging from a proposal by older activists involved in the 1991 Strike, the event aimed to recreate the informal, joyful spaces that once nurtured ties of trust and solidarity. Before the Strike, participants gathered in a public park: seasoned unionists and younger feminists, migrant and Swiss-born women, joined by music groups, dance performances, and collective meals. These moments of shared celebration were intentionally framed as political gestures, a reclaiming of social space against the atomisation and precarity that characterise contemporary labour and everyday life. As several interviewees emphasised, such encounters are essential for countering the fatigue and isolation of sustained activism, while also providing a safer, more welcoming entry point for those who might feel marginalised or exposed in more confrontational protest settings.

At stake in these practices is more than the reproduction of solidarity; they represent an attempt to rebuild the social infrastructure of feminist politics under conditions of fragmentation and inequality. Despite the Geneva collective's internal diversity – bringing together Swiss, Italian, Spanish, Colombian, French, and Tunisian women – other groups, particularly undocumented and racialised migrant women, remain almost invisible in public organising. Their absence signals a broader challenge for contemporary feminism: how to sustain intersectional and interclass alliances when the very sites of collective experience have been dispersed. Through convivial rituals such as the picnic, activists attempt to materialise alternative modes of belonging, spaces where affect, memory, and politics intertwine to sustain a shared horizon of feminist struggle.

> To reach the feminist local, you enter a vast industrial building now repurposed as a shared creative space. The walls are raw, the ceilings high. Up the stairs, a hand-drawn sign on the wall reads 'Via Feminista' in bold purple letters and guides you forward, like a quiet invitation or a soft provocation.
>
> In the hallway, a door pushes open into a communal space shared with the building's other inhabitants. A kitchen anchors the room – dented kettles, mismatched mugs, a sense of ongoing life. To the right, behind another door, is the room of the Geneva Feminist Collective.

Inside, the space opens warmly, if somewhat chaotically. A shelf leans under the weight of books, colour markers, papers, stickers, leftover banners from past actions – objects waiting for reuse. It's not full, not quite organised, but it holds potential. A large wooden table sits surrounded by chairs. Three big, slightly worn sofas hug the edges of the room, their cushions sloped from long conversations and long hours. The walls are dense with time. Protest posters layer across each other: slogans, colours, raised fists. Between them, large black-and-white photographs from the 1991 Strike, and full-colour images from 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023... – snapshots of bodies in the street, banners in the air, moments mid-shout.

On one wall is a text recounting the history of *la maison des femmes*, a feminist house once located in Geneva, destroyed by city authorities in the 1980s. The story is made visible here, insistent.

It's in this room, between posters and memory, between kitchen noise and political dreaming, that we meet. The atmosphere is both lived-in and charged, holding the weight of history and the momentum of something still unfolding.

(Geneva, February 2025)

Rather than merely repeating the past, the Feminist Strike Movement reactivates its lessons under new conditions. It draws on the experiences of earlier generations while adapting to contemporary dynamics shaped by precarity, migration, and intersectional injustice. The result is not a nostalgic reproduction of previous forms of activism, but a dynamic, evolving praxis – one that insists on memory, continuity, and transformation as intertwined forces in the struggle for feminist futures.

> "*I believe that anti-racism, feminism, and the fight against LGBT-phobia are struggles we carry throughout our lives, not just externally, but also internally. We are all, to some extent, the product of this patriarchal, sexist, racist, LGBT-phobic, and fatphobic society. And often, even when we ourselves endure these oppressions and violences, we internalise them. It often takes years to deconstruct these internalised beliefs. And usually, the ones we manage to deconstruct are those that affect us most directly, I think. So, all I can say is that this is a lifelong fight*".
>
> (Ines[38])

[38] The interventions of Ines cited in this thesis are drawn from online radio interviews. While numerous informal discussions with her were foundational to shaping this research, the decision was made to use publicly available words. These interviews were addressed not solely to the researcher, but to a broader audience, inviting reflection

The Feminist Strike, as a movement that defines itself as anti-racist and intersectional, strives to challenge existing structures both in discourse and in practice. At the same time, the necessity of developing new practices of solidarity – ones that do not replicate existing forms of dominance – remains an open and ongoing challenge. The awareness that dominant narratives are not confined to a single centre but instead spreads in multiple yet powerful ways makes this struggle even more pressing. As Braidotti argues,

> the centres proliferate in a fragmented manner but lose none of their powers of domination. The conclusion is clear: it is important to resist the uncritical reproduction of sameness on a planetary scale. (Braidotti 2014, 178)

Recognising this dynamic turns spaces such as the feminist collectives into a strategic starting point for resistance – a space where dominant structures can be questioned, redefined, and ultimately, disrupted. Through experiences of political engagement with other social and political actors, this question presents itself as a 'margin' in the sense of a space of resistance, political re-elaboration, and openness to new alliances.

The words that come out in these counter-power spaces enter the public sphere whenever these collectives make statements. Though predominantly white, the collectives remain aware of their positionality and continually interrogate their own limitations. They refuse to reproduce welfarist attitudes and instead challenge the political landscape, engaging in performative acts that seek to expose systemic violence and raise awareness (Wekker, 2004). By choosing to disrupt dominant discourses in this way, the collectives play a crucial role in pushing for a more inclusive political conversation within what Bhabha (1994) terms the 'third space'.

Bhabha (1994) describes this space as an ambivalent site of cultural encounter – one that both resists and negotiates with dominant power structures. As Jefferess (2008) argues, this in-between space is not simply a site of failure for colonial narratives but one where they are actively transformed in politically meaningful ways. Here, the totalising force of the coloniser's authority is disrupted, creating a gap between expectation and response – one that destabilises fixed binaries and produces alternative modes of subjectivity. However, while Bhabha's

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and engagement beyond the immediate conversation. In this case, the words come from the podcast *Étincelles*, produced by the Feminist Strike collective of Vaud and broadcast by Fréquence Banane, part of a broader attempt during the COVID-19 period to generate self-reflective knowledge and to continue acting politically in alternative forms.

framework highlights the discursive dimensions of resistance, it is crucial to consider how this negotiation interacts with material struggles. Without addressing the economic and institutional inequalities that persist within post-colonial and neoliberal contexts, the third space risks becoming a purely theoretical construct. This suggests that the third space is not an evenly shared site of negotiation but rather one that is, as Parry (2004) puts it, "differentially occupied".

The experience of diaspora, for example, is not homogeneous, especially in multicultural cities such as Geneva or Lausanne. It varies significantly depending on one's legal status, occupation, race, gender, and class. Second- or third-generation immigrants, skilled immigrants, undocumented workers, and students may navigate the third space in radically different ways, and these differences must be taken into account when analysing the process of cultural negotiation. In short, while Bhabha's framework is valuable for highlighting hybridity and the deconstruction of binaries, it fails to fully address the unequal power dynamics that shape lived experiences within the third space, leaving gaps in its applicability to diverse post-colonial realities.

Since 2019, influenced by younger generations of activists, there has been an increasing awareness that symbolic gestures toward diversity are insufficient. Instead, there is a growing demand to address the structural exclusions embedded within the movement itself. As bell hooks reminds us, political positioning within systems of power is never neutral:

> Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of the colonising mentality? (...) This choice is crucial. It shapes and determines our response to existing cultural practice and our capacity to envision new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts. It informs the way we speak about these issues, the language we choose. (hooks 1989, 15)

One significant example of this political reorientation is the active support extended by the Geneva Feminist Strike collective to Muslim women. These women – particularly those who wear the hijab – have long been subjected to state-sanctioned racist discrimination and feminist paternalism. Their visibility, often through veiling practices, makes them vulnerable to multiple forms of scrutiny and exclusion. Over the past two decades, Islamophobia has become a central axis of racialised discourse in Switzerland, particularly within far right and anti-immigration rhetoric. Women have been placed at the symbolic core of this discourse, as illustrated by two major national referendums: the 2009 ban on minarets (Gonzalez 2015; Eskandari, Banfi 2017)

and the 2021 prohibition on face coverings. Both measures were framed under the guise of secularism, security, or even women's rights, but in practice functioned as tools of exclusion, reinforcing a vision of Swiss identity rooted in whiteness and Christian modernity. As Leila Abu-Lughod (2013) has compellingly argued, the figure of the Muslim woman is often instrumentalised within liberal and white feminist narratives, not to enhance her autonomy, but to reaffirm Western moral superiority. Her critique is crucial for rethinking how feminist spaces can move beyond these inherited logics and confront the racialised dimensions of power operating within them. Within the Swiss Feminist Strike Movement, the issues raised by the collective *Les Foulards Violets* (The Purple Scarves) played a key role in opening up such critical spaces for reflection. Their interventions not only made visible the structural exclusions faced by Muslim women but also challenged the dominant frameworks of white feminism from within.

The emergence of *Les Foulards Violets* in Geneva just before the 2019 Strike exemplifies how feminist politics can be reconfigured through practices of solidarity and self-critique. This collective, composed of both Muslim and non-Muslim women – veiled and unveiled – was formed to ensure that the struggles of Muslim women, especially those who wear the hijab, are not sidelined within feminist spaces. As co-founder Inès El-Chir has argued, general feminist demands – such as equal pay or protection from violence – are incomplete if they fail to incorporate the specific experiences of Muslim women, who face barriers not only in the labour market and education system but also in accessing public space.

For *Les Foulards Violets*, intersectionality is not a theoretical add-on but a political necessity. Their position is unequivocal: "*You cannot believe in equality halfway. Either you fight for the rights of all women – including those who wear the hijab – or you reproduce the exclusions you claim to oppose*".

Their first major intervention during the June 14, 2019 Feminist Strike was both symbolic and transformative: a visible bloc of purple-scarved women marching with the larger protest. As Ines recalled: "*There came a point where we no longer knew exactly where the Feminist Strike ended and where* Les Foulards Violets *began. We became one movement, enriched by our differences*".

This moment marked more than symbolic inclusion – it catalysed broader reflections within the Strike movement about white feminism's historical complicity in systems of racial and cultural domination. In this context, slogans such as "*We want rights, not saviours*" and

"*We want solidarity, not pity*" become acts of political reclamation, insisting on a feminism that does not rest on exclusionary forms of moral western superiority.

> "*Basically, not only was there a clear position taken by the collectives on the burqa issue, but also a very clear way of operating: when people came to ask us questions about the burqa, we would redirect them to the* Foulards Violets*. Myriam and Inès, who are part of the collective, became the go-to people we referred them to.*
>
> *They went on talk shows, spoke on the radio – they were able, as directly affected individuals, to speak on a topic that concerned them. And Myriam said several times that it was the first time this had ever happened – that Muslim women had actually been involved in the conversation*".
>
> (Aude)

Nearly six years later, this collaboration remains active. The Feminist Strike collective continues to work alongside *Les Foulards Violets* in ways that reflect a more sustained and self-reflexive intersectional practice. One notable example is their current campaign for inclusive access to public swimming pools in the Canton of Geneva.

Although cantonal regulations officially permit diverse forms of swimwear – including burkinis – some pools continue to exclude the burkini or other covering clothing with the pretence of hygiene or security norms. These apparently neutral policies, in practice, function as mechanisms of exclusion. For many Muslim and racialised women, these pools are no longer spaces of leisure, but sites of surveillance and rejection.

In response, a protest action has been discreetly organised at one of the pools that continues to defy cantonal policy. Given the risks faced by undocumented and asylum-seeking women – those most affected by these exclusions – activists were carefully strategising visibility, with allies taking the front lines and media outreach being handled with caution. This approach reflects the movement's growing sensitivity to the uneven distribution of vulnerability and risk within public protest, while also recognising the mechanisms of privilege and power. As Judith Butler has argued, vulnerability is not just a condition to be protected against, but a potential ground for solidarity – a way of recognising interdependence and forging alliances across difference (Butler 2015). The swimming pool campaign, then, was not only a demand for access, but a form of feminist practice rooted in care, collective strategy, and the refusal of so-called neutral public space. It made clear that rights are lived materially – through who can move, appear, and belong.

Yet the collectives learning process surrounding these struggles has not been without its contradictions. As the movement deepens its commitment to anti-racist and intersectional politics, tensions have surfaced around how solidarity is enacted in practice. One example lies in the well-intentioned but sometimes counterproductive principle of "not speaking for others". While aimed at avoiding appropriation, this stance can, at times, serve as a form of withdrawal. As several racialised members have pointed out, when white activists say, "I prefer not to speak about this because I'm not directly concerned", it is often experienced less as allyship and more as an abdication of responsibility. Rather than distributing the labour of anti-racist critique, such gestures risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to dismantle – placing the burden of remembrance, resistance, and education disproportionately on those already most affected.

The politics of Palestine have also become a revealing and often divisive focal point within Swiss Feminist Strike collectives, prompting intense internal debates around anti-racism, internationalism, and the limits of solidarity. In a recent interview, Françoise reflected candidly on a particularly critical rupture that unfolded within the Geneva collective. "*When we speak of feminist hopes, it has to be in the plural*", she said, "*because we need to reflect on what kind of feminism we're building. There are many feminisms*". The collective's longstanding difficulty in meaningfully including racialised members, she noted, was brought into sharper relief by international events – first with Black Lives Matter, but more recently, and more forcefully, with Palestine.

These debates became especially intense following the October 2023 escalation in Gaza, when internal disagreements surfaced around how – or whether – the collective should position itself publicly. Aude, also member of the Geneva Strike group, recalled the confusion and pressure many activists felt:

> "*There was a moment when I felt uncertain about how to position myself on this – as a feminist, as an anti-racist – with what's happening in Palestine, and with some feminists calling on us to actively speak up about Israeli women and so on. We felt a lot of pressure. People calling us. The press*".
>
> (Aude)

This uncertainty began to shift when Inès spoke out. Aude recounted how her testimony helped reframe the conversation:

> "*She shared how Muslims were expected to constantly position themselves, to prove they're 'against Hamas'. In a way, she drew the line: 'Here's where I stand on this issue'. And I was like, okay, damn, there it is. We talked about what feminism means in*

> *terms of solidarity. What it means to take a stance. After that, I thought: now I know where I stand too*".
>
> (Aude)

Yet even after these conversations, tensions persisted. Some collective members felt Inès's words were 'too forceful', a reaction that, to Aude, exposed deeper problems: "*And I was just like – seriously? We're talking about anti-racism, about the anger of Black and Arab women, and then when an Arab woman speaks up, it's 'too much'? That's not okay*".

The collective was thrown into a moment of crisis. "*We had massive debates*", Françoise explained. "*I was really afraid everything would fall apart. Honestly, I thought: the collective is going to explode*". The tipping point came when one member strongly opposed foregrounding Palestine during the March 8 demonstrations and made comments that Françoise called out as racist. For younger Arab members, this was disillusioning. One of them expressed her frustration bluntly: "*If people here think like this, then maybe I don't belong in this group*".

Françoise's political clarity in that moment drew from decades of experience, including formative years in the United States during the 1980s, where she studied feminist and Marxists literature alongside members of the Black Panther Party. This background shaped her deep commitment to anti-racist and anticolonial feminism, positioning her as an intergenerational bridge. "*We have collective values*" she said.

> "*We've written them down in our manifesto. Anti-racism, internationalism, decolonialism – they are not optional. And if someone doesn't understand them, we can take time to explain. But if there's no agreement on these values… then no. You've come to the wrong place*".
>
> (Françoise)

Despite the intensity of the disagreement, the collective reiterated its foundational commitments and, in doing so, created space for new members to join. Some later left, but what remained was a more politically grounded and cohesive group – one strengthened by its willingness to engage conflict and reaffirm its values. As Françoise put it, "*Today, I'm really proud of what we've become*".

This episode highlights that decolonial and anti-racist feminism is not a static identity or claim, but an ongoing, situated practice. As Audre Lorde reminds us, "difference must not merely be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (Lorde 1984). Similarly, Judith Butler (2015) emphasises that alliances

are often forged not through shared identity but through the negotiation of vulnerability, interdependence, and disagreement. In this sense, the fractures that emerged were not signs of failure but expressions of a collective political becoming – a process of learning how to stay in relation while unlearning dominant modes of power.

Some activists continue to attend weekly meetings, while others have redirected their energy to alternative spaces, such as Siembra Resistencia, a Colombian music collective that brings together women of diverse origins – migrants, activists, and union members. These partial shifts reflect the porous nature of political engagement. Rather than fragmentation, they signal the expansion of a broader ecology of resistance in which the Feminist Strike is one node among many, connected through shared commitments and transversal solidarities.

6.2 (In)Visibility: Beyond the 4th Wall

If the Feminist Strike constitutes a permeable political space, its power lies precisely in how it is inhabited, reinterpreted, and transformed by those who take part in it. Each 14 June in Geneva, the streets are not only occupied but reassembled: sound, rhythm, and colour reshape the march's geography. South American drum collectives beat the pulse of the march; the Geneva Strike collective mobilises banners and chants; a truck carries the *Femmes paysannes* (peasant women), reclaiming rural labour as feminist struggle, while the *Bloc décolonial* – gathering activists in solidarity with Palestine and other anticolonial movements – foregrounds histories of dispossession and resistance that exceed national borders.

The Feminist Strike thus becomes a field of plural presences, where distinct struggles intersect and claim visibility on their own terms. Though coordinated by the Feminist Strike collectives, the space is continuously re-appropriated by those who inhabit it, producing what we might call an insurgent common: a collectively produced terrain of appearance where new alliances and subjectivities emerge.

From a theoretical standpoint, the decolonial presence in the Strike is not merely thematic – it gestures toward a broader epistemic and affective shift. As Walter Mignolo (2011) and Françoise Vergès (2021) have argued, the decolonial contests the universalist assumptions of Western traditions, narratives and forms of knowledge, foregrounding how race, coloniality, and labour structure the very conditions of gendered existence. In the streets, these perspectives do not appear as abstract critiques but as embodied performances: banners written in Spanish, Palestinian keffiyehs, Colombian drums, etc. The Strike becomes, in this sense, a transversal

space (Federici 2012), where political imaginaries travel and mutate through sound, gesture, and affect.

Laura Quintana's notion of "affective spaces" (2023) offers a way to think through these dynamics. She posits that emotions are not merely personal experiences but are shaped by social and political structures, influencing how individuals relate to institutions and each other. These affective dimensions can either reinforce existing power dynamics or open pathways for emancipation. In this context, the emotional responses to the discussions on Palestine reveal underlying tensions within the collective, highlighting the need to address not just ideological differences but also the affective undercurrents that sustain or disrupt solidarity.

If the politics of emotions are a key factor in understanding the history of politics (Ahmed 2004), then individual and collective perspectives, shaped by shared experiences, become essential in grasping specific political structures and landscapes. Mapping the trajectories of trade unionists and workers into other political spaces reveals a complex network of personal and social bridges where political possibilities converge. It is not fixed structures that generate transformation, but rather the people who navigate across them, continually producing new alliances, interpretations, and practices, from margin to centre.

A compelling example of these affective and political trajectories is Mylene, a Filipino woman who has lived in Switzerland for thirteen years. Before migrating, she had already been deeply involved in political and trade union activism in the Philippines – a background that would later inform her militancy in Switzerland, especially her commitment to workers' rights and organising. Upon arriving in Geneva, however, she faced a stark contrast: while she found community in her local neighbourhood and in church circles, she struggled to access spaces of conviviality where she could be both politically engaged and fully herself.

Her entry into collective life began through migrant theatre workshops. These became a vital space for expression, allowing her to share stories, build connections, and begin to reweave a sense of political belonging. Later, she joined the SIT (*Syndicat Interprofessionnel de Travailleuses et Travailleurs*), where she became especially involved in the group focused on domestic economy with Mirella. Her deep roots in the Filipino community made her an important and trusted figure. Her work is not just local. It builds on a transnational history of organising: the experience she brings from the Philippines shapes her analysis, her organising style, and the solidarity she builds. Within the SIT, she has helped politicise everyday

experiences of exploitation and invisibility. Though she works as a secretary in a Geneva NGO, Mylene has faced racism and condescension that made her feel isolated and undermined.

> "*People telling me how to do my job… I've been doing this for over twenty years. I know how it works. It's humiliating. I've never reached out to trade unions for that. Proving racism is hard, and I felt it wasn't something I could do*".
>
> (Mylene)

But union spaces – especially those she helped shape – became places of possibility. "*I wanted to do something meaningful*", Mylene explained. In 2023, she participated in the Feminist Strike – not as part of the formal organising collective, but as someone intimately familiar with the inner workings of trade unions and with close ties to domestic workers across the city.

The Feminist Strike that year was organised in a carefully choreographed sequence: starting at 14:00 with public speeches by diverse groups – the Peasant Women, *Lestime* (a lesbian and feminist association), *Equinox* (working on anti-racism and decolonial practices), and other collectives – followed by musical performances by the *Tambureras de Suiza*. Subsequently, the *Groupe de Travail antiraciste de la Grève Féministe* (*Anti-racist Working Group of the Feminist Strike*) delivered a public address, and further interventions expressed solidarity with struggles in Iran and Peru, while the *Coordination Asile* (Asylum Coordination, supporting migrant and refugee rights) also took the stage. Around 16:30, public testimonies were shared by women from different trade unions recounting strikes they had participated in during the year. These accounts differed from the more formal, procedural tone of the union congress: the speakers were workers and their allies, sharing experiences directly in public space rather than within the walls of the institutions. This created a different kind of resonance, where visibility and political voice were enacted in the streets and absorbed by a wider audience. The march concluded with a final speech by the Geneva Feminist Strike collective before participants took to the streets.

Mylene took part fully in this day. Yet she also brought with her a desire to organise something else, outside of this framing, pushing the boundaries of the Feminist Strike in both time and space. With other migrant women, she organised a performance in the morning at Place Bel-Air in Geneva. The group recycled used sponges, left in a collection bag at the SIT building, transforming everyday objects into instruments of protest. A theatre teacher, connected through Mylene's artistic network, worked with the women to prepare them for the performance. Mirella explained the choice of the space: "*This is the place from where most of*

them leave early in the morning to go to work. It is a city node, full of people". For twenty minutes, the workers occupied the square, positioned among passersby, bus stops, and tram lines leading to all corners of the city.

With sponges in hand, participants embodied scenes of daily domestic work, including moments of humiliation, tyrannical employers, and the devaluation of labour, time, and bodies. In ordinary life, Mylene speaks softly, almost disappearing into the background; in this performative setting, power dynamics were inverted. Participants enacted both the roles of workers and employers, simultaneously reproducing and critiquing structures of domination. The performance can be read through Paulo Freire's framework of conscientisation (Freire 1970), in which marginalised subjects engage in a praxis that transforms perception into political awareness. The act of embodying work, exploitation, and resistance allowed domestic workers to reflect on their own conditions, make them visible to others, and reclaim agency over narratives that often render them invisible. This form of embodied pedagogy politicises the everyday, making oppression legible while also cultivating collective consciousness and solidarity.

Through movement, metaphor, and public visibility, the performance rendered visible the labour that sustains households across Geneva, challenging the economic and racial logics underpinning care work under capitalism. This intervention resonates with Bhattacharyya's (2018) analysis of racialised labour in capitalist accumulation, highlighting how resistance emerges precisely in sites traditionally deemed marginal, unimportant, or invisible. The sponges – simple, intimate, and familiar – became instruments of critique, translating private, undervalued labour into a powerful collective statement that confronted the public and provoked reflection on structural inequalities.

The performance spoke not only to state or elite neglect – it also unsettled the comfort of middle-class white feminists marching beside them. In Geneva, it is not only diplomats who underpay or exploit domestic workers[39]. Many 'ordinary' families, often self-identified as progressive, quietly rely on this labour. Most of these women – because they are overwhelmingly women – work without contracts or protections. The performance made this

[39] A well-documented example of such exploitation emerged in Geneva in 2021, when several domestic workers employed by foreign diplomats revealed having worked for decades without pay or under severely exploitative conditions. Supported by the *Syndicat Interprofessionnel de Travailleuses et Travailleurs* (SIT), these workers publicly denounced their treatment and filed legal complaints against their employers, exposing the structural impunity afforded by diplomatic immunity. The case reignited public debate on domestic labour rights and the limitations of existing protections for migrant workers employed in diplomatic households. See: *RTS Info*, "Après 20 ans sans salaire, des employées de diplomates à Genève se rebiffent", 2021. https://www.rts.ch/info/regions/geneve/12255999-apres-20-ans-sans-salaire-des-employees-de-diplomates-a-geneve-se-rebiffent.html

contradiction visible. It asked: who gets to strike? Whose labour is truly valued? And how do white and middle-class feminists confront the privileges on which their own freedom rests?

As scholars have noted, feminist solidarity demands not only recognition of difference but accountability for the unequal distribution of reproductive labour – often shouldered by racialised and migrant women (Mohanty 2003; Davis 1981). In this sense, the act was not just a critique of exploitation – it was a confrontation with complicity (Ahmed 2017; Bhattacharyya 2018). It challenged dominant feminist narratives by inserting the embodied voices of migrant workers, drawing attention to the very organisation of labour and the racialised hierarchies on which it rests. Their presence – and the force of their creative resistance – made visible the distribution of privilege under racial capitalism, where whiteness and class offer mobility and cover, while others remain exposed and expendable.

Mylene's story, and that of the women she organises with, shows how the Feminist Strike can become a space of not only resistance, but also reckoning. Their presence redefines who speaks, who is seen, and what struggles feminist politics must centre.

This kind of embodied resistance also resonates with the experience of *Siembra Resistencia*, a feminist and anti-racist music collective launched in Geneva by two Colombian women. The group brings together a wide constellation of women – some are trade union militants like Mylene, others active in the feminist collective, and still others are simply individuals seeking a space to express themselves politically and socially. Many are migrants. What unites them is the desire for a space where struggle is lived not only through formal organising, but through music, performance, and shared joy. It is a collective where politics are at the centre, but refracted through rhythm, affect, and art. In this sense, conviviality can be understood not merely as coexistence, but as a political act that challenges racialised boundaries, privileges, and hierarchies embedded in everyday life (Vergès 2021).

Though *Siembra Resistencia* participates in major feminist protests, their presence is not merely decorative. Like Mylene and the domestic workers' performance, they intervene as a statement: a refusal of paternalist white feminism. Their aesthetic and sonic presence in demonstrations marks a political act in itself – an insistence on visibility, audibility, and embodied power. "*The visibility of the strike is a political instrument*", explains Charito, one of the group's members, "*but it can only be effective if the most marginalised can use it*".

Charito is a long-standing activist in Geneva's neighbourhood associations. In 2019, she threw herself into the Feminist Strike collective. At the time she had no salaried job, which

gave her the possibility to commit herself fully to organising. She's someone who likes to 'do' – painting banners, crafting props, building the infrastructure of protest. "*In the drum group*", she recalls, "*there were ups and downs. But we have to recognise that when the drums entered the Feminist Strike, things changed*". *Siembra Resistencia* brought a powerful Latin American performance culture. "*There were about twenty of us, mostly Latin American migrants, but also some Swiss and others. We started doing performances that totally transformed how protests happened in Geneva*". One of their defining interventions was during the March 8 demonstration, inspired by the Chilean feminist uprisings.

> "*That was the first time we wore hoods. We organised a workshop to make them. It was right when the Chilean revolt was happening, and these incredible hooded women were appearing in the streets. There were a lot of Chilean women in the strike, so we said – let's bring this here*".
>
> (Charito)

For a movement in Geneva long dominated by white women, this influx of sound, rhythm, and embodied performance brought an entirely new dimension.

> "*It was mind-blowing to have Latin drums leading the march. It changed everything. It was artistic, powerful – it brought joy into struggle. In Latin America we say: don't invite me to your revolution if I can't dance!*".
>
> (Charito)

Charito emphasised how this joyful, performative activism created deeper emotional and political connections: "*This energy fed our militancy. And others felt it too – people who hadn't really felt at home in the movement suddenly did*".

On the Instagram page of the Geneva Feminist Strike Collective, a short video captures some these musical moments: a group of people playing Afro-Colombian drums on Jun 14 2025, at the picnic and during the march. The rhythmic intensity of drums and flutes is overlaid by the voice of Cindy, one the *Tambureras* collective's founders. In French with subtitled in Spanish, she says:

> "*June 14 is the Feminist Strike, and for me, it is essential to be in the public space on this day of struggle, with Afro-Colombian militant drums. For five years, dozens of drums have travelled from my homeland, the Colombian Caribbean, to here, carried by*

a clear mission: to make music a tool of militancy, of demands, and of memory. I traced this path with conviction by creating the concept of 'Percusiones Militantes'. So that our traditions are not only celebrated, but used as weapons against racism and patriarchy. These drums are not here to look pretty. They are here to disturb, to awaken, to gather. As long as they resonate here with this intention of struggle, we know we are on the right path. Each drumbeat recalls that my ancestors resisted – against injustice, colonialism, and privilege – that we resist and continue to do so, that our struggles are legitimate, visible, and necessary. On June 14, our drums shouted loudly. As long as we strike, we exist; as long as we make noise, we will never be silenced".

(Cindy)

Cindy's statement, accompanied by the collective rhythm of Afro-Colombian percussion, transforms the space of the march into an embodied archive of resistance. Through sound, movement, and visibility, she bridges ancestral memory and contemporary militancy. The use of *'Percusiones Militantes'* is not only aesthetic: it is a decolonial strategy that reclaims the body and sound as political instruments. The act of "making noise" functions here as what Sara Ahmed (2017) would call a 'feminist killjoy tactic': a refusal to maintain the comfort of the dominant order, in this case, the polite and discursive modes that have often structured Geneva's public protests.

In another video published online, Cindy recounts her story, this time in Spanish, subtitled in French:

"*While crossing the Atlantic on a sailboat, I wondered: what could I bring when I arrive in Europe? And I realised that I was bringing with me an ancestral heritage. Music. Folklore. Drums. To this heritage, I have given a militant and performative dimension. The drums have become one of the instruments I use as a mediator to make struggles and demands resonate. (...) The drums remain my tool to claim feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial struggles*".

(Cindy)

Here, Cindy articulates a politics of transmission – what Catherine Walsh (2013) calls "*pedagogías decoloniales*", or decolonial pedagogies – where ancestral practices are not preserved only as folklore but reactivated as political tools. The drumbeat becomes a medium of memory, a form of embodied pedagogy that teaches through rhythm, vibration, and collective movement. This process also resonates with María Lugones's vision of a decolonial feminism grounded in relationality and "world-traveling" (Lugones 2003), where coalition emerges from mutual translation rather than sameness, a site where theoretical reflection and embodied

practice co-produce new feminist and anti-racist subjectivities. Cindy is also closely connected to trade unionists and activists within the Feminist Strike collective. Her trajectory – like that of Mylene – illustrates how migrant women not only participate in but recompose the political and affective fabric of feminist mobilisation. They are not guests in the movement; they are its pulse.

These sonic and performative interventions – by Cindy and the *Tambureras*, by *Siembra Resistencia*, and by the domestic workers who staged their sponge performance – are not merely aesthetic gestures. They enact what we might call a decolonial politics of resonance.

Such performances produce what Fred Moten (2003) describes as a fugitive sonic practice: modes of expression that escape capture by dominant epistemologies yet reverberate through the structures that seek to silence them. In Moten's reading of the Black radical tradition, sound – particularly the voice, the scream, the hum – carries the residue of resistance against the violent erasure of the enslaved subject. Similarly, the drums of Cindy and the *Tambureras* and *Siembra Resistencia,* together with performance of domestic workers in the square, vibrate against the grain of audibility, asserting presence in spaces where visibility and speech are unequally distributed. In this sense, these interventions also engage Édouard Glissant's call for a "right to opacity" (Glissant 1997, 189-194). Rather than demanding assimilation into pre-existing frames of recognition, they claim the legitimacy of difference – of sounds, gestures, and temporalities that do not seek to be fully understood or translated. The opacity of rhythm and performance resists the colonial demand for transparency; it preserves the density of experience that exceeds language.

These interventions thus perform a double critique. First, they expose the exclusions within dominant feminist and union spaces, where visibility often remains tied to whiteness, respectability, and institutional recognition. Second, they propose an alternative grammar of political action – one that is relational, embodied, and affective, grounded in the epistemologies of those who have been historically relegated to the margins of speech. In this sense, they can be read as both a practical and theoretical response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). Spivak's argument, grounded in post-colonial and feminist critique, suggests that the subaltern – those outside hegemonic circuits of power – cannot simply "speak" within frameworks that render their speech unintelligible. When the subaltern voice enters dominant discourse, it is often ventriloquised, mediated, or appropriated. Yet the performances and sounds emerging from Geneva's Feminist Strike suggest another possibility. They do not "speak" in the discursive sense that Spivak problematised; rather, they

resonate. They make themselves felt through rhythm, gesture, and collectivity – through what Moten calls "the resistance of the object" where

> the essential theatricality of blackness, of the commodity who materially objects beyond any subjunctively posited speech, is evoked in the service of metaethics. The resistance of the object is the condition of possibility of a metaethics". (Moten 2003, 234)

The question, then, is not only 'can' the subaltern speak, but 'how might we listen differently'? To listen here means embracing opacity (Glissant 1997), recognising that communication does not require transparency or translation, but mutual attunement. It also requires, as Spivak later emphasised in *Righting Wrongs* (2004), a form of "unlearning one's privilege as one's loss" – a willingness to inhabit discomfort, to relinquish the expectation that all voices conform to familiar idioms of resistance.

Thus, when drums echo through the streets of Geneva, when migrant women transform the tools of their labour into instruments of critique, they are not merely making noise. They are reconfiguring the conditions of audibility. These acts compel us to rethink both who speaks and how we listen.

Tracing the evolution of the Geneva Feminist Strike collective over time reveals how this cross-pollination manifests in language. In meetings, assemblies, and social media posts, terms such as 'systemic racism', 'intersectionality', 'white privilege', and 'white feminism' have gradually become part of the collective vocabulary. This linguistic evolution is not merely semantic; it represents what Paulo Freire (1970) describes as "pedagogy of praxis", a process through which knowledge emerges from collective reflection on lived experience. In this sense, language operates as a site of political formation, where everyday encounters become moments of learning and consciousness-raising.

Following Stuart Hall's (1996) insight that language is a terrain of cultural politics, these shifts reveal how activists continuously rearticulate the meanings of feminism, anti-racism, and solidarity. Through practice, theoretical concepts are not simply adopted but reworked and embodied, producing a shared lexicon that both diagnoses structures of oppression and gestures toward alternative forms of belonging. This evolving vocabulary functions as a set of nodal points that temporarily stabilise meaning while leaving space for re-signification. In Laclau and Mouffe (1985) terms,

> The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude in the field of discursivity. (Laclau, Mouffe 2001, 113)

These nodal points do not produce a final or universal truth; they are contingent, partial constructions that connect diverse struggles and participants, producing a "polyphony of voices":

> The discourse of radical democracy is no longer the discourse of the universal: the epistemological niche from which 'universal' classes and subjects spoke has been eradicated, and it has been replaced by a polyphony of voices, each of which constructs its own irreducible discursive identity. This point is decisive: there is no radical and plural democracy without renouncing the discourse of the universal and its implicit assumption of a privileged point of access to 'the truth,' which can be reached only by a limited number of subjects. (…) Juridical institutions, the educational system, labour relations, the discourses of the resistance of marginal populations construct original and irreducible forms of social protest and thereby contribute to all the discursive complexity and richness on which the programme of a radical democracy should be founded. (Laclau, Mouffe 2001, 191-2)

The feminist strike exemplifies this logic in action. These dynamics show that radical democratic politics are constructed not from a universal standpoint but through situated practices and embodied interventions. In streets, public performances, and informal gatherings, activists generate original forms of protest that produce new hegemonies grounded in lived experience rather than institutional authority. In this sense, the Feminist Strike's evolving language and affective practices embody Laclau and Mouffe's vision: a democracy constituted through plurality, continual articulation, and the co-production of meaning across difference.

What is important to understand here is that these performative and embodied practices do not remain confined to the streets. They reverberate back into trade unions, carried by the activists,

organisers, and militants who move between these spaces. What unfolds is not a linear transmission of ideas but a circulatory movement, a network of bodies, words, and affects that connects public squares, union offices, and community gatherings. Through these circulations, union politics itself is redefined. Activists who inhabit both the feminist and trade union arenas bring back not only strategies but also new sensibilities, new ways of speaking, listening, and imagining solidarity. These movements of people and practices transform what unionism can mean in post-migratory contexts (Foroutan 2019), expanding its repertoire beyond negotiation and representation toward care, visibility, and embodied resistance. From there, they return – refracted and reinterpreted – into trade unions and other institutional arenas. What emerges is a recursive movement in which the street becomes a site of political invention, while the union becomes a space of translation and reconfiguration.

These interventions also illustrate what might be called the "fall of the fourth wall" in political and performative terms. Borrowing from theatre, the fourth wall separates performers from spectators; its collapse renders the audience both witness and participant and destabilises fixed hierarchies of authority. In the domestic worker performance or in the *Tambureras'* musical interventions, the audience – whether passersby, allies, or institutional observers – is drawn into the performance itself. Work, care, and protest are no longer abstracted into speeches or institutional reports; they are enacted, thus producing spaces in which participants and audiences alike confront the embodied realities of labour, migration, and racialised gender hierarchies. These affective interventions create resonance beyond the immediate performance.

The circulation of these practices demonstrates how political knowledge and radical critique move through both affect and discourse. As Paulo Freire argues in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), genuine education cannot be imposed from above; it must emerge from "a pedagogy forged 'with', not 'for', the oppressed". This pedagogy takes form in the "incessant struggle to regain humanity", where "oppression and its causes become objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection comes their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation" (Freire 2005, p. 48).

Seen in this light, the Feminist Strike, the performances of domestic workers, and the rhythms of the *Tambureras* can be understood as practices of conscientisation, processes through which participants and observers alike learn to read the world critically. Freire (1970) reminds us that conscientisation arises not through didactic transmission but through dialogical encounters, where people collectively recognise and interrogate the structures that shape their existence (Ibid., 53). The street thus becomes a site of dialogue; embodied protest becomes pedagogy.

When domestic workers perform the routines of their labour in public squares, their gestures and movements become acts of teaching. Such performances blur the line between art and politics, turning the square into what, with Freire, we might call a 'classroom of liberation'.

This dynamic is further exemplified in the 2019 cleaners' strike in Geneva. The conflict began when Orgapropre, a cleaning company contracted to maintain the offices of the *Union Bancaire Privée* (UBP), lost its service contract. In response, the company abruptly dismissed thirty-seven workers – most of them women – without offering any form of social plan or compensation. Supported by the *Syndicat Interprofessionnel de Travailleuses et Travailleurs* (SIT), a group of fifteen of these cleaners organised a daily picket outside the bank's headquarters on the Rue du Rhône, protesting during their usual working hours, from 6 to 8 p.m[40].

What made their situation particularly unjust was a restrictive non-competitive clause written into their original contracts, which prevented them from being rehired by the new subcontractor, Cleaning Service, that took over UBP's cleaning contract. This clause not only stripped the workers of their jobs but also of the right to continue earning a living. It illustrates the multiple layers of control and dispossession that shape feminised and racialised labour in the service sector: the chain of subcontracting that fragments responsibility, the corporate indifference to workers' livelihoods, and the legal mechanisms that bind their mobility.

The strike, therefore, was not simply a demand for reemployment; it was a challenge to the entire architecture of invisibility and exploitation on which Geneva's financial economy rests. In the public space of the Rue du Rhône – a symbol of wealth and prestige – the cleaners' presence disrupted the sanitised image of the banking district, making visible the bodies whose labour sustains it. Their banners and testimonies reframed the urban landscape as a site of confrontation between capital accumulation and the right to dignity.

Inspired by these events, documentary theatre practitioner Jérôme Richer undertook a two-year project to translate the 2019 cleaners' strike into a performative space of collective reflection. Through extensive interviews with the workers, collaboration with trade unionists, and close engagement with the everyday realities of cleaning labour, Richer sought to create a play that would not simply represent the strike but extend its dialogical and pedagogical force.

The resulting play, *~~Malgré qu'on me traite comme de la merde~~, je suis quand même gentille* ("Even though they treat me like shit, I'm still kind"), stages a dense and uncomfortable

[40] https://www.evenement.ch/articles/des-femmes-de-menage-en-greve-devant-une-banque-genevoise

social tableau. In the title, the phrase "~~*Malgré qu'on me traite comme de la merde*~~" ("Even though they treat me like shit") is visibly crossed out, a visual gesture that is itself a subtle act of resistance. On the page, this erasure operates as a refusal: it exposes the disciplining expectation that women, particularly those in feminised and racialised labour, remain kind and compliant despite humiliation. Following James C. Scott (1985), this act can be read as a form of infra-political resistance: an almost invisible subversion inscribed within the text, a gesture that 'whispers' defiance beneath the surface of domination.

Richer's dramaturgical method complicates traditional oppositions between oppressor and oppressed. While the employers' discourse is made present, he also introduces a less visible oppressor: the ordinary citizen – often middle-class, progressive, and self-perceived as benevolent – who relies on domestic labour without confronting the precarious and racialised conditions that sustain their comfort. The play's realism thus fractures: workers, employers, and audience members are all drawn into the same web of implication. As Richer explained in an interview, his aim was not to denounce from a distance but to create a space where contradiction and complicity could coexist. Jacqueline, one of the actresses, described this process in detail during an interview:

> "*Around mid-August, maybe before that in June, we had met three or four times to try things out. Jérôme had already written part of the text – all the archival material he had compiled – and he asked us, and filmed us, to talk about personal stories connected to cleaning work.*
>
> *Most of what I said in the performance was actually taken from what I had said during those interviews. For instance, I talked about having a cleaning lady for years without declaring her, but we have a special bond – Raquel has been working with us for twenty years now.*
>
> *When the Papyrus Operation took place, I accompanied her because I personally knew one of the organisers. Thanks to this, she got help with her paperwork, something she probably wouldn't have managed alone, because it was intimidating. I also talked about how my mother worked as a cleaner for years, and about my involvement in the Feminist Strike collective that prepared the first strike in 2019. There were many things that intersected*".
>
> (Jacqueline)

Jacqueline's account exemplifies how Richer's theatre blurred the lines between personal confession and structural critique. Her story is not one of moral redemption but of implication: it confronts the spectator with the messy coexistence of care and complicity, privilege and affection. Crucially, her words also drive the narrative back to the Feminist Strike – the site

where many of these networks and forms of awareness first converged. Having herself taken part in preparing the 2019 strike, Jacqueline embodied a bridge between two political grammars: the explicitly feminist and intersectional language of the Strike and the more intimate, experiential discourse of the theatre. Through her voice, the continuum between collective action in the streets and the affective work of theatre becomes visible. The play thus did not merely stage classed and racialised labour; it enacted the very circulations through which feminist and anti-racist consciousness travel between different political spaces.

It is important to say here that many of the cleaners involved in the 2019 strike were Portuguese women. This dimension adds another layer to the discussion of racialisation and whiteness in Swiss society. As several trade unionists have noted, including Maurizio from Unia, Portuguese workers occupy an ambiguous position: while they may be seen as 'European' and have gained partial social recognition, they remain, in many ways, not fully white. Unlike Italian migrants, Portuguese workers have often remained confined to low-wage, feminised sectors such as cleaning, elderly care, and hospitality. Their migratory paths are marked by a persistent temporariness – accompanied by an investment back home and eventually a return to Portugal upon retirement – which reinforces their structural marginalisation. This reflects a gradient of whiteness, a shifting boundary that includes and excludes according to class, labour, and visibility. Within this continuum, Portuguese women cleaners embody a form of racialised proximity: close enough to normative whiteness to remain invisible, yet far enough to carry its burdens. Their experiences complicate any simplified binary of white/non-white labour. Richer's play, by centring these voices, offers a performative critique of this unacknowledged racial order. Through this performance, racialisation becomes perceptible not as overt discrimination but as a structure of differentiation reproduced in the most ordinary relations of care and work. In this sense, the play's performativity is not only representational but pedagogical and transformative. It teaches audiences to see differently: to perceive the unspoken hierarchies that organise everyday life, and to translate affect into political awareness.

Following the last performance, Jérôme Richer organised a collective discussion that brought together the workers, trade unionists, actresses, employers, the representatives of the institutions involved and the public. In a more intimate setting, the fourth wall dissolved. The dialogue after the play did not aim for consensus but *conscientização*. What had been abstract – the structures of precarity and invisibility – was rendered tangible. The performance thus exceeded the stage, transforming into a collective act of recognition, a moment where social roles could be renegotiated through dialogue. As Paulo Freire reminds us, "this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent

liberation" (Freire 2005, 54). In Richer's project, this principle takes shape materially. The theatre becomes a collective classroom where everyone – workers, activists, spectators – takes part in a process of shared learning. In this sense, performativity functions as a translation of significance: the body, the voice, and the gesture become mediating tools through which the meaning of a strike travels beyond the picket line. Theatre does not replace political struggle but re-articulates it in another register.

Here, the fall of the '4th wall' is more than a theatrical device; it is not merely a metaphor but a figuration, in Braidotti's (1998) sense, a material-semiotic expression that maps processes of becoming and relational transformation. The stage ceases to be a space of representation and becomes one of transformation, a living figuration of political learning, where new relational subjectivities can emerge. Through this movement, the political life of the strike and of labour struggles against processes of differentiation and hierarchisation extends into the cultural fabric of the city, weaving together affect, critique, and embodied knowledge.

Conclusion

It is often at the end of a long trajectory that the beginning reveals itself.

In the winter of 2022, I found myself at the *Université ouvrière de Genève* for an event. Founded over a century ago by trade unionists and educators, the UOG has always been more than a school: a commons of words and worlds, linking past and present.

That night, the lights dimmed for the screening of Katherine Dominicié's *Lettres Ouvertes*. The film traced the histories of Geneva's seasonal workers – those who once crossed borders to clean, build, and care. Born from a larger collective project, part of the 2019 exhibition *Nous saisonniers, saisonnières, Genève 1931-2019*, it wove open letters from former workers, their children, and grandchildren into dialogue with the archives – letters and documents facing one another like mirrors, bringing the silences of the 20th century back into the light.

After the screening, the filmmaker, trade unionists, film protagonists, and the audience entered a dialogue. Among those present were ex-seasonal workers, now in their late eighties. One of them asked to speak. His voice, hesitant at the start, gained clarity and strength, carried forward by the attentive presence of the room.

Merita, both a protagonist in the film and a trade unionist at the SIT, then took the stage. Her presence was more than symbolic: she was a bridge across struggles and generations. She had contributed to the *Lettres Ouvertes* project, her letter addressed to her father – an Albanian seasonal worker who had migrated to Switzerland to escape persecution in Yugoslavia.

In 2019, Merita was among the trade unionists who supported the cleaners' strike.
In 2022, she was there again, after the play, in conversation with the workers, Jérôme Richer, and the public.
Listening, remembering, witnessing how stories travel from the street to the screen to the stage, and back again.

That night at the UOG, something came full circle. The people, the struggles, returned in new shapes: a film, a letter, a play, a

conversation. The past and the present did not follow one another; they folded into each other.

The way stories travel between us, finding new forms and new meanings each time they are told, is perhaps what endures most.

It is often in the act of witnessing, of tracing histories and presences, that the past returns to illuminate the present. The fieldwork and encounters documented in this research reveal not only the circulation of feminist and anti-racist practices, but the ways in which histories of racialisation, exclusion, and struggle continue to resonate in contemporary spaces of mobilisation. To historicise race is to recognise the long lineage of structures, hierarchies, and violences that shape who is seen, who is counted, and whose life is valued. It is also to see the enduring traces of those who resisted – the workers, women and men, migrants, feminists, and collectives who fought to dismantle these hierarchies, sometimes in silence, sometimes in public, sometimes through language, words, or the embodied, performative interventions documented here.

The practices described in this thesis represent only fragments – selected moments within a far vaster and more complex anti-racist landscape – with a deliberate focus on spaces connected to labour and the history of trade unionism. These moments and practices are not isolated; they are continuations, echoes, and rearticulations of earlier histories of struggle, though often without knowledge of it. The absences or silences within memory, are themselves part of the story. One of the aims of this thesis has been to gesture toward that memorial void: to underline the importance of the past not as nostalgia, but as a resource for imagining other futures, for thinking critically with and against each time and context.

In mid-20th century Western Switzerland, Italian and Spanish migrants, before aspiring to be comprehended by the oppressor, built their own infrastructures of solidarity: newspapers, workers' clubs, cooperative networks, and practices that allowed them to name themselves before being named. They spoke in languages that did not seek translation but affirmation, crafting alternative grammars of belonging. Today, the anti-racist experiences traced here – the insistence on systemic racism and the calls for intersectional care – inherit, transform, and sometimes unknowingly echo those same gestures.

Yet these resonances do not flow only from past to present; they also move across geographies. The actors encountered in this research carry with them migratory trajectories that are themselves archives of struggle, survival, and collective invention elsewhere. Their

practices bear the imprint of other histories: of Italian workers' movements in Italy, of resistance to the Francoist regime in Spain, of feminist mobilisations in Latin America, of organising in the Philippines, of revolution in Iran, and of post-colonial solidarities forged across borders. The power of migration, in this sense, is epistemic: it transports ways of knowing and resisting that exceed national narratives. The continuity lies not in form, but in refusal – the refusal to remain invisible, the refusal to be contained within the vocabulary of the state and its multiple tentacles. Here, the key lies in dialogue and exchange: in the fragile, transformative encounters through which these trajectories meet, speak, and reshape one another.

These encounters show that anti-racist struggles are neither linear nor bounded. They are sustained through friction, through the constant negotiation between movements and institutions, between the language of resistance and the structures that seek to contain it. History teaches that such radical perspectives endure only when pressure from outside continues to press upon the centre, when the pulse of the street reverberates. The transformative potential of these movements lies precisely in maintaining that tension, refusing closure, and sustaining movement.

The sites explored in this research – where labour, feminist, and migratory experiences intersect – should not be read as a comprehensive map of anti-racist practice, but as particular constellations within a broader, shifting terrain. They serve as vantage points rather than endpoints: spaces where historical legacies of organising converge with contemporary experiments in solidarity. Within these porous and tension-filled zones, sometimes outside yet often adjacent to institutional centres, racism is not merely denounced but actively contested. Here, diverse subjectivities meet, forging fragile yet vital coalitions through the very practice of contestation, delineating the contours of anti-racism not as a fixed ideology, but as a living and contested practice, one that must be continually rearticulated to remain alive and transformative.

The thesis underscores how knowledge travels: from the streets to trade unions, from embodied performance to institutional and cultural arenas. Practices of visibility, critique, and care are absorbed, refracted, and reinterpreted, producing new vocabularies, sensibilities, and forms of solidarity. In this sense, anti-racism becomes a praxis lived across temporal and spatial scales: a pedagogy of praxis (Freire 1970), sustained by circulation, encounter, and reflection. Yet, there remains much to explore – the full dynamics of intersectional alliances, the evolution of institutional responses, and the ways global solidarity movements might draw on these insights to intervene meaningfully in local struggles.

Yet this work also opens questions left unexplored, trajectories yet untraced. How are these practices refracted in spaces beyond the spaces studied here? What forms of recognition and solidarity emerge when struggles intersect globally, across borders and political contexts? Contemporary mobilisations, such as marches in support of the liberation of Palestine, reveal the persistence of these questions. Students, activists, and participants from associations and institutions assemble together, negotiating the tension between universalist humanitarian discourse and the direct naming of racialised power. Here, the limits of traditional 'humanitarian' frames become apparent: calls for solidarity risk being absorbed into narratives of pity or passive compassion, masking the systemic violence and structural inequalities that sustain global hierarchies.

This research has shown that the recuperation of critique by the state and capital is an ever-present risk. Anti-racist and feminist practices, even when embodied and performative, remain vulnerable to neutralisation if they do not confront the mechanisms of power at every level, within institutions, within markets, and within everyday social relations. Structural racism, colonial legacies, and economic extraction do not vanish with individual awareness or symbolic gestures; they require persistent, critical, and material engagement. As Weill-Lévy and colleagues argue,

> The repression of democracy, the anti-Jewish concentrationary barbarism, now symbolise a detested past… The Swiss authorities will bow to this evolution. They will take particular care to produce a limited critique of their antisemitism in order to preserve the 'foreigner policy' and will therefore forge this theory (…) according to which the totalitarian and Nazi environment surrounding Switzerland made the anti-Jewish measures they had to impose inevitable. That contemporary Swiss asylum policy remains the same as that applied yesterday to Jews and other minority groups (national, political, trade unionists) will surprise no one. It remains subject, as it was, to the 'foreigner policy' and to the racist and discriminatory criteria that dominate it". (Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 42)

This insight highlights the persistence of institutionalised racism and the danger of allowing critique to be contained within narratives that neutralise responsibility. Colonialism, in this sense, is never merely a past event or a localised occupation; it is a total system whose continuities must be named, interrogated, and contested if anti-racist and feminist practices are to maintain their transformative force.

As Freire (1970) reminds us, the task is both radical and relational:

> The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both... True generosity lies in striving so that these hands – whether of individuals or entire peoples – need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world... They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. (Freire 1970, 44-5)

Within this framework, solidarity cannot be passive; it cannot reside in gestures of pity, nor in the abstract universalism that avoids naming power, race, or structural exploitation. Freire's insistence on praxis, on the struggle of the oppressed to restore their own humanity and that of others, resonates beyond individual movements. It underscores the necessity of collective action, of spaces where political knowledge, embodied experience, and structural critique circulate and transform those who engage in them. It is within these moments of co-presence, risk, and shared responsibility that anti-racist and feminist politics are not only articulated but performed. True anti-racist solidarity, in this sense, begins with understanding and contesting the mechanisms of one's own society, while extending outward to connect struggles globally, through shared, embodied, and dialogical practices.

Such praxis also requires, finally, a reckoning with the historical conditions that have made racial capitalism natural, inevitable, or economically rational. Racism is not merely reproduced through discourse or policy, but through the organisation of labour, value, and accumulation itself, binding racial difference to regimes of extraction and inequality over time. To confront this entanglement is to refuse inherited narratives of progress and neutrality, and instead to reopen history as a contested terrain – one in which dismantling racialised forms of exploitation becomes inseparable from imagining futures not governed by them.

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