Taking Stock of Two Decades of Change: The Alps and Alpine Anthropology in the Early Twenty-First Century[1]

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Abstract

This chapter proposes to take stock of the changes undergone by the Alps and Alpine anthropology in the early 21st century and concentrates on the largely unexpected reversal in migration trends and its socio-cultural effects, also in the light of anthropology's profound disciplinary reshaping in the same period. In order to put these recent or ongoing changes in perspective, however, the first sections revisit the quite different but significant changes experienced by Alpine anthropology in the late 20th century, most notably a growing involvement with history and the development of an ecological approach focused on the relations between human populations and natural resources. Although the demographic and especially climatic changes of the last two decades have brought about a shift from an ecological to a more explicitly environmental anthropology, community studies are nevertheless retaining their methodological centrality. This raises delicate issues about what should be meant by local community (and culture) in markedly changed sociodemographic settings. An analysis of the various kinds of "new highlanders" leads to an examination of the extent to which negotiations between old and new dwellers are affected by structural constraints, social cleavages and the availability of spaces for agency. Particular attention is paid to a topic that has so far been little explored by the anthropological literature on the Alps, namely intergenerational relations.

Keywords: Alps; Alpine anthropology; demographic change; intergenerational relations; community.

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1   Although this chapter, which overlaps only to a very limited extent with an article bearing a similar title we have recently published (Zanini & Viazzo, 2020), is the outcome of close collaborative work, the first three sections have been written by Viazzo, the other three by Zanini.

1. Gloomy Forecasts: The State of the Alps in the Late Twentieth Century

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the Alps seemed to have a reasonably foreseeable, and rather dark, future. Based on comparisons between census or census-like data collected around the year 2000 and evidence from previous censuses, the geo-demographic maps one could find both in the updated versions of Werner Bätzing's magisterial work on the Alpine region as a cultural landscape (Bätzing, 2003, 2005) and in the imposing *Alpenatlas* edited by Ulrike Tappeiner, Axel Borsdorf and Erich Tasser (2008) provided a general picture which was very similar to the one depicted, and predicted, in the early 1970s by the French geographer Germaine Veyret-Verner (1971). In a now classic article on population ageing in the Alps, Veyret-Verner had proposed a sequence of types ranging from "traditional" communities, where agriculture was still of primary importance and population was sharply falling, to the demographically much healthier tourist resorts, where increasing proportions of the inhabitants were engaged in service industries: all in all, however, she offered the desolate and alarming image of an Alpine society whose structural ageing was caused not only, and not so much, by a decline in fertility (as was mostly the case elsewhere in Europe) as by a massive process of mountain exodus, which was regarded by this influential scholar to be virtually ineluctable.

In the course of the three decades that had elapsed between the early 1970s and the end of the century things had changed a little, and not always for the better. Contrary to Veyret-Verner's expectations, the French Alps were displaying timid signs of recovery: a comparison between the 1981 and 2001 censuses showed that in this inter-censual period the population of a sizeable number of municipalities had grown to a variable extent after more than a century of uninterrupted decline (Bätzing, 2005, p. 361; Heinrich, 2008, p. 106), a symptom of incipient rejuvenation mainly stimulated, directly or indirectly, by the arrival of new inhabitants from outside (Bender, 2008, p. 112). These gains were, however, more than outbalanced on the southern side of the crescent by the spreading of a marked tendency to depopulation from the Piedmontese mountains to the rest of the Italian Alps, most notably the valleys of Veneto and Friuli, and it was now possible to spot population de-

cline even in some parts of the Eastern Austrian Alps (Bätzing, 2005, p. 355; Heinrich, 2008, pp. 106-107). Notwithstanding the partial trend reversal in the French Alps, the demographic fate of the Alpine space, trapped in a perverse spiral of depopulation and ageing, seemed to be settled.

Tourism still appeared to be the only viable option to keep and attract people, but dark clouds were already looming on the horizon. Temperatures had begun to climb suddenly in the 1980s, and by the end of that decade lack of snow had started to cause concern. Climate change had started, in particular, to be feared as a major threat to tourism (Elsasser & Bürki, 2002). This did not bode well for the Alps (and the whole world), yet predictions were still cautious as it was impossible to exclude the possibility of winters with copious snowfall in the future. The acceleration of global warning in the first decades of the twenty-first century, and the severity of its manifestations in the Alps, have thus largely come as a worrying surprise. The first two decades of the new century had other surprises in store for the Alps, though – and, this time, not necessarily for the worse. These unforeseen changes have obviously impinged heavily on the anthropological study of the Alps, which has on the other hand also been affected by methodological, theoretical, epistemological and ethical changes within the discipline at large. Before trying to take stock of the changes experienced by the Alps and Alpine anthropology since the beginning of the new century, it is therefore useful to have a quick look at the quite different changes undergone by Alpine anthropology in the previous twenty years or so.

2. Fin de Siècle Alpine Anthropology

Although the origins of Alpine anthropology can be traced back to Robert Hertz's field study of the cult of Saint Besse, a martyr saint worshipped in a cluster of communities in the Western Alps (Hertz, 1913), a decisive impetus only came in the first decades after the end of the Second World War, when an increasing number of anthropologists from British and especially North American universities headed for the Alps, where they encountered local scholars steeped in different national traditions of research on peasant life and popular culture (Viazzo, 1989, pp. 49–66). These encounters were not free

from tensions and reciprocal suspicions. The initial reaction of many Swiss *Volkskundler* to the methods and theoretical pronouncements of their Anglo-Saxon colleagues was apparently one of "resented astonishment" (Centlivres, 1980, p. 40). And in Austria, too, perhaps more than in Italy and France, there was debate about the costs and benefits of the research styles adopted by foreign anthropologists in the Alps. However, most Swiss and Austrian scholars eventually came to acknowledge that on balance the arrival of the *Amerikaner* had been beneficial. They had not only filled an "empty niche" in Alpine studies: they had also enlivened the stagnating world of folklore research and helped counteract its pernicious tendency towards a celebration of Alpine values and ways of life at times bordering on racism (Centlivres, 1980, p. 43; Ortmayr, 1992, pp. 132–140; Niederer, 1996, pp. 283–286; Johler, 1998, pp. 167–168). Indeed, they had at last allowed the natives to be "othered" by anthropologists from outside (Gottowik, 1998).

As Robert Anderson aptly observed in summarizing the state of play in Alpine anthropology around 1970, the two keywords were "ecology" and "change" (Anderson, 1973, pp. 69–80). Following the lead of Julian Steward, and confident that in the high Alpine valleys long-established ways of life were hanging on more stubbornly than in the plains, these anthropologists were at first mostly looking for uncontaminated and environmentally extreme research settings, where the extent to which the spatial and social-structural evolution of village communities had been shaped by environmental constraints could be neatly assessed (Burns, 1961). In many cases, however, anthropologists who had originally planned to work almost exclusively on mountain ecology and traditional livelihood strategies quickly discovered, once in the field, that local economies had gone through startling transformations. Thus, the focus of their research shifted from ecology to social and economic change, as exemplarily shown by John Friedl's experience in Kippel, a village in the Swiss Alps which had been selected from afar on the basis of slightly outdated statistical figures which suggested that economic self-sufficiency still held sway (Friedl, 1974).

A distinctive feature of the anthropological studies on the Alps published in the third quarter of the twentieth centuries was that the changes they described were set against an interpretive backdrop that relied much less on documented evidence than on the commonplace assumption that for a long

and indefinite time mountain communities had been geographically isolated, economically backward and culturally closed, and that they had been left almost intact until the Second World War, which had ignited a transition from a traditional past to a modernizing present. An assumption, it should be noticed, these anthropologists shared with historians. Highlanders, to quote the most prominent of all historians in those years, had been forced by geographical isolation and an exceptionally harsh environment "to be self-sufficient for the essentials of life. (…) In the mountains, society, civilization and economy all bear the mark of backwardness and poverty" (Braudel, 1966, p. 29). For Fernand Braudel, the mountains had been little more than a reservoir of manpower for other people's use, and their history "consisted in not having any history at all" (pp. 30–31).

These representations of the Alps were successfully challenged in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not least because of the role played by innovative anthropological research. A turning point was definitely represented by the publication of John Cole and Eric Wolf's landmark book *The Hidden Frontier* (1974), based on ethnographic and archival investigations conducted in two adjacent villages in the Eastern Italian Alps. Cole and Wolf's book was a plea for combining anthropology and history, and it is largely because of their influence that in the Alps bridges between the two disciplines were built and crossed at an earlier time than in most other sectors of anthropological research. Prior to the publication of Cole and Wolf's book, however, two other Alpine anthropologists had already complemented conventional ethnographic fieldwork with in-depth and imaginative archival research. Their investigations were both carried out in the early 1970s, but their impact was felt only in the 1980s, when the results of these investigations were eventually published in book form.

The first of these studies was Robert Netting's work on Törbel, a community in the Swiss Alps, whose hallmarks were the replacement of the cultural-ecological approach by ecosystemic models and an intensive exploitation of local micro-demographic data covering three centuries. Netting's skilful blending of anthropology and historical demography paved the way to the recognition that in the past, far from displaying a "primitive" demographic regime characterized by high levels of both fertility and mortality, as assumed by most demographers, historians and geographers, Alpine populations had

in fact experienced low birth and death rates (Netting, 1981, pp. 70–185). This entailed a rethinking of many central issues in Alpine historiography and demography, in particular the causes and consequences of emigration (Viazzo, 1989, pp. 120–152). In the same years, Harriet Rosenberg was gradually discovering through archival work that Abriès, the depopulated and remote village in the French Alps she had chosen for her fieldwork, had once been a wealthy, hardly isolated and highly literate commercial town, and that its marginalization and utter decline had been the paradoxical outcome of modernization (Rosenberg, 1988).

By the end of the twentieth century Alpine anthropology had profoundly changed, mostly because of its intense involvement with history. We should not forget, however, that although anthropological studies were crucial in questioning or even turning upside down the previously dominant image of the Alps *in the past*, their authors had little doubt that the communities where they had conducted their fieldwork were doomed, unless they could be rescued by tourism. The discovery that mountains, too, had a history – to quote the emblematic title of a book published in the mid-1990s (Walter & Korner, 1996) – certainly exerted a significant influence on the work of Alpine anthropologists in the last decade of the century, when their focus of activity gradually shifted to the protection and valorization of cultural heritage also through the foundation of ethnographic museums, whose number grew at an exponential rate (Bellwald & Antonietti, 1999, pp. 140–42; Viazzo, 2018, 264-65). But here, too, it was a sort of salvage anthropology spurred by the widespread belief that Alpine anthropology's principal mission for the future was to preserve the memory of things past, possibly to the benefit of cultural tourists venturing into more and more depopulated highlands. No one could perhaps divine the future waiting for Alpine anthropological studies just after the turn of the century. Intriguingly, ecology and change were to remain the two keywords, but in quite different, novel and unexpected ways.

3.   From Ecological to Environmental Anthropology

Netting's 1981 volume offered one of the most convincing illustrations of the "processual approach" in ecological anthropology, whose aims, principles and early achievements had been ably summarized in the same years by Benjamin Orlove (1980, pp. 245–61), then a rising star in Andean anthropology. Especially in Alpine studies, the strength of the researches that adopted this approach was their ability to collect and analyze empirical evidence which demonstrated that historical reality had quite often been very different from the dominant representations of mountain areas as ineluctably poor, backward and overpopulated relative to scarce natural resources. As such, they were in keeping with the still largely unchallenged historiographical task of debunking "deceptive myths" about the Alpine past (Bergier, 1996, p. 19). At the very end of the century, however, this strength rapidly turned into potential weakness when approaches relying on ultimately positivist epistemologies (as was the case of Alpine ecological anthropology) came increasingly under attack from postmodernist critics who were skeptical about the possibility of establishing historical truth or, indeed, about the very usefulness and legitimacy of searching for it. The new century opened with an article in which the Swiss anthropologist Gérald Berthoud branded as a "positivist illusion" the demythologization of Alpine history undertaken by a number of Swiss historians in order to inform their fellow-citizens about what had really happened in the past and free them from an imaginary vision of the Alps which lent itself to political manipulations (Berthoud, 2001, p. 93).

But the first two decades of the twenty-first century, as we have said, had many surprises in store. In anthropology, as well as in other human and social sciences, a big surprise was that postmodernism melted like snow in the sun, more rapidly than even its opponents would have dared hope. A much less metaphorical, but anthropologically equally significant surprise, has been the accelerated melting of Alpine glaciers, which has turned the Alps "into one of the hot spots and icons of global climate change" (Krauß, 2018, p. 1021). Climate change has indisputably played a decisive role in expediting the transition from what Conrad Kottak (1999) already dubbed "the old ecological anthropology", anthropocentrically focused on the relations between primarily human populations and natural resources, to a new environmental

anthropology with a research agenda that now ranges not only from political ecology to the study of indigenous environmental knowledge, but also to multispecies ethnography (Crate, 2011; Orr, Lansing & Doves, 2015). As Werner Krauß has recently remarked in a stimulating article on Alpine anthropology in the Anthropocene, the realization that humans may well be the main culprits, but are certainly not the only ones to experience the effects of climate change, has shifted the focus to Alpine landscapes "as assemblages of entangled human, geological, biological, and meteorological actors", a shift that "enables a new form of telling stories about human-environment relationships" (Krauß, 2018, p. 1021).

An emblematic example of this transition from ecological to environmental anthropology is provided by a series of studies on the perception of glacier retreat and, more generally, of climate changes in mountain areas published by a multidisciplinary research team headed by Orlove (Barnes et al., 2013; Jurt et al., 2015; Orlove et al., 2019). Mostly on the basis of ethnographic investigations conducted in three upland communities (one in the Andes, one in North America, one in the Alps), these studies reveal that glacier retreat is differentially perceived by those who look at the mountains from afar and by those who live in "forefront communities" close to the melting glaciers: while the former draw of what Orlove and colleagues call a *climate change frame*, which directs attention to global changes and the need for global solutions, the latter mostly draw on a *community frame* which "recognizes that societies in remote rural areas occupy a marginal position within national politics" and "emphasizes a 'we' of local societies". A community frame identifies both negative challenges and positive opportunities and most residents appear to believe that they can "address challenges and take advantage of opportunities, drawing on core values of local society (the strength of local identity, the importance of local self-reliance) and mobilizing their social ties and local organizations" (Orlove et al., 2019, p. 1299).

A point which needs to be emphasized is that Orlove and his colleagues are keen to insist, particularly when addressing non-anthropological readerships, on the benefits that may accrue to climate research from ethnographic investigations carried out "over extended periods of time in a single community or set of communities, gradually building relations of trust with research subjects, closely observing people's everyday activities, interactions

and conversations, and conducting interviews" (Barnes et al., 2013, p. 541). They are, in other words, reaffirming the persistent methodological soundness of community studies. As far as the Alps are concerned, however, this raises a question whose relevance and sensitivity have greatly increased over the past twenty years: who are, today, the members of Alpine communities? What are their local identities and the core values of the local societies of which they are part?

4.   Changing Communities

In the same year in which Germaine Veyret-Verner published her sombre article on the ageing of Alpine populations, the British anthropologist Frederick Bailey, who had conducted first-hand ethnographic investigations in the mountains of Piedmont and led a large-scale research project on socio-cultural and economic change in the Alps and the Pyrenees, portrayed a similarly dark picture. "For centuries", he wrote, "seasonal migration has been a feature of the mountain communities of Europe", and seasonal migration often precipitated permanent emigration. Until the Second World War, however,

> this process remained one of emigration; it was not yet depopulation. The surplus population went away from the mountains in great numbers, but it was still a *surplus* population. Sufficient people were left on the land and in the families to keep the family farm going (…). But since the end of the Second World War all this has changed. Emigration has turned into depopulation; the end of peasant farming in mountain areas (…) is now in sight. (Bailey, 1971, pp. 32–33)

These predictions were set forth by Bailey in a piece he entitled "Changing communities": changing both because they had been eventually caught up in the process of modernization and because the transformation of former migrations into sheer exodus condemned them to abandonment. It might well have been entitled "vanishing communities".

Bailey's account was historically and ethnographically not impeccable, and it has been rightly criticized (Albera, 1988). It also omitted to say that considerable differences existed between the French and Italian Alps, where

demographic decline had been more precocious and far more massive, and the more resilient Swiss and Austrian Alps. Still, it captured the prevailing feeling that depopulation was unstoppable and bound to increase even further. Once again, the new millennium was hiding surprises. As we have seen, signals of recovery could already be detected in the French Alps in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For the rest of the Alpine crescent, however, and in particular for the Italian Alps, the prognosis was poor. Contrary to this prognosis, from the early 2000s onwards the demography of Alpine regions started to take unexpected paths, which presaged the possibility of a different destiny non only for the already recovering French Alps, but also for the Italian uplands, thanks to more or less intense migratory flows moving upwards to the mountains and entailing substantial variations in the composition of the local populations, which now found themselves hosting not inconsiderable numbers of "new highlanders".

The reversal of the migratory and more generally demographic trend in the first decade of the twenty-first century was documented and analysed above all by geographers and territorial planners (Dematteis, 2011; Löffler et al., 2011; Bender & Kanitscheider, 2012; Corrado, Dematteis & Di Gioia, 2014), whose works gave rise to lively debates on what has been variously termed Alpine repopulation, upland resettlement, or return to the mountains, a multi-faceted phenomenon which was greeted with cautious optimism in both the academic and public domains. During the following decade, research has focused on the different ways in which the new socio-demographic dynamics were manifesting themselves. At first, attention was paid almost exclusively to experiences of mostly young people who had decided to leave urban life and settle in the mountains in order to put into practice neo-rural aspirations (Van der Ploeg, 2009). Subsequent studies made clear, however, that these "highlanders by choice", as they had been felicitously defined a few years earlier by Enrico Camanni (2002), were not the only ones to have recently moved to the Alps. In fact, they were outnumbered by "highlanders by necessity", a label designating the new and largely foreign mountain dwellers who have been attracted to the highlands by job opportunities and lower living and housing costs (Membretti, Kofler & Viazzo, 2017). In addition, there was another category of new dwellers which could not be neglected: the contingents of asylum and international protection seekers who were allocated

to mountain areas by national and local reception systems and were thereby made "highlanders by force" (Dematteis, Di Gioia & Membretti, 2018; Perlik et al., 2019).

By the middle of the second decade of the new century the fifth report on *The state of the Alps*, published by the Alpine Convention[2] and specifically devoted to the changing demography of the Alpine region, attested that "new highlanders" were omnipresent not only in the French and Italian Alps, but also in Switzerland and in western Austria, the only exception being the eastern Austrian Alps (Alpine Convention, 2015, pp. 44–60). During the long process of depopulation, Alpine communities had hardly been harmonious and homogeneous collectivities. Nevertheless, apart from tourist resorts, there was little or no population turnover. People were simply leaving their homelands without being replaced. The recent trend reversal has instead generated a population turnover with potentially far-reaching implications of undeniable anthropological relevance. Compared to what they were half a century ago, Alpine communities have greatly changed, but along trajectories neither Veyret-Verner nor Bailey could possibly have imagined. Change has been, however, path-dependent. The settlement of new inhabitants, in particular, and their margins for manoeuvre in the local economic, political and cultural arenas have been relatively encouraged or constrained by a whole set of circumstances that are the outcome of differential historical and demographic processes. Thus, in the French and Italian Alps, where the numbers of permanent residents had often plunged to exceedingly low levels, the arrival of new inhabitants, even when modest in absolute terms, may easily turn out to be far more significant on the local scene than in other parts of the crescent where depopulation has been less severe (Löffler et al., 2014).

A few years ago, we hypothesised that, paradoxically, massive depopulation might be an all-important precondition for subsequent repopulation (Viazzo & Zanini, 2014). This hypothesis had been sparked by some intriguing remarks we had come across in an article by the geographer Françoise Cognard on the French mountain district of Diois, where she contended that the demographic, spatial, economic and social void caused by a sharp decline

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2   The Alpine Convention is an international territorial treaty for the sustainable development of the Alps. Signed in 1991, it involves Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia, and Switzerland.

in the number of inhabitants had proved decisive in making reverse resettlement processes possible:

> Thanks to the vitality of certain local actors, the Diois truly become "actors of their own development", moving from an intercommunality of services to an intercommunality of projects associated to participatory initiative (…). This "committed minority" includes most notably some highly qualified neo-rurals who *have taken advantage of the relative emptiness created by years of emigration*. (Cognard, 2006, p. 8 [italics added])

Originated in a completely different setting, Cognard's contention tallied surprising well with the theoretical arguments that Francesco Remotti had recently advanced on cultural creativity and its preconditions. Remotti maintained, in particular, that since cultural creativity "needs space to express itself", a "thick culture" – or a strong social structure – will favour creativity less than a thin and impoverished culture or a weak social structure (Remotti, 2011, p. 292). If Cognard and Remotti were right, we could then surmise that the structural and cultural fabrics of a local community were a relevant factor in favouring or discouraging neo-settlement. Communities in which the social structure was – for historical and historical-demographic reasons – "empty", weak and loosely knit seemed to constitute an easier context within which to settle and experiment with new forms of living. On the contrary, contexts in which social structures had retained a greater solidity, and community fabrics had been less seriously unravelled, could be imagined to be more exclusionary, or at least less permeable to the arrival of new inhabitants.

This idea that Alpine emptiness – socio-structural and cultural even more than purely spatial and demographic – can favour, stimulate or indeed make possible social innovation and cultural creativity has enjoyed some success and has actually contributed to give the notion of emptiness new currency. We feel, though, that what had been originally intended as a theoretical suggestion to be verified through anthropological and ethnographic research may be used as a trivialized concept to quickly interpret highly heterogeneous territorial and demographic situations. A revisitation of mountain emptiness seems therefore in order. Before returning to this notion, however, we would like to direct attention to an issue which has been so far neglected by

the literature on the new inhabitants of the Alps, namely intergenerational relations.

5.   Generational Frames

Until not long ago, the term "local community" was used not only in political parlance but also in the studies of geographers and territorial planners to conveniently refer to human collectivities which tended to be represented as basically homogeneous, especially when they were located in mountainous and other marginal areas. Things have now changed. In the Alps, in particular, greater attention is now paid to the coexistence in the same communities of "new" inhabitants alongside "old" dwellers, people who are locally born and often belong to families of deeply-rooted local descent. This has understandably led to envisage the relationships between "old" and "new" highlanders almost without exception in terms of seniority of presence in the community, but they might and should also be conceived of in generational terms. When intergenerational relations do surface in the literature, however, it is usually to remark – or denounce – that the demographic collapse suffered by the Alps was mainly to be attributed to the exodus of the new generations. It is then sometimes added that the arrival of new inhabitants from outside is conversely inducing a demographic rejuvenation of local populations. Yet, these processes of demographic replacement pose questions which go well beyond demography. An important question, and one that anthropological research can scarcely avoid, concerns intangible heritage (Viazzo, 2012; Porcellana et al., 2016). Who is entitled to learn and transmit, and then promote and valorise, "local cultures"? In socio-political contexts that are characterised, like many Alpine communities today, by significant population turnover, the transmission of local culture not infrequently becomes the focus of complex negotiations, mainly perhaps between natives and new highlanders (Steinicke et al., 2011a; Membretti & Viazzo, 2017), but also between generations.

Over the past two decades the Alps have witnessed two migratory trends of opposite sign: the previous and often persisting, but not complete, abandonment of the highlands by the younger local generations, on the one hand,

and the arrival of new inhabitants from outside on the other. In such circumstances, the complex and delicate question of the transmission of cultural heritage is indeed helpful to conceptualize a single scenario in which the relationships between "old" and "new" highlanders intertwine with the relationships between anagraphically old and anagraphically new inhabitants, the latter category including both the local youth and the largely young immigrant population. The complexity and delicacy of this question is highlighted by a paradoxical outcome of population turnover. Especially in the ethnographic literature, cases are well attested of newcomers who prove very active and often decisive in keeping alive local traditions, be they agricultural, pastoral and artisanal activities on the verge of extinction or, rather, ceremonial activities threatened by fading interest or sheer lack of personnel to organize and perform the rituals (Membretti & Viazzo, 2017, p. 103). Admittedly, "highlanders by choice" tend to be more interested than economic migrants or refugees in ensuring the survival and revitalization of local crafts and rituals, as they are more likely to be driven and enthused by the fascination exerted by local cultural heritage. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that in the depopulated communities of the Alps cultural continuity is frequently made possible, to put it in a nutshell, by demographic discontinuity.

It is worth noting that Article 2 of the 2003 UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of intangible heritages states that intangible cultural heritage is "transmitted from generation to generation"[3]. This may intuitively be taken to mean that cultural heritage is, and should be, *vertically* transmitted primarily within the family, from fathers and mothers to their children, and secondarily from the older to the younger members of a community again intuitively imagined as a closed autochthonous population. The demographic make-up of many Alpine communities is, instead, rapidly changing. As a consequence, cultural heritage now increasingly tends to be transmitted *diagonally*, as it were, from elderly holders of local knowledge to younger immigrants, thereby securing a cultural "continuity within discontinuity". These processes are regarded with favour by many, with some concern by others. Concern has been expressed, most notably, by the Austrian geographer Ernst Steinicke and his associates in a number of studies on linguistic minor-

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3   http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

ity communities in the Italian Alps. They report that population turnover, in conjunction with new legislation, has caused the emergence of what they call a "diffuse ethnicity", grounded not so much in linguistic competence as in subjective assertions of belonging by new highlanders eager to claim the right to promote and enhance local culture. Their main point is that such novel representations of ethnicity are posing a threat to the survival of minority languages. What is especially relevant to our discussion is, however, that Steinicke and his colleagues also report that the spreading of various forms of diffuse ethnicity is detectable not only among new inhabitants, but also in the new local generations, who are progressively exhibiting a sense of belonging to the community resting not so much on linguistic competence as on a deep, intimate sense of living in the mountains and on the awareness that it is their task to take care of the unique and fragile Alpine landscapes (Steinicke, Čede & Fliesser, 2010; Steinicke et al., 2011a, 2011b; Beissman et al., 2012). A generational gap thus emerges, with local youngsters and the mostly young new dwellers who are more and more sharing representations of the territory and a sense of place that differ from those of the anagraphically older inhabitants.

The relationships between generations – and between those who belong to the same generations, irrespective of their origins and seniority of residence – may therefore turn out to be far more complex than a dichotomous distinction between old and new highlanders would lead us to believe. To venture into this complexity, the theoretical approach proposed by Orlove and colleagues (2019) to explore differing perceptions of glacier retreat and global climate change, and in particular their notion of *frame*, might prove helpful. For it does appear that what often unites local youngsters and new inhabitants, and separates them from older dwellers of the same local community, is an interpretive frame – in this case, a *generational frame*. But of course, local (and supra-local) dynamics are made even more complex by other intervening factors. Emphasizing the importance of generational frames is not to deny the existence of potential or actual cleavages stemming from origins and seniority of residence, which may intersect generational differences thereby creating communal fronts and oppositions that vary from one situation to another. And much also depends on the degree of demographic, social and economic emptiness of a mountain territory, a notion to which it is now time to return.

6. Emptiness Revisited: Structural Constraints, Social Cleavages and Spaces for Agency

In a concise historical survey of migration and mobility in the Swiss Alps, Anne-Lise Head-König has observed that not only in the Middle Ages, when the colonization of the high valleys was completed, but until the end of the sixteenth century substantial population movements were made possible "by the absence of restrictions on the settlement of newcomers, who were often welcomed". Populations losses due to epidemics, in particular, "encouraged some communities in the sixteenth century to grant local citizenship relatively easily to newcomers – in total contrast with what occurred from the seventeenth century onwards" (Head-König, 2011, p. 3). For the Swiss Alps, and more generally for the whole Alpine region, the seventeenth century was indeed a turning-point as far as migration and mobility are concerned. Because of partly political and partly demographic reasons, settlements of new inhabitants became rare events: "the immigrant who wanted to settle was often not welcome" and rights to marry foreigners were curbed (p. 5). Politically, state authorities increasingly used legal control mechanisms to determine who could emigrate or immigrate, and "the gradual establishment of more developed state structures at the commune level was aimed at limiting the mobility of the poorest elements of the population who could not prove they had local citizenship rights and were therefore not entitled to assistance" (p. 3). Demographically, restrictions were urged by a widespread process of population growth whose main causes were at first an epidemiological transition whereby plague epidemics suddenly abated and ceased to decimate local populations (Mattmüller, 1987, pp. 228–307), and, later on, an increase in agricultural productivity which stimulated further growth and led the population of the Alps to peak in the second half of the nineteenth century (Mathieu, 1998, pp. 3–8).

Since then, the Alps began to experience a process of demographic decline mostly due to outmigration, which ultimately resulted in extensive depopulation and abandonment. In other words, the Alps began to empty. As we have already briefly noted, however, this process was more precocious and far more massive in the French and Italian Alps than in the rest of the crescent. There can be little doubt that this difference is largely accounted for by

the greater strength and better timing of the *Agrarpolitiken* enacted by central and local governments in Austria and Switzerland throughout the twentieth century compared to the timid and disjointed measures taken to support mountain agriculture in France, where plans to revitalize Alpine economies began to be seriously launched only in the 1970s, and especially in Italy (Streifeneder, 2009, pp. 91–122). Nevertheless, the working of a set of restrictive rules that are still today distinctive of the Germanic Alps was also significant.

In Austria, customs of impartible inheritance were definitely more effective in keeping peasant families in the mountains than the partible systems that prevailed elsewhere in the Alps. And in both the Austrian and especially Swiss Alps a partly similar role was played by institutions of long standing which defined unambiguously the boundaries of the "local community", its membership and its extensive prerogatives, thereby enabling local populations to exert a much greater degree of control over local resources than was the case in France or Italy (Viazzo, 2019, pp. 49–53). Such closed corporate communities, to borrow a classic and still useful anthropological concept (Wolf, 1957), had once existed all over the Alps, but in the French Alps and in most of the Italian Alps they have been greatly weakened or totally erased over time by repeated waves of state intervention. Significantly, restrictive rules that have proved crucial to brake demographic decline in the age of Alpine depopulation, and were widely praised when it was hardly imaginable that people from outside might be interested in moving to the uplands for reasons other than those that were pulling labour migrants towards tourist resorts, are now turning into mechanism of exclusion as they make it difficult or undesirable for potential new inhabitants to settle in the mountains. It is almost a commonplace to compare the lack of agency of the refugees and asylum-seekers who are forced to become (albeit mostly temporarily) highlanders to the freedom enjoyed by "highlanders by choice". But choice may in fact be constrained by a multiplicity of factors, not least the presence of such institutional barriers.

When we first put forward the hypothesis that advantages could paradoxically be taken from emptiness, our notion of emptiness was only distantly related to Gilles Clément's concept of "third landscape", space left over by man to nature for landscape evolution (Clément, 2014), and even less to the rather crude perception of contemporary mountain societies that have led the

Italian governments to temporarily settle substantial numbers of forced mi-
grants in Alpine localities because the Alps as a whole were assumed to be a
virtually empty area (Dematteis, Di Gioia & Membretti, 2018). There is clearly
more to emptiness than mere depopulation: the Alps are better conceived of
as "differentially empty" not only from a demographic but also from a cul-
tural and social-structural point of view. Our guess was that all in all the
French and Italian Alps offered to potential new highlanders greater chances
to settle in the mountains and to find wider spaces for agency than the Swiss
and especially Austrian Alps, where local cultures less impoverished by
mountain exodus were likely to be "thicker", to use Remotti's term, and social
structures pivoted on restrictive rules appeared to have retained considera-
ble strength. This hypothesis has received some corroboration, although still
at a rather general level, by a recent article on the "culturally embeddedness
of population mobility in the Alps", in which geographers Oliver Bender and
Andreas Haller argue that long-term historical processes, sometimes dating
back to the Middle Ages, have created profound cultural differences between
the Romance and Germanic Alps on such issues as inheritance, succession,
and community membership. They believe that especially in the Germanic
Alps this cultural legacy remains very strong and supports "persistent struc-
tures that are still powerful today", not least in affecting population mobility
(Bender & Haller, 2017, pp. 141–42). As we have already hinted, however, to
avoid the risk that the notion of mountain emptiness fades into vagueness or
deceptive common sense, or both, in-depth ethnographic investigations are
needed both in the Romance and Germanic Alps.

More nuanced and in some respects surprising accounts have indeed
recently come from ethnographic studies carried out in the Western Alps.
Field researches conducted over the past few years in several hamlets of the
Piedmontese Western Alps by one of the authors of this contribution (Zanini,
2021a, 2022) have confirmed that careful attention must be paid to the com-
position of the younger age groups and to intergenerational relations, also
showing that a focus on the arrival of new highlanders tends to conceal the
presence of "stayers" and "returners", highlanders by birth who choose to
stay in their homelands or decide at some point in their life-courses to re-
turn. These studies have allowed close and in-depth observation of the role
played especially by "returners" in outlining new trajectories of community

life and development (Zanini, 2021a). Their return to a community dimension, after having experienced life contexts that were often radically different, has brought about a resemantisation of places and rural space, which is represented as a "future space" within which to imagine and co-construct a new economic, but above all a socio-cultural lifestyle designed for future generations. Staying is, however, no less significant and anthropologically interesting than returning. In this connection, the reflections proposed by the anthropologist Vito Teti (2004, 2017, 2020) look very suggestive. Although his interpretive model has been conceived with explicit reference to the Apennines, it is well suited to the dynamics that can be observed in the portions of Alpine space where a social and cultural tension exists between leaving and staying. Teti highlights, in particular, the relevance of the feeling of desire, and commitment, that drives one to stay in one's own place of origin, not out of inertia or habit, but on the contrary because of a creative will to give a new meaning to places, to regenerate and resemantise spaces and relations with a future-oriented gaze. This again points, from a different angle, to the frequent interweaving of elements of (residential) continuity with aspirations to social and cultural change and discontinuity.

The presence of mostly young "stayers" and "returners", along with older highlanders, is a reminder that mountain areas are only very rarely completely empty, and brings us back to a consideration of the structural conditions that encourage or discourage, in the first instance, young people to arrive, to return or to stay, and to the relationships that may arise between the various sections of local populations. Two ethnographic case studies, very different from each other, show quite clearly the importance not only of the availability of empty spaces, but also and above all of the attitudes of openness or closure of the members of what we can roughly define the hosting communities in areas that have suffered depopulation and yet are far from being completely empty.

The first study has mostly focused on returnees in Cumiana, a Piedmontese municipality made up of hamlets located at sensibly different altitudes (Zanini 2021a). Ethnographic research in the higher and more depopulated hamlets has revealed that the young people who have returned and resettled there to start new activities in the agro-pastoral or tourist reception sectors have been able to take advantage of the spaces made available by the demo-

graphic and economic emptying of these hamlets in the previous decades. The most instructive result to emerge from this research was, however, that a successful resettlement of the returnees would have not been possible if the higher hamlets had been left totally empty. Small groups of older people had instead safeguarded them, both physically and symbolically, and had been ready to "pass the baton" to the returnees by transmitting both tangible and intangible resources. Cumiana, or at least a part of its large and diverse territory, thus offers an example of harmonious and indispensable intergenerational relations, where the old inhabitants who have looked after the hamlets and the younger new inhabitants (admittedly of local origin) do not simply coexist but live almost symbiotically together.

A completely different situation is portrayed by another recent ethnographic study (Giliberti, 2020) of the Val Roja, a bi-national valley which begins French, at the Col de Tende on the French-Italian border, and ends Italian near Ventimiglia. The mountainous portion of the valley is, however, entirely French. Like most other French Alpine valleys, the Val Roja had experienced substantial flows of emigration, which had nevertheless left behind a certain number of families (or remnants of families) of old local descent. Since the last decades of the twentieth century the valley became a favourite destination for neo-rural new highlanders, still locally designed as "les hippies", looking for alternative lifestyles. The arrival of these neo-rurals, almost invited by the voids caused by outmigration, had indeed made its contribution to the trend reversal from depopulation to repopulation observed in the French Alps precisely from the 1970s onwards. As in the rest of the French Alps, there was no institutional barrier that could legally prevent or even strongly discourage such immigration. The families of old local descent, the *familles de souche*, still retained considerable power in the local political arenas, but had no corporate and exclusionary rights in indispensable communal resources. The neo-rurals had therefore access to sufficient territorial and economic resources and their "spaces for agency" were only moderately constrained. Nevertheless, also because of ideological reasons they found it difficult, or unpalatable, to effectively integrate into the five small communities into which the population of the valley is segmented. A social and political cleavage ran across these communities, but a state of truce prevailed until 2015, when the valley suddenly became a passageway for migrants coming

from Ventimiglia and trying to get into France. As ably shown by Luca Gi-
liberti's book, this triggered tensions or indeed conflict not only, or not so
much, between migrants and "locals", but also and especially between differ-
ent sectors of the local populations, namely the neo-rural new highlanders,
who were overwhelmingly supporting the migrants, and the *familles de souche*
(Giliberti, 2020, pp. 100–208). If we look at the cases of Cumiana and of the
Val Roja through the lenses of a theoretical framework that has recently been
proposed to investigate the relations between different sectors of variously
heterogeneous populations inhabiting the same territorial settings, Cumiana
and the Val Roja appear to be truly poles apart. Whereas in Cumiana the rela-
tions between old and new inhabitants closely approach *conviviality* (Hemer,
Povrzanović Frykman, Ristilammi, 2020), in the Val Roja we find mere *coex-
istence*[4].

This conceptual distinction can prove useful to better understand some
highly topical aspects of the relations between asylum seekers and host com-
munities in the Alps and elsewhere. Surveys conducted in the second decade
of the new millennium suggest that accurate analyses of cases of asylum see-
kers hosted in the Alps may bring to light other, not negligible dimensions of
the complex intertwining of negotiation and emptiness (Perlik et al., 2019). In
Italy, one alleged reason behind the decision to allocate sizeable contingents
of asylum seekers to mountainous areas has been the seemingly self-evident
fact that these are mostly empty spaces, a decision usually embellished by the
rhetorical expedient of presenting the new "highlanders by force" as a poten-
tial resource for the enhancement of communities otherwise destined to de-
cline or abandonment. This has created a multiplicity of negotiation proces-
ses involving not only old and new inhabitants, but also the institutions and
local agencies that concretely manage and organise hospitality. A multi-voice
and multi-scale dialogue, therefore, which paradoxically reduces the actual
possibilities of negotiation by the newcomers and also by the local commu-
nities themselves, which are sometimes excluded from crucial phases of the
decision-making process. Although the overall situation is extremely hetero-
geneous and much depends on the tailor-made practices implemented within

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4   For a detailed analysis of the epistemological differences between conviviality (*con-
vivenza*) and coexistence, and their anthropological and political implications, see Remotti
(2019).

the communities, which are not infrequently virtuous and may engender real dynamics of inclusion, there is a definite risk that such laborious and lopsided negotiations will more often than not result in coexistence bordering on intolerance instead of giving rise to proper practices of conviviality (Zanini, 2021b).

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in order to adequately understand the transformations undergone by the Alps and Alpine anthropology since the turn of new millennium we found it helpful to look back at the last decades of the past century, when Alpine anthropology went through major epistemological and methodological changes. In retrospect, these changes look far more radical than the ones experienced by the upland communities that were the object of anthropological study and appeared to be mostly doomed to decline, depopulation or utter abandonment. Quite surprisingly, the Alps have instead witnessed significant changes that are forcing Alpine anthropology to look for adequate conceptual tools to deal with largely new and often entangled social settings. In this respect, we feel that the conceptual couple *conviviality/coexistence*, if appropriately put into theoretical dialogue with the notion of *emptiness*, may prove a useful interpretive starting point for in-depth investigations, through the classic yet still valid community study approach, of the complex and heterogeneous processes that are changing the demographic, social and cultural landscape of the Alpine area.

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