

# WORKING ON MARGINS

## An Anthropological Analysis of the Italian Supply Chains in two Eastern European Countries

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Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the Eastern European countries, the new governmental authorities embarked rapidly upon a series of wide-ranging legislative reforms in the economic, political and institutional domains. This process began as an economic reform within the existing framework and subsequently developed into a so called *transition* to market oriented economy. The reform process was not linear and the social costs of the transition have been considerable (Burawoy, Verdery, 1999). The gross domestic product dropped significantly during the years immediately after the start of the transition. Its 1989 level was first recovered in Poland in 1996 only, followed towards 2000 by Albania, Hungary, Slovenia, the Slovak Republic, followed closely by the Czech Republic. The inflation rate reached high peaks in some countries, for example, as high as 578 per cent in Bulgaria, 152 per cent in Romania in 1997, and 251 per cent in Belarus in 1999 (Dorbritz, 2003).

As a consequence of these political and economic changes, first Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland and then Romania and Moldova were included as countries with low labour costs in the Italian companies' production geography. A number of factors played a role in prompting this phenomenon: tax incentives for foreign investors, the possibility of recruiting, a labour force already trained in the many State industries that went bankrupt after 1989, the low wages and a shortage of trade union organisations.

At the centre of this analysis is the transfer of Italian producers to Romania and Moldova. This relocation has helped redefine the geography of labour in an area straddling the European Union. The choice of territory in which to relocate production cannot simply be ascribed to the low-cost of labour without considering the possibility of *translating* life in its various forms into suitable

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conditions for the deployment of the logic of capital (Chakrabarty, 2000). It involves translating the conditions and relations found in the abstract *low-cost labour* force category into *facts*, and as such, considered as able to be quantified.

The categories, most commonly used today to represent global production, such as *value chains* or *global production network*, are the terrain where this translation takes shape. For this reason, in an anthropological analysis of global production we need to overcome the notion of the division of labour to which these categories more or less explicitly refer. The debate that has developed about location, territory and scale in the context of the so-called *spatial turn* of social sciences supports the attempt to give an alternative interpretation of the geographic reorganisation of capitalism. Reference to reflective images (Appadurai, 1998) and more generally to categories other than strictly economic ones not only questions the smooth vision of the globe and negotiates distances produced by those interpretations, but also asserts the spatiality and the substantive forms of life at work (Bhabha 1994 ; Gupta, Ferguson 1999).

In this light, I dedicate my attention in this essay to the proliferation of borders and margins between different types of work in the various territories (Mezzadra, Neilson 2013). Global network production is undergoing continuous change, not only because enterprises are always looking for new places to increase value production, but also because of the presence of frontiers that give people different margins of social, political and legal action. The reconfiguration of capital space clashes with the needs of those who refuse to be given low wage jobs, and capital mobility comes up against an equally mobile living labour (Castles, Miller, 1993).

An anthropological analysis of global labour cannot ignore the instability of the margins, that is to say the way in which territories gain or lose economic power (Harvey, 1985). For this reason, the ethnography underlying this analysis is the result of gradually *shifting* the borders of the area of research including different countries and a longitudinal analytical perspective (Burawoy, 2003). This perspective proved necessary to reveal the companies' relocation strategies in relation to the negotiations and conflicts that occur in the more marginal areas — metaphorically and literally — of the global production network.

### **Production Network as Social Arena**

The sphere in which this analysis develops is that of production geographically dispersed by means of a contract and then regrouped according to a *network* logic (Ohmae, 1990). From the 'nineties' this method enabled companies even very distant from each other to interact, creating a product that is today the result of work done in different countries under very different working and wage conditions. Decentralisation of Italian production developed from the nineteen-seventies nationally and then internationally to enlarge the catchment area

for recruiting low wage labour and gain access to new markets. After 1989 in Italy, the outsourcing strategy was extended towards Eastern European countries. In Romania this delocalisation was particularly remarkable<sup>2</sup>. Following the fall of the Ceauşescu regime at the end of 1989, tens of thousands of Italian companies transferred their production to Romania<sup>3</sup>. In most cases, they were small enterprises that outsourced one or more production phases with raw materials sent from Italy and then re-exported the finished or semi-finished product to western markets.

From the mid-nineties, an intense multidisciplinary debate concentrated on this delocalisation. Economic approaches in particular, concentrating on company governance, have demonstrated the logic behind the move and the consequent economic advantages. From this perspective, relocating production has been explained in relation to characteristics considered intrinsic to the various territories, such as the availability of labour, low labour costs and a favourable legal and political framework. There are discussions on multi-territorialisation of enterprises because they geographically distribute their activities to places that are different from the others, i.e. the *competitive differentiation* that distinguishes them (Rullani, 1998). From this point of view, a place's *convenience* has not been determined only by its low production costs but by a series of local characteristics such as, for example, the availability of raw materials and culture understood as a set of skills sedimented in the territory.

On various occasions between 1999 and 2009, I have conducted ethnographic research in Romania on the businesses involved in woodworking in Transylvania<sup>4</sup> and on those active in clothing and footwear manufacture in the Banat region<sup>5</sup>. The analysis of the movement and the entrepreneurs' reasons

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2 The presence of supply networks can be detected by import data. All Italian imports from Eastern Europe Countries are very concentrated. For example, during the nineties Romania was the largest supplier of clothing products (50% of total Italian clothing imports from Eastern Europe), followed by Hungary (28%), Poland and Bulgaria (8% each) and the Czech and Slovak Republics (7%) (Graziani, 1998).

3 Italy is still Romania's prime trading partner in terms of the number of businesses. There are estimated to be approximately 37.000 Italian companies in Romania (Ice, 2014). As for the value of the direct investments, Italy is in fourth place after the Netherlands, Germany and Austria (*Info Mercati Esteri*, 2018).

4 For two months respectively in 1999 and 2001, I carried out fieldwork in the city of Cluj-Napoca by means of semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs, workers and trade union representatives.

5 During doctoral and postdoctoral fieldwork, I stayed for extended periods (in 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2009) in the city of Timișoara and conducted over a hundred semi-structured interviews with Italian entrepreneurs, Romanian workers and trade union and institutional representatives involved in various ways in Italian companies' activities.

for relocating has led me to depart from a static and locally concluded outlook like the one I have just described. The entrepreneurs I met during fieldwork tended to dilate the boundaries of the economic area, which therefore appeared more similar to what Fredrick Barth (Barth, 1963) has defined as an economic *niche*. This idea has the merit of highlighting not only the entrepreneur's position vis-à-vis resources, competitors and customers but above all the relationship between the entrepreneur and the context in which he finds himself in various spheres of exchanges. In the intricacies of this complex interaction, it becomes possible to define the characteristics of a given territory. In this regard an Italian entrepreneur reported:

First I was a commercial intermediary in the timber sector and worked in the former Yugoslavia. Then war upset everything and to save money I came to Romania. Here too, I started with marketing but then I had to go into production because otherwise I couldn't work. At one point in Romania they blocked marketing and allowed only exports of processed timber. I had already set up quite an important business here, so what I could do? Either leave or adapt to the system. And I adjusted: training the labour force, looking for political connections that are indispensable here and also dealing with bureaucracy that is more... controllable here, in the sense that money is always the key to every licence and every authorisation.

As can be understood from this entrepreneur's words, when negotiating and corrupting<sup>6</sup> he is acting on an economic, institutional and political level. Although these fields of action are not necessarily in communication and they are seen as spheres of exchange in which assets of differing values circulate, this activity goes with the activation of channels for the conversion of values from one sphere to another. Italian companies are not independent of public intervention and institutional decisions that may turn out to be more or less favourable and that can be facilitated. Even if norms, services and favours in the public sector are not always exchangeable with money, there are legitimate channels via which money can be converted into these decisions: through contributions, sponsorships or public support. Through these channels an opening is made between one sphere and another and the company becomes a catalyst of (financial, productive or normative) factors, which the entrepreneur must manage and adjust to. This is how it is shaping the arena (Olivier de Sardan, 1995) in which the resources of a given territory appear accessible. Political and economic relations between institutions and social actors are thus decisive

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<sup>6</sup> During the years of the investigation the possibility of corrupting the authorities was quite frequent. Anthropologist Filippo M. Zerilli thoroughly analysed some of these practices and their meanings (2003).

in evaluating the appeal of a territory that does not exist *a priori*, but only in the collective bargaining framework.

### Networks and Chains

As we have seen, a territory's appeal is defined within a framework of heterogeneous relations permeating the companies and their activities (Selim, Sugita, 1991). In a situated analysis of the work dynamics, it is also necessary to consider the displacement of these relations. The supply companies working in Romania are restricted by costs and production parameters established elsewhere by the contracting companies whether multinational or large companies located in Italy. Supply relations therefore develop among subjects with very different discretionary powers: the large companies that retain some of the control or production phases and entrust others to supply companies abroad (Tsing, 2009). In this sense Romania and, as we shall see, Moldova are links in what is defined the *global value chain* (Gereffi, Korzeniewicz, 1994). This category is used to explain the organisation of economic processes on a world scale and the relations between geographically dispersed firms and the power relations within them. In the anthropological analysis, the metaphor of the *chain* is useful to highlight the hierarchy of productive relations at various levels: between the production sites and the management and control ones, between the contracting companies and suppliers and between the latter and the workers.

As Frédéric Lordon has clearly shown (2010), the hierarchical relations existing within the firm tend to be reproduced, even more intensively in subcontracting areas. Subcontracting relations are characterised on the one hand by extremely conflictual relations between companies "owing to the vital importance of keeping their contracts" and on the other hand the "implacable logic according to which the violence inflicted is proportional to the violence received" (*id.*: 47). The economically most convenient place in which to locate production is not therefore geographically demarcated but is defined in a field of relations that exist on several levels. It is the result of the conflict between the contractors who tend to reduce costs and the subcontractors who seek to increase their profit margins by regulating and controlling the labour force. In Romania, after giving the work to subcontractors, the contracting firms have built or purchased production plants *in loco*. On this basis, they have renegotiated the prices of the orders and forced the suppliers to move where the cost of labour is even lower. The suppliers' network has thus gradually moved from the major Romanian cities to rural areas that often lack infrastructure (public lighting, tarmac roads, and gas pipelines), means of transport and alternative occupations. Many Italian companies in Romania have been defined *tortoise companies* because they continually move with their own material and machinery and install themselves in rented

industrial warehouses. The purchase of industrial buildings is incompatible with the search for more and more advantageous wages and working conditions. Elsewhere I have defined them as *de-delocalisations* (Redini, 2008) and they occurred first within Romania and then in neighbouring countries such as Moldova, where there are highly flexible conditions and low labour costs. For this reason the city of Timișoara, a hub for Italian companies<sup>7</sup> until the beginning of the 21st century, grew into a logistics centre for the activities that have been relocated from 2006 (Redini, 2011). In this process that the entrepreneurs indicated saying, “Romania is over”, the rise in costs and wages played an important role in the phase preceding its accession to the European Union. However, for a deeper understanding of the implications, an informer considered a series of factors:

In Romania, the Italian subcontractors who gained from low-cost labour margins have almost disappeared. There are various reasons for this: contracting companies arrived and applied a general decrease in subcontracting prices. Therefore, many have closed down and others have gone to Moldova where prices are lower. But another very important factor to consider is that in Romania there is now a labour shortage.

Romanian migration, with a visa regime that is more favourable than in neighbouring countries, has taken place since the early nineties owing to the various movement dynamics (Diminescu, 2003). This migration massively involved people unwilling to accept tight work schedules and low wages, as a Romanian woman who used to work in an Italian company reports:

Footwear manufacturing is hard work, you stay for 8 hours in front of a machine, always doing the same thing and you are always under the boss’s eye. The boss treats us as if we were famished children. So, if I have to work here for 120 euros a month, I’ll go to Italy and be paid 900!

The work relations described in this testimonial refer to the fact that the Italian companies’ activity in Romania was created involving the political and symbolic dimension of *transition* towards a market economy. During fieldwork in a footwear factory in Timișoara, I noticed that the daily work relations were characterised by a marked paternalism aimed at forming subjectivities suited to specific production requirements. In the Italian entrepreneurs’ accounts and in Romanian political discourse, the western capitalist enterprise was presented as “the way towards the Nation’s future” (Barbu, 2001: 3). Foreign investments

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<sup>7</sup> Until 2005 more than 15% of all the Italian firms in Romania were concentrated in this area (Ice, 2007).

have represented a dreamlike horizon for the workers, also. Those hired by Italian companies often told me of their enthusiasm to be part of “a new way of working” after the sudden layoffs, the closure of companies and unpaid wages in the Romanian companies in the nineties (Kideckel, 2008).

The economic development and entrepreneurial spirit narratives played an active part in the process of translating specific modes of life into working and social behaviours suited to the logic of capital. The rhetoric about *education for work* and *for modernity* had the aim of justifying and legitimising particularly tight work schedules. In Romania, as in other countries in Eastern Europe, Italian companies set a higher daily production rate than that of the Ceauşescu regime. This difference was not only maintained by a strict labour discipline (controlling working hours, breaks and workers’ freedom of movement inside the factory) but it was also maintained by the rhetoric on the role of a civilising rupture with the communist past. The entrepreneurs disputed the workers’ passive attitude, poor reliability and inability to understand the company’s requirements as attitudes inherited from the Ceauşescu regime (Verdery, 1996). These narratives appeared to be seeking a degree of social peace in work places because these specific work and wage conditions were fully legitimated by the civilising mission that entrepreneurs took upon themselves in a Romania in transition.

Socio-anthropological analyses have highlighted the processes of precarisation and pauperisation of labour in connection with the development of production in the global network (Kasmir, Carbonella, 2014). Labour processes are not only affected by local and international adjustments. For example, the definition of high or low skill does not necessarily correspond to the worker’s actual activity or skill, but above all on the possibility that specific kinds of discussion will be recognised, legitimised, and eventually become a source of profit (Bazin, 1996). Critical literature on social sciences has demystified the horizontal outlook that the network category tends to evoke, on the one hand, a system where access depends on financial and technological resources and on the other hand, the wide distribution of control cores and hierarchical levels in space (Bazin, Bourdarias, Selim, 1999). For this reason, in an anthropological analysis of contemporary capitalism, we should concentrate on the marginal areas of the international labour market, namely the less visible, interstitial spaces of the network.

### **Network margins**

Analysing the development of capitalism, David Harvey (*op. cit.*) has suggested that attention should be paid to how it fluctuates between maintaining investments and their devaluation through the creation of new space for accumulation. It is in the light of this analytical trail that in my fieldwork I have

followed the entrepreneurs in their moves towards Moldova<sup>8</sup>. Here, as I have said, between 2006 and 2009, many small Italian enterprises had decided to delocalise their activities<sup>9</sup>. This former Soviet Republic too, after becoming an independent state in 1991, began a transition process towards a market economy that concentrated on attracting foreign capital by means of a very low-cost of labour<sup>10</sup>, tax and customs incentives and the creation of a Free Economic Zone.

From the production point of view, Eastern Europe is a broad *maquiladora* of the Western world, because within it are stark differences between rules and working standards (Ellingstad, 1997) and also because of the border policies and confinement policies that are an integral part of the economic and spatial restructuring of production (Mezzadra, Neilson, 2013). As we have seen, the transnational organisation of production, while freeing production from territorial limitations, has simultaneously been localised (Didry et al., 2004) via zoning techniques in managing flows of people (Ong, 2006). Today Moldova is one of the areas where the cost of labour is lower than those that have recently joined the European Union also because the movement of workers is linked to the distribution of visas (Keough, 2006). This is a crucially important factor in setting up *production networks* because manpower is not only a labour force resource, but also has social and political characteristics that are under continuous transformation due to historical experience. The agency of the workers who renounce the physical fatigue, routine and low wages of the delocalised production sectors are therefore more carefully considered when structuring production assembly before being removed to the category of *Countries with low labour costs*. In the testimonials of Moldovan workers, it finds a way of re-emerging. For example, Irina, a former worker in a clothing company in Chişinău, relates her migratory path clearly showing the subjugation systems aimed at immobilising workers in a low wage condition:

Before leaving, I was working in an underwear company. It was very hard work, we were always under inspection for everything and I never earned more than thirty

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**8** In the months of January and February 2009 I conducted ethnographic research in Moldova, in the city of Chişinău as part of a comparative analysis project in Moldova, Ukraine and Romania (Sacchetto, 2011). In this context I conducted semi-structured interviews with Italian entrepreneurs, Moldovan workers and Moldovan migrants who had returned to their home Country.

**9** In this period the Italian companies rose from twentieth (2006) to fifth (2008) place in the list of foreigners present in the country (Ice, 2008).

**10** In the 2014 the Clean Clothes Campaign (2014) found that the average salary in the garment and footwear sector was about 90 euros.

euros a month. My husband worked too but it was no good, there was not enough money. So we decided to leave. We sold our flat to obtain the money to buy our visas and we left. The first time it went badly. We didn't manage to buy our visas, we were stopped in Slovenia and from there they brought us back and dumped us in Romania. We tried again to ask for visas at the German Embassy, but without success. Then we decided to entrust ourselves to a company<sup>11</sup> of people who told us, "you must go there, you will meet a person, that person will take your passports, they will do what they have to do and you must pay them".

In analysing the delocalisation of companies, the migration of workers, in this case subjected to corrupt practices to obtain visas and the irregular conditions in the countries of destination, reveals an emblematic contradiction. On the one hand, we are confronted with companies that move fairly smoothly within and across different territories ; on the other hand, there seem to be obstacles against the movement of workers.

The people who manage the production process are aware of the impossibility of separating the workforce from the worker in flesh and blood and from his refusal to be labelled as a low-paid worker. From an analysis of entrepreneurial activity, the production method of what the economic analyses instead present as a given fact can be seen more clearly. The Italian companies in Moldova have implemented flexible methods of establishment relying on margins and borders and have succeeded in including several countries in the same industrial project. An Italian entrepreneur, who has moved to Moldova after ten years in Romania, says:

Here in Moldova I have a tailoring company where we complete the sewing phases for an Italian company that has continued some of its activities in Romania. I moved because after joining the European Union the costs had become too high there and it was no longer possible to work. This, for me, at least for the moment, is a bit like the last frontier. Of course it is not final because of the continuous effort to enable my women [the workers] to work well and because I don't know if in future I will be able to have a workforce. If migration continues like this I won't have one anymore because people come to work one day and not the next. This is why I am stuck in a village where people have not yet gone away.

As shown in this testimonial, production assemblies are modelled bearing in mind both migration from rural areas where companies traditionally find low-cost workers and the bargaining power of those who, thanks to the migrants' earnings, have been able to choose not to seek employment. The latter

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**11** Here the informer refers to the networks that manage irregular frontier crossings.

aspect is particularly important. It is both a form of resistance against the logic of traditional, paid work and a way of negotiating more advantageous contract terms and, finally a factor that can transform the labour geography whence it originated. When a family considers the possibility that one of its members will emigrate, they do not only compare the wages they can earn *here* and what they can earn *there* but also how to invest *at home* the money received *from abroad*. Thus, those who have remained can decide whether or not to seek employment on the labour market. In this way the remittances short-circuit the wages that Italian enterprises are prepared to pay. These enable people to live although they are unemployed, finding informal employment and obtaining supplies, in rural areas, from their vegetable gardens. By bearing in mind all of these parameters, it is possible to define the wage margins, the enterprises' choice of location and the composition of the workforce employed. In the Italian enterprises I have examined, the recruitment strategies took into consideration the migration potential. Where there was a particular shortage of manpower, sometimes the entrepreneurs would guarantee a period of unpaid leave for short-term (seasonal) migration. More frequently however they preferred to hire more fragile people, especially married women, often divorcees with dependent children, concluding that they would not leave the country, or people who had no migratory experience. Workers who worked abroad are not likely to accept lower wages; they give an indication of the wage negotiations that employers would rather avoid.

As we can see, archipelago production may be structured owing to the presence of a political archipelago consisting of islands endowed with different types of government (Ong, *op. cit.*). Delocalisation and the presence of a low-cost labour force are not given phenomena but the result of a continuous bargaining process on the margins. The ethnographic investigation shows that the distribution of activity in many places is not based on the differences between one place and another, but based on spaces with different conflicts between the actors. Thus it is the web of contacts, conflicts and mediations between companies, the workforce and its agency that define the appeal of one territory as opposed to another and therefore explain, based on the economic situation and instability, the development of production networks on a world scale (Tsing, *op. cit.*).

## Conclusion

This analysis has been developed in the fragmented and scattered geography of production taking place in different places: those where higher added value is achieved and in other places, where labour is standardised, *routine* and low-cost.

I discussed some of the categories most widely used in analysing this organisation: *global value chains* and the *global production network*. Although the latter is more sensitive than the former to the context of each activity, since

these ideas evoke characteristics considered as intrinsic to the territories, they give an image of geographic and social space as an inert support to production. In this way, they eclipse the socio-cultural dynamics that allow the deployment of productive activities and the power-related issues between the actors involved in these relations.

Starting with the Italian supply companies' delocalisation strategies in Romania and Moldova, I tried to uncover the practices that build what in economic analyses appears as a *given* and through which the resources of a given territory become accessible.

The analysis concentrates on relations between *leading* companies, suppliers and workers and particularly among the latter. The examination of this relationship shows the entrepreneurial and management logic employed in network capitalism and the methods through which work practices are defined. In the cases examined, low-cost labour is justified by the entrepreneurs who refer to the workers' backwardness and *simplicity*, i.e. their *culture*. In this way, fluctuating between the populism through which they exploit the workers' capacity to live with low wages and the miserabilism with which they denounce their lack of autonomy (Grignon, Passeron, 1989), the subcontractors deflect the conflicts from wage claims and from work conditions. Such rhetorical practices are not only intended to sustain the production process but also work towards legitimating its development. The reduction to an essence and the stereotyping of labour are thus the expressive dimension of specific hierarchic relations, but also use words to create reality (Herzfeld, 1992).

These strategies are an essential part of the methods through which the territorial and labour force blends can occur in worldwide production, since production is not independent of the social context and of its labour agency potential. The workers, refusing to be labelled as a low-cost workforce through migration, undermine the location choices made by the Italian enterprises. The migrations urge us to reconsider the relationship between enterprises, the territory and pay levels, owing to the intense migration from rural areas where companies traditionally find low-cost labour and to the bargaining power of those who, thanks to the migrants' remittances, can remain inactive.

Proliferation of the frontiers between the post-soviet Republics and the enlargement of the European Union space are the backdrop for this research. In this scenario, the unequal possibility of migrant movement in comparison with capital movement reveals that a major factor in perpetuating low-cost labour is the deviation rather than the reduction of these flows (Gambino, Sacchetto, 2007). For this reason, the *chains* within this analysis refer not only and not so much to the link between the various productive activities, but to the attempt to limit or channel the workers' mobility. The Italian companies' move from Romania to Moldova was made possible thanks to the role of heterogeneous

borders (Mezzadra, Neilson, *op. cit.*), both in marking and legitimating wages and differentiated working conditions and in limiting and directing the migrants towards specific areas of action.

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### SUMMARY

By diversifying working methods and conditions, outsourcing on a world scale has led to new production of geographies, complicating the idea of a strictly limited economic area. Based on ethnographic research on Italian firms' supply chains in Romania and Moldova, the purpose of this article is to show the formation of marginal figures of the European and non-European labour market. In highlighting the strategic role of borders, I seek to anthropologically deconstruct the concept of the division of labour, showing the strategies of multiplication and diversification of work processes in the global production network. These processes contain programmes, institutions and economic development practices analysed here as classifications that produce representation and finally the presence of low-cost labour.

**Keywords:** Supply chains, work conditions, anthropology of labor, Romania, Moldova.

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### RÉSUMÉ

**Travailler sur les marges : Une analyse anthropologique des chaînes d'approvisionnement italiennes dans deux pays est-européens**

En diversifiant les méthodes et les conditions de travail, la sous-traitance a engendré de nouvelles géographies de la production qui compliquent la notion d'espace économique strictement délimité. Sur la base d'une recherche ethnographique sur les relations de sous-traitance des entreprises italiennes en Roumanie et en Moldavie, le but de cet article est de montrer comment est établie la catégorie des sujets les plus marginaux du marché du travail européen et non-européen. En mettant en évidence le rôle stratégique joué dans le réseau

global de production par les frontières, il s'agit de mettre en discussion dans une perspective anthropologique la catégorie de division du travail en montrant plutôt sa multiplication et diversification. Au cœur de ces processus, il y a des programmes, des institutions et des pratiques de développement économique qui sont analysés ici comme des classifications qui produisent le sens, les représentations et la présence de main-d'œuvre à moindre coût.

**Mots-clefs : Chaînes d'approvisionnement, conditions de travail, anthropologie du travail, Roumanie, Moldavie.**