A Remote Land in the Heart of Europe

Some Dilemmas in the Anthropological Study of Alpine Societies

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Abstract

This chapter traces the development of Alpine anthropology from the community studies conducted by American researchers in the early decades after the Second World War up to the present day. The first question it addresses is whether the theoretical approaches and ethnographic methods introduced by these studies proved beneficial or, rather, stifled pre-existent national traditions of research in the European countries which share the territory of the Alpine region. The chapter then reassesses the relations between "native" anthropologists and their colleagues coming from faraway countries, and the past and present status of Alpine anthropology and anthropologists within the wider realm of anthropological research and its practitioners. It is suggested that in at least some Alpine countries and across the Atlantic the perception of the Alps as being close and remote, strange and familiar, undermined their recognition as a fully legitimate field side for ethnographic research. The final part of the chapter argues that the status of Alpine anthropology in the future will largely depend on how successfully ethnographic investigations and anthropological reflections will be able to grapple with the many changes the Alpine region has been experiencing since the beginning of the new millennium, from the effects of global warming to the unexpected settlement of new dwellers after a long period of depopulation.

1 I am most grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed comments on this chapter and their very helpful suggestions.

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Ù&@ ^ãå^¦, Œ & Væ à^¦, Ò. (Eds.). (2024). *Þ^¸ ÁP[¦ã[}•Á[¦Á@ÁŒ] • – Òc@[*¦æ] @ã•ÊÁÜ^• @æ] ã *ÁÔ@æ|^} *^•Áæ}åÁÒ{ ^¦*ã *ÁT[¦^ËV@æ} ËÒŒ] ã ^ÁÜ^|æcã[}•.*
bu,press. https://doi.org/10.13124/97888604619ÌÌ
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Introduction

Sixty years ago, Conrad Arensberg (1963) argued in his introduction to a special issue of the *Anthropological Quarterly* that it was high time for social and cultural anthropologists to pay professional attention to the cultures of the "Old World peoples" and to establish a proper anthropology of Europe. Arensberg's introduction was followed by four articles, each devoted to a European culture area that had been identified and deemed worthy of ethnographic and theoretical inspection. Remarkably, one of these four culture areas was the Alpine region, whose coverage was entrusted to Robert Burns (1963), an American anthropologist who had recently completed a study of Saint-Véran, the highest village community in the French Alps (Burns, 1959). The Alps were thus established as a legitimate and important field for Europeanist research, alongside the Mediterranean area and the more vaguely defined cultures of the "Atlantic belt" and of the "Great Plains" of Central Europe. Such a status was confirmed a decade later in the first comprehensive survey of the anthropological literature on modern Europe (Anderson, 1973). Burns's contribution to the special issue of the *Anthropological Quarterly* was itself remarkable. On the basis both of his findings in Saint-Véran and of his perceptive reading of a still meagre and fragmentary literature, he proposed a tentative list of ten cultural traits as distinguishing features of the Alpine region – or, rather, of what he termed the "Circum-Alpine area", a culturally discrete zone including most of the upland regions of Southern and Central Europe (Burns, 1963). Although the soundness of some of his contentions were questioned by later research, in other respects Burns's insights were confirmed by subsequent anthropological and historical studies, in particular his suggestion that the Alpine area may have been traditionally characterized by an unexpectedly high degree of literacy and education.

We will return to this and other issues in the next sections. First, however, it is necessary briefly to outline some of the basic themes in Alpine anthropology and the main phases of its development. We will try to assess whether the studies carried out in the Alps by American anthropologists like Burns proved ultimately beneficial for Alpine anthropology or, rather, stifled pre-existent national traditions of research. This will lead us to reconsider the relations between "native" anthropologists and their colleagues coming

from faraway countries, but also the past and present status of Alpine anthropology and anthropologists within the wider realm of anthropological research and its practitioners. A status that in the future will largely depend on how successfully ethnographic investigations and anthropological reflections will be able to address the many changes the Alpine region has been experiencing since the beginning of the new millennium, from the effects of global warming to the unexpected arrival of new inhabitants, which might give the Alps a new centrality as a laboratory of social innovation and a space of cultural creativity.

Anthropologists in the Alps

Most accounts of the history of Alpine anthropology (Anderson, 1973, pp. 69–78; Viazzo, 1989, pp. 49–66; Ortmayr, 1992, pp. 132–140; Sibilla, 1997; Minnich, 2002, pp. 55–60; Albera, 2011, pp. 69–79) seem to agree that after small and largely unrecognised beginnings, the anthropological study of the Alps started properly in the first decades after the end of Second World War, when a number of fieldworkers from North American universities headed for the high Alpine valleys: they included, in addition to Burns, the likes of John Honigmann, Frada and Raoul Naroll, Leopold Pospisil, Eric Wolf, John Cole, Robert Netting, Harriet Rosenberg, John Friedl, Daniela Weinberg, Rayna Rapp Reiter and Sandra Wallman, to name just a few.[2] In the early 1930s a leading *Volkskundler* had defined the Alps "the El Dorado of folklore studies", a reliquary of old customs, sayings and artefacts long disappeared in most other parts of Europe (Helbok, 1931, p. 102). Two decades later, the survival of old traditions and habits was still the focus for some of the first studies of Alpine villages carried out by American anthropologists. Their attitude was, however, quite different from that of the folklorists that had preceded them in the study of Alpine culture. John Honigmann's work in Styria, for instance, was largely concerned with cultural survivals, but his aim was, in

2 For a long if incomplete list, see Ortmayr (1992, pp. 134–135). Wallman is of course British-born and was trained at the London School of Economics, but in the years of her Alpine research she was teaching at the University of Toronto. A recent book (Wallman, 2020) provides an affectionate account of her fieldwork in a village of the Piedmontese Alps in the early 1970s.

fact, to demonstrate the limitations of the "geographical marginality theory" favoured by folklorists, and also the economists' view that in the Alps modernisation and economic rationalisation were hampered by the conservatism of the local populations (Honigmann, 1963, 1970).

An even greater difference separates previous studies of mountain folklore from the ecological approach which has been a trademark of Alpine anthropology since its very first days. Another article by Burns (1961) is indicative of the programme of ecological anthropology in the Alps: following the lead of Julian Steward, he was trying to demonstrate that in the valleys of the Dauphiné, in the French Alps, the spatial and social-structural evolution of the village communities had been shaped by environmental constraints. Cultural-ecological models were soon to be replaced or supplemented by ecosystemic models, most notably in Netting's work on Törbel, a community in the Swiss Alps (Netting, 1981, 1984, 1990). In some cases, American anthropologists who had left for the Alps to work almost exclusively on mountain ecology quickly discovered, once in the field, that the local economy had gone through startling transformations. Thus, the focus of their research shifted from ecology to social and economic change, as shown in an exemplary way by Friedl's experience in Kippel, also in the Swiss Alps (Friedl, 1974). One basic question was to establish whether these changes marked a radical break with the past, or, on the contrary, significant continuities were still detectable underneath, as Weinberg (1975) argued for yet another Swiss village, Bruson.

Thus, as Anderson (1973, pp. 69–80) aptly noticed in summarising the state of play in Alpine anthropology around 1970, the two key-words were "ecology" and "change". As we shall see in the final section of this chapter, the study of ecology and change is still of primary importance for Alpine anthropology today, albeit in markedly different terms. However, another major line of research was inaugurated in 1974 by Cole and Wolf's landmark book *The Hidden Frontier. Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley*: the study of ethnicity, and the formation of identities at regional and local levels. Especially in the 1990s and in the first decade of the new century these issues were to become a central preoccupation for anthropologists working in the Alpine area (Minnich, 1998, 2002; Heady, 1999; Stacul, 2003, 2005; Grasseni, 2009; Porcellana, 2007).

Based on ethnographic and archival work in two adjacent villages in the Eastern Italian Alps, Cole and Wolf's book was also a plea for an approach combining anthropology and history. Indeed, it was largely because of their influence that in the Alps anthropology and history converged at an earlier time than in most other sectors of anthropological research. Prior to the publication of Cole and Wolf's book, however, at least two other North American anthropologists had complemented conventional ethnographic fieldwork with intensive and imaginative archival research in their studies of Alpine communities, both carried out in the early 1970s. Netting's skilful blending of anthropology and historical demography paved the way to the recognition that in the past, far from displaying a "primitive" high-pressure demographic regime characterised by high levels of both fertility and mortality, as assumed by most demographers and geographers (Veyret, 1952; Guichonnet, 1975; Hagmann and Menthonnex, 1979), 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 discovered during her stay in Abriès, a village in the French Alps not far from Saint-Véran, what subsequent historical investigations have confirmed, namely that literacy levels had been definitely higher in the Alpine valleys than in the surrounding plains, thereby vindicating one of Burns's most iconoclastic assertions (Burns, 1963, pp. 149–151), and more generally that such high levels of literacy went hand in hand with much greater prosperity, openness and political autonomy than had been previously surmised or taken for granted.[3] Rosenberg's conclusion was that, "if 'traditional' is taken to mean illiterate, passive, isolated, and poor", then clearly Abriès "did not look or behave like a 'traditional' peasant community" (Rosenberg, 1988, p. 3). By virtue of such a precocious and intense involvement with history, village studies by social and cultural anthropologists were instrumental in undermining the canonical image of the closed and inexorably backward upland community conjured up by the historians.

3 See especially Fontaine (1996, 2003), Fontaine and Siddle (2000), and, on literacy, also Roggero (1999, pp. 237–255).

Much more could be said on the origins and development of the anthropological study of the Alps and on the broad themes that have just been mentioned. Instead of belabouring these points, however, it seems more profitable to highlight in the pages that follow a few dilemmas, partly stemming from its history and partly from the very geographical and symbolic place of the Alps within Europe, that Alpine anthropology has faced in the past, is facing in the present and is likely to face in the future.

The "Native" and the "Foreigner", Or: Do We Need American Anthropologists in the Alps?

The first of these dilemmas almost inevitably concerns the relations between "native" anthropologists and the "Americans". As we have seen, most historical accounts assume that Alpine anthropology started with the arrival of American researchers and the establishment of the Alps as a discrete culture area and a proper field of anthropological study. A revealing common feature is that all these accounts, when they look for European forerunners, show a definite preference for scholars who have some kind of direct or indirect connection with the Anglo-American mainstream tradition. A favourite ancestor is Robert Hertz, whose study of the cult of Saint Besse, a martyr saint worshipped in a cluster of communities in the Western Alps (Hertz, 1913), was praised by Evans-Pritchard (1960, p. 10) as an early example of anthropological fieldwork. A less obvious but no less interesting female ancestor might be Lucie Varga, the Austrian social historian who in the 1930s was helped by Malinowski himself to work out her plan to do research in the Vorarlberg and was one of the very first scholars to import "exotic" methods of fieldwork into the European scene[4]. Although it would be hard to argue that there was any continuity between these early studies and those carried out after the Second World War[5], both Hertz and Varga look genealogically attractive because

4 Her debt to Malinowski is explicitly acknowledged by Varga (1936, p. 1). A portrait of Varga as an "excluded ancestress" of modern anthropology is provided by Stade (1999).

5 Which is not to say that such early studies are not capable of providing a stimulus to contemporary research in the Alps, as shown by the use of Varga's work made by Albera (2011, pp. 176–178) and especially by the spectacular revival of interest in the cult of Saint Besse as well as in Hertz's Alpine work: see e.g., MacClancy (1994), MacClancy and Parkin

their methods and theoretical approaches differ considerably from those of folklore studies in the first half of the twentieth century.

Such a distancing from folklore studies calls to mind the distinction between modern and backward varieties of anthropology made by John Davis (1977, pp. 3–4) in his book on the anthropology of the Mediterranean and his unabashedly disparaging and unfortunately phrased warning that "a contemporary ethnographer from France or England or America, carrying the very latest lightweight intellectual machine gun in his pack, may be suddenly confronted by a Tylorean or Frazerian professor appearing like a Japanese corporal from the jungle to wage a battle only he knows is still on". Contemptuous attitudes of this kind were understandably not taken lightly in southern Europe (Leal, 2001) and fuelled considerable tensions between most Iberian and Italian anthropologists and their British and American colleagues (Viazzo, 2021a, pp. 303–307). Did similar theoretical, methodological and sometimes political contrapositions also arise in the rather different transnational space of Alpine anthropological studies?

Predictably enough, in the Alps the relationships between "native" and "foreign" anthropologists were not always easy and relaxed. Arnold Niederer, the great Swiss *Volkskundler*, has recollected that his first meetings with Netting had made him quite suspicious of the American's ecosystemic models and that he could not understand his guest's excitement about the new vistas opened up by historical demography (Niederer, 1991). And in Austria, too, there was debate about the methodological pros and cons of the research styles used by foreign anthropologists in the Alps,[6] as testified by an essay by Norbert Ortmayr entitled *Amerikaner in den Alpen* (1992), and, very explicitly, by Reinhard Johler's article *The idea of an "Alpine society", or: why do we need the Americans in the Alps?* (1998).[7]

(1997), Horden and Purcell (2000, pp. 450–460), Isnart (2009) and more recently Demarchi (2016, 2021).

6 Some Austrian and Swiss scholars were unimpressed by a methodological recipe prescribing that fieldworkers should focus "intensively" for one year on a single village community. This was in stark contrast with the "extensiveness" of Alpine research in both Austria and Switzerland, characterized by long-term investigations that often covered the territories of entire valleys and might lead researchers to inhabit their fields for large parts of their lives. On these issues see Centlivres (1980, p. 40) and more recently Krauß (2018, p. 5).

7 It is worth noting that the "Americans" whose works are discussed by Ortmayr and

Michał Buchowsky (2004, p. 10) has referred to Ortmayr's and Johler's pieces to contend that the encounter between foreign and native anthropologist in the Alps produced a "hierarchy of knowledge" which in turn generated "a vibrant discussion on the presence of Anglo-Saxon anthropologists in the Alpine region and the value of their scholarly output". Although this is undeniable, as we have just seen, there are reasons to believe that tensions were not as strong as in Mediterranean anthropology. An especially enthusiastic appreciation of John Honigmann's work in Styria is provided by Volker Gottowik (1997, 1998), who insists on the importance for natives of "being othered" by anthropologists from outside. But if we go beyond the provocative titles of their articles, we discover that Ortmayr and Johler, too, ultimately acknowledge that on balance the arrival of the "Americans" was beneficial because they helped enliven the stagnating world of Austrian folklore studies and to rescue them from a pernicious tendency towards a celebration of Alpine values and ways of life at times bordering on racism. Similarly, Niederer eventually came to recognise the value not only of Netting's work but also of the "alien" tradition he represented, and to complain that "Swiss and Austrian students of folklore know very little, or nothing at all, about Anglo-American or even French research in the Alps" – adding that "this is a general feature of European *Volkskunde*, which has long been conceived of as a national science" (Niederer, 1996, p. 286).[8] Thus, both Niederer in Switzerland and Austrian scholars like Ortmayr and Johler are denouncing, from within, the national-

Johler are by no means all American. Rather, "American" is used as a label that stays for "modern" anthropology as opposed to folklore studies and may also cover British social anthropologists like F.G. Bailey, or even anthropologists from Alpine countries like Switzerland and Italy who had been trained or had taught in "Anglo-Saxon" universities.

8 Kuhn (2022, p. 244) has recently suggested that it was not until the nationalistic narrowing of the 1930s that German-language folklore studies "lost the anthropological, and often comparative, perspectives that had been present before". Especially in Austria, as is well known, these comparative perspectives gave way to an emphasis on nationalistic (volkisch) ideologemes that were consonant with National Socialism. Even after 1945, however, a tendency to "shrink and isolate" (Niederer, 1986, p. 286) still prevailed for several decades in both Austria and Switzerland.

istic drift and the resulting insularity of the "backward" national traditions scorned by Davis.

The skein to be untangled is obviously intricate. Much depends on the different histories of ethnological and anthropological studies in the various countries, and of course not all Swiss and Austrian anthropologists working in the Alps would necessarily agree with Niederer, Ortmayr or Johler. Nevertheless, we may note that in Italy some studies by foreign Alpine anthropologists have been very well received by local scholars. This is the case not only of Cole and Wolf's 1974 book but also, for instance, of Patrick Heady's study of a valley in the Friulian Alps (Heady, 1999), which has been translated into Italian (Heady, 2001) by the University Press of Udine, the capital of the region where he conducted his fieldwork, and has been praised by Italian anthropologists.[9] On the other hand, one cannot easily forget Dionigi Albera's scathing attack on F.G. Bailey's study of a village in the Italian Alps (Bailey, 1971b, 1973), launched in an article published by a major anthropological journal and entitled *Open systems and closed minds: the limitations of naivety in social anthropology – a native's view* (Albera, 1988). It should be stressed that Albera was not writing against "Anglo-Saxons" per se. His article was more of a criticism of the transactionalist and anti-historical paradigm incarnated by Bailey than of anthropologists from outside. Nevertheless, it is significant that he decided to emphasise his status of a native anthropologist. But how native are the native anthropologists who have worked in the Alps? And how much was – and is – their work valued by the anthropological communities of their native countries?

The "Domestic" and the "Exotic", Or: Are Alpine Anthropologists True Anthropologists?

When Netting announced his plans for fieldwork in a Swiss peasant community, the first and most frequent response from his American colleagues was: "Why is an anthropologist and an Africanist going to alpine Switzerland?" (Netting, 1981, p. x). In the eyes of many anthropologists of the time the Alps

9 See e.g., Gri (2001) and Stacul (2003).

and more generally Europe – were definitely no good: there seemed to be little point to try and find out "how the Swiss plant potatoes and what brand of transistor radio is preferred in a Serbian village"[10]. Such an attitude was still dominant at the end of century and probably persists today. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson ironically remarked, echoing Orwell's *Animal Farm*[11], in the Anglo-American academic system there was, in principle, no hierarchical difference between field sites, "but some 'fields' are more equal than others – specifically, those that are understood to be distant, exotic, and strange" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, p. 13). It is worth noticing, in this connection, that while some of the Americans who did research in the Alps in the 1950s and 1960s had already made a name for themselves in more exotic settings (as was the case of pioneers like Honigmann, Pospisil, Wolf or Netting), most of those who followed in their footsteps were "absolute beginners" working towards their doctorates. For those falling into the former category, doing research in the Alps could easily be seen as a sort of apostasy, but their academic positions were secure; for those falling into the latter category, on the other hand, it was a risky business as they might be accused of failing to go through the prescribed initiation (or being initiated in the wrong place)[12].

As a consequence, the "Americans" who ventured on their research journeys in the Alps were likely to experience the uncomfortable condition of being, so to speak, between the devil (their more orthodox colleagues' disapproval) and the deep blue sea (the suspicious attitude of local anthropologists). It is tempting to take it for granted that things must have been quite different, and easier, for "native" anthropologists intending to do research in the Alps. There are reasons to doubt it. The recollections of the doyen of Italian Alpine anthropology, Paolo Sibilla (2004, pp. viii–ix), are strikingly reminiscent of Netting's experience across the Atlantic. In the late 1960s, when

10 On these venomous criticisms and, more generally, on the widespread hostility in American anthropological circles towards the budding Europeanist anthropology, see Cole (1977, pp. 351–355).

11 As readers of Orwell's satirical novel (1945) know, "All animals are equal" was the seventh and most important of the commandments inscribed on one of the farm walls after the animals' successful revolution. When the despotic pigs eventually took control of the farm, however, the seven commandments were replaced by a single commandment that ran: "All animals are equal but some animals are more equals than others".

12 On the potential consequences of doing research in field sites that are "less fully anthropological", see Gupta and Ferguson (1997, pp. 13–15).

Sibilla started his research in La Thuile, an upland community in the Aosta Valley, Italian anthropology may well have been marginal as compared to Britain, France and the United States, but in Italy, too, anthropology (or *etnologia*) was meant to be essentially the study of distant, preferably primitive peoples. There was, therefore, little sympathy for those who claimed that proper anthropological studies were possible and legitimate also at home: the Alps, like southern Italy, provided an appropriate terrain for folklorists, hardly for true anthropologists.[13]

It would be interesting to investigate whether the low status the Alps held as a suitable field site within Italian anthropology in the 1960s, and possibly still holds today, is to do with the fact that not all Alpine countries are Alpine in the same way and to the same extent. "Alpine country" is a label assigned to France, Italy, Switzerland and Austria, along with Germany, Liechtenstein and Slovenia, in a variety of formal and informal contexts ranging from the Alpine Convention[14] to winter sports. There can be little doubt, however, that the Alps carry far less economic, demographic and symbolic weight in Italy, or France, that in countries like Switzerland, where they have long been a powerful symbol of national identity (Berthoud, 2001), or Austria, especially in the territorially diminished and much more Alpine state that emerged from the dissolution of the Habsburg Empire after the First World War (Johler, 1998, pp. 165–166). In fact, focusing research on the Alpine region helped anthropological and folklore studies to gain institutional respectability in both Switzerland and Austria. However, the enduring prominence of old-style folklore studies ultimately delayed, as Konrad Kuhn has recently argued, "the site-specific re-formation of the discipline at the universities in Switzerland and Austria through the adoption of new, present-oriented analytical perspectives and social science methods" (Kuhn, 2022, p. 260).

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13 On the relations between anthropology, ethnology and folklore studies in Italy, see Viazzo (2017).

14 The Alpine Convention is an international treaty promoting the sustainable development of the Alpine region and cross-border collaboration. Opened to signature in 1991, it involves Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Switzerland and the European Union. (Source: https://www.alpconv.org/en/.)

There is one more point which should not be overlooked, though, namely that at least some of the "Americans" were driven to Europe by reasons similar to those that led Pierre Bourdieu, roughly in the same years, to return as an ethnographer to his native Pyrenean village in the Béarn. Having previously worked in Kabylia, he thought that it would have been interesting to do a kind of *Tristes tropiques* in reverse and observe the effects that the "objectification" of his native world would produce (Reed-Danahay, 2004). Bourdieu's desire to engage in domestic research is somewhat akin to Austrian-born Eric Wolf's decision to go back to the mountains of South Tyrol where he had spent his holidays as a child. Wolf's case is a reminder that some "Americans" were actually European by birth[15] and were therefore able to claim native status. This is just one of the many indications that the category of "native anthropologist" is far more complex and nuanced than is usually assumed. It is a matter of degree and possibly dissonant and conflicting recognition by different groups, from the "local community" of the villagers among whom fieldwork is conducted to the national and international disciplinary communities of anthropologists.

All anthropologists must cross boundaries to "enter" the community they want to study and live in. It is my impression that such boundaries may prove surprisingly numerous and insidious for those who want to study village communities in nearby and seemingly familiar Alpine areas. This is a point I have made elsewhere (Viazzo, 2003), largely on the basis of my own field experience. The village in the Italian Alps I studied in the early 1980s is located only some 100 kilometres from the place where I was born: yet, the boundary between my native rice-growing plains and the adjacent, steep mountain valleys was very evident. Moreover, the village where I did my fieldwork was German-speaking, an "exotic" feature that contributed to undermine my status as a (quasi-)native. My impressions have been confirmed by two books written by Italian anthropologists who have worked in the Italian Alps. Although he was neither a native nor a local resident, Jaro Stacul's study of two

15 Another notable case is that of Leopold Pospisil, who was born in present-day Czech Republic and carried out his research in the Tyrolean village of Obernberg in the 1960s. For an early use of his Alpine field material, see Pospisil (1971, pp. 322–335), where he proposes a comparative formal analysis of inheritance laws in Tyrol and among the Kapauku of Papua New Guinea. His monumental, and definitive, book on Obernberg's peasant economy was published only a quarter of a century later (Pospisil, 1995).

villages in the Vanoi, a valley in Italy's Trentino province, one of the Trentino valleys, met most of the requirements for being classified as anthropology at home. Until the First World War, however, this Italian-speaking area had been part of the Austrian Empire. In a valley that still preserved vivid memories of its Habsburg past, Stacul (2003) did not feel completely at home, especially when the local people referred to him as "the Italian", a term used by these Italian citizens to designate outsiders. The case of Cristina Grasseni (2009) is even more paradoxical. Born in a mid-sized town in the north of Italy located on the edge of the Alps, she had to work hard to overcome the qualms and feelings of guilt generated by her desire to do fieldwork not in faraway places but in the nearby mountains – only to discover that once in the field, in spite of minimal distance and no linguistic barrier to negotiate, she was not regarded (and did not regard herself) as a "native".

This helps us understand why Sibilla (2004, pp. viii–ix) speaks of a "presumed" or "deceiving" domesticity of the Alps, thus implying that "they may turn out to be more exotic than domestic, if by exoticism we mean what appears to us to be distant and different". Indeed, one all-important feature of the Alpine region and possibly of the whole Circum-Alpine area is that they are at the same time close and remote, strange and familiar. Their "remoteness", to use Edwin Ardener's (1987) notion, has always set them apart not only from the surrounding plains but also from the urban world and from the eighteenth-century savants, who were the first to climb the valleys for scientific purposes, and their modern successors, the anthropologists, whether born in an "Alpine country" such as Austria, Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy or Slovenia, or in Northern Europe or America. Unlike other parts of the Old World, the mountains of Europe tend therefore to constitute a sort of liminal zone ambiguously suspended between the domestic and the exotic (Viazzo, 2003). Placed right "in the heart of Europe", to quote the title of a famous book (Veyret and Veyret, 1967), the Alps have nevertheless been long perceived as a pocket of primitive and scarcely European customs and beliefs. It is no accident that the exploration of the Alps and the exploration of the Pacific took place roughly in the same period and in surprisingly similar ways, producing largely similar representations of native life (Walter, 1996).[16]

16 See also Schär (2015).

The “Local” and the “Newcomer”, Or: Who Are the Keepers of Alpine Culture?

“High in remote Alpine valleys”, Anderson wrote in the early 1970s, “change comes more slowly than in villages on the plain. Peasant traditions hang on more persistently” (Anderson, 1973, p. 69). The opportunity to observe social and cultural change in slow motion and the associated survival of peasant traditions were central to making the Alpine region, and its communities, interesting field sites for anthropologists. Nevertheless, it was patent that a growing number of marginal Alpine villages were becoming purely residual communities. Anthropologists were aware that for centuries seasonal migration had been a feature of upland regions and that surplus population had been reduced through permanent migration: but this process, as Bailey mournfully remarked, “remained one of emigration; it was not yet depopulation. […] Sufficient people were left on the land and in the families to keep the family farm going and to maintain a highly complex labour-intensive farming programme. The mountain communities, at least, were left intact”. Since the end of the Second World War all this had changed and the final demise of peasant farming in mountain areas was now in sight (Bailey, 1971a, p. 33).
The gloomy pictures painted by Bailey, and others, while capturing important strands of economic and social change in the Alps, may easily obscure the fact that demographic decline was not uniform throughout the Alpine crescent, and depopulation far more severe in the French and Italian Alps than in the Swiss and Austrian Alps (Bätzing, 2003, pp. 271–298). What is more, even in the same region, or in the same valley, while some or most villages lost population, others were gaining new inhabitants primarily because of the economic alternative provided by tourism. Broadly speaking, the attitude of the first ethnographers who witnessed tourist development in the Alps was diffident or plainly hostile. This is partly explained by the realisation that “many new resort developments were owned by outside (and sometimes foreign) companies and that local people found only menial, low paying jobs in their home communes” (Hartley, 2006, p. 7). More generally, Alpine anthropologists shared with their colleagues who had stumbled across tourism in other parts of the world a dislike for the intrusion of external values and new economic incentives into indigenous communities that could

scarcely claim to have been left intact. Even when the growth of tourism was accompanied by a revitalisation of rituals, they felt – to use a famous phrase coined in a different context to describe comparable situations (Greenwood, 1977) – that local people were "selling culture by the pound".

In the intervening years this attitude towards tourism and its effects has mollified, and anthropologists studying Alpine societies are no exception. It is now conceded not only that tourism has prevented complete depopulation in some areas,[17] but also that it has often played a decisive role in supporting Alpine farming and livestock production, thereby helping preserve traditional agricultural and pastoral practices, and even in ensuring the survival of festivals and other rituals that would have otherwise been doomed. Indeed, while earlier anthropological observers tended to criticize tourism as a destructive force for authenticity and creative expression, later research has suggested that commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of rituals and cultural products, although it may change it or add new meanings to old ones. Attention has been drawn, in particular, to the role of co-creation and to processes of "communal creativity" that can develop and involve both locals and tourists and are best analysed by sharpening such notions as creativity, authenticity and sincerity (cf. Viazzo and Zanini, 2014, pp. 4–5).

Rather paradoxically, hamlets which had been abandoned because of their geographical and productive marginality – and therefore left "intact" – are now in a better position to reap the benefits and opportunities offered by modernity and its demand for uncontaminated authenticity, which is closely intertwined, in such sanctuaries of tradition as the Alps, with heritage tourism. Precociously deserted villages, once considered to be lagging behind, have now acquired (or may acquire in the future) a modern or innovative status. They can become the sites of ecomuseums, be repopulated by tourists looking for rustic second homes, or even attract people who are desirous to settle in the mountains to escape from the cities and to make a living by reviving old local crafts (Crivelli, Petite and Rudaz, 2007). Yet it would be wrong to infer that tourist development has been everywhere a success story. While there is still widespread agreement that the timing of entry into the tourist economy is a critical factor in sustainable development, it has been

17 See Alpine Convention (2015, pp. 36–37) and, for a recent ethnographic study, Nöbauer (2022, p. 129).

argued that an even more decisive factor is represented by local control, the ability by local communities to direct, regulate or at least exert some meaningful influence on the processes set in motion by tourism (Hartley, 2006, pp. 11–14; Sibilla and Viazzo, 2009, pp. 223–227). This, however, immediately raises an issue of the utmost anthropological and political significance, namely: who are the locals?

For centuries Alpine communities have been accustomed to emigration. Less so, with the exception of mining districts, to immigration. Several studies had already noticed that this had changed with the advent of tourism: as Julie Hartley (2006, p. 9) has remarked, “when a village embraces tourism, its social structure must shift to accommodate the tourists and resident outsiders, who become part of village life”. Although this has been known for a while, the situation has now become far more complex and delicate. From the mid-nineteenth to the late-twentieth century the Alps suffered a severe and apparently irreversible demographic decline, but in the past few decades signs of recovery have surfaced and there is now mounting evidence of a reversal. Since the natural balance of births and deaths still remains negative or steady almost everywhere in the Alps., population growth, or even mere stability, is chiefly due to the immigration of new inhabitants, coming not only from lower Alpine reaches and cities on nearby plains but also from further afield. Such a population turnover has profound implications, particularly in the French and Italian Alps, where the numbers of permanent residents had mostly plunged to exceedingly low levels; the arrival of these “new highlanders”, even when modest in absolute terms, can potentially be highly significant within circumscribed local contexts (Bender and Kanitscheider, 2012; Löffler et al., 2014).

When talking about the Alps, politicians, planners and even social scientists often write about “local communities” as if there were monolithic populations inhabiting these valleys from time immemorial and exhibiting harmoniously shared views. The largely unexpected socio-demographic developments of the past few decades inescapably beg many questions which had been almost presciently posed twenty years ago by Enrico Camanni (2002): what should we mean by “local communities”? Who are their members? Or, to put it differently and more provocatively: who do the Alps belong to? Virtually everywhere in the Alps there used to be fairly clear-cut boundaries sep-

arating what in the German-speaking Swiss Alps is known as *Bürgergemeinde*, the "community of citizens", from the more volatile and usually smaller population made up of those who lived or worked in a village but could not boast local family roots. In some sectors of the Alps these boundaries have dissolved in the course of lengthy processes of state formation; in others they have weakened but survive to the present day, and the control over communal resources they granted to the "community of citizens" has played a major role in moulding economic and tourist development. This pattern of differential access to material resources would seem, however, more and more difficult to defend in villages where descendants of the community's "historical families" can account for just a modest percentage of the inhabitants.

Things are even more intricate when we turn to culture and intangible heritage. Ethnographic observation reveals that it is often the newcomers who are keenest to preserve and promote the culture of places where they have only recently settled (Membretti and Viazzo, 2019, pp. 27–28). Sometimes, this cultural activism is welcomed by an ageing "local" population; sometimes it is resented as an intrusion, a sort of misappropriation. This is a new situation which invites anthropologists to address classic and still topical questions: can one be a highlander only by descent or also by choice? Can newcomers legitimately be entitled to become the heirs and the keepers of local culture? Should local culture remain as much as possible the same lest it suffers further impoverishment, as some fear, or there is room for creativity and adaptation to a changing world, as others maintain?

It cannot be ignored that some eminent cultural geographers have indeed expressed fear that the arrival of new inhabitants in the Alps may prove a threat, especially to linguistic minority groups (Steinicke et al., 2011), but more generally to Alpine local cultures (Bender and Kanitscheider, 2012, p. 240). Steinicke and his associates, in particular, are worried by 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: "We are witnessing", they lament (Steinicke et al. 2011, p. 6)), "the emergence of a new awareness, whereby standard language and language competency no longer constitute the most important elements for identifying ethnic groups. Instead,

ethnic identity is increasingly expressed through subjective factors (ethnic self-assessment)".

In anthropology, of course, Fredrik Barth's famous intimation that the critical focus of investigation should be "the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses" (Barth, 1969, p. 15) has implied a paradigm shift in the study of ethnicity, whereby critical importance is now attributed precisely to the actors' subjective views and to the strategies they adopt to establish group boundaries by pointing to specific markers that distinguish them from ethnic others (Wimmer, 2009, pp. 250–251). The anthropologists' task is thus to convince other Alpine scholars that "diffuse ethnicities" should not be seen as synonymous with cultural loss and destruction or mere usurpation, but rather as the outcome of interactions and delicate negotiations between locals and migrants, which must be studied in depth and with attention to local contexts.

Between Remoteness and a New Centrality: Whither Alpine Anthropology?

In his still inspiring paper on "remote areas", Edwin Ardener (1987, p. 41) noted that mountains are remote almost by definition, but he contended that while remoteness has necessarily a position in topographical space, it is crucially defined "within a topological space whose features are expressed in a cultural vocabulary". Remoteness is, therefore, not the same as physical distance: it is, rather, a perception from elsewhere, from an outside standpoint, and not all purely geographical peripheries are remote, only those that are "not properly linked to the dominant zone. They are perceptions from the dominant zone, not part of its codified experience" (Ardener, 1987, pp. 49–50). The Alps are a very good case in point. Although they lie in the very heart of Europe, they have long been perceived and represented by European centres as culturally distant – and, we may add, as inescapably "primitive", socially isolated and economically backward (Viazzo, 2021b).

From the middle of the nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century such a perception of cultural distance between contrasting ways of life was further underpinned by a process of modernisation which marginalised the

Alps, turning them into a depopulated periphery carrying decreasing economic, political as well as demographic weight. However, the recent reversal of this trend signalled by the arrival of "new highlanders" points to several significant and interrelated changes. The Swiss historian Jon Mathieu (2015, pp. 161–163) has hinted that if Alpine depopulation was ultimately the product of modernity, Alpine repopulation might well be emblematic of postmodernity. Although the mountains now appear to be particularly fragile spaces in the face of global phenomena like climate change or the outbreak of epidemic diseases, like other remote areas they are nevertheless looked at with growing interest as places of opportunities. As has been rightly noted (Dematteis, 2018, pp. 5–6), "the diversity of the mountain environment is now perceived as a set of economic, cultural, aesthetic, and existential values, not only complementary but also partly alternative to the urban values". The Alps are thus attracting not only vacationers, but also new residents, multilocal residents who split their time between mountainous and urban locations (Elmi and Perlik, 2014), new farmers, and innovative entrepreneurs. A positive vision is replacing previously dominant, mainly negative images, and geographers, sociologists and territorial planners are increasingly talking of a "new centrality" of the Alps and more generally of the mountains (Dematteis, 2018; Bolognesi and Corrado, 2021).

We may wonder whether this "new centrality" of the Alps will help, or spur, Alpine anthropology to regain a more central position on the international anthropological scene. The time of potential tensions, but also of frequently fruitful exchanges, between "American" and "native" anthropologists is gone. The Alpine valleys are now mostly studied by researchers coming from nearby universities and the circulation of the results of these investigations often remain circumscribed within national or even regional boundaries. Only very few PhD students are today keen to cross the Atlantic (or the Channel) to flock to that upland region which Eric Wolf (1972, p. 201) had described as a "magnificent laboratory" for the anthropologist who was looking for experimental settings where the relative strength of ecology and ethnicity could be assessed. Yet, nearly twenty-five years ago two researchers from the French Research Institute for Agricultural and Environmental Engineering had already suggested that, owing to the socio-demographic changes they were experiencing, the mountains could prove an excellent "laboratory

of social and institutional innovation” (Brun and Perrin, 2001, p. 38). A laboratory for those who live in the mountains – people of local descent as well as new highlanders – variously trying to relaunch traditional activities in partly new forms or to graft business opportunities usually provided by urban surroundings onto radically different environments (Dematteis, 2018, pp. 5–6). But a laboratory, too, for sociologists, anthropologists and human geographers interested in observing and analysing these economic, micropolitical and socio-cultural processes.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Brun and Perrin’s article also indicated that mountain areas offered privileged and perhaps unique conditions to study phenomena which require a combined effort from the natural and the social sciences: changes due to climate dysregulation, sustainable development, environmental diversity (Brun and Perrin, 2001, pp. 33–37). These are some of the urgent issues towards which Alpine anthropology is almost bound to move progressively in the future. One can detect significant lines of continuity with the past: an ecological approach, as we have seen, was a trademark of Alpine anthropology in its very first days; and “ecology” and “change” are still its two key-words as they were in the early 1970s. Ecological anthropology itself has, however, changed considerably. In an article published just before the end of the last century, Conrad Kottak noticed that some of the fundamental tenets and goals of what he called “the old ecological anthropology” looked more and more questionable: “the new ecological anthropology”, he admonished, “must be careful not to remove local people and their specific social and cultural forms from the analytic framework” as the old ecological anthropology had done, and he believed that one major task of “the new, or environmental, anthropology” was to blend theory and analysis with political awareness and policy concerns (Kottak, 1999, 23–24, 31). Climate change has played a major role in accelerating the transition to a new environmental anthropology, with a research agenda that now ranges from political ecology to the study of indigenous environmental knowledge and multispecies ethnography (Crate, 2011; Orr, Lansing and Doves, 2015).

The melting of Alpine glaciers, one of the most visible and incontrovertible indicators of contemporary global warming, points symbolically and operationally the way forward for Alpine anthropological studies, as exemplarily demonstrated by recent studies on perceptions of and responses to

glacier retreat conducted by a research team led by the anthropologist Ben Orlove. These studies convincingly show that glacier retreat is differentially perceived by those who look at the mountains from afar and by those who live close to the melting glaciers: while the former draw of what Orlove and colleagues call a climate change frame, which focuses attention on 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).

The attitudes of highlanders to glacier retreat were explored mainly through ethnographic research in three sites located in as many glaciated regions of the world: the village of Sopa in the Peruvian Andes, two small towns in the North Cascades region of the United States and the municipality of Stilfs/Stelvio in the South Tyrol. A few years earlier, a group of anthropologists including Ben Orlove had claimed that especially anthropology's in-depth fieldwork methodology yields valuable insights which can enrich and deepen our understanding of climate change, and lamented that the discipline's voice in climate change debates had remained a relatively marginal one until then (Barnes et al., 2013). These investigations of perceptions, attitudes and emotions in three localities which have been directly affected by glacier retreat for over 40 years, and their intriguing results, vindicate the usefulness and potentialities of anthropological community studies and are likely to be corroborated by further ethnographic research.

The distinctive features and potentialities of ethnographic approaches in the study of climate change are clearly spelled out by Barnes, Orlove and colleagues in their 2013 article: addressing a non-anthropological readership, they underline that anthropologists "typically conduct research 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 in-

terviews". This enables them to recognize that the communities they have studied "are not homogenous, isolated, static or all-knowing", but also to argue that "local observations of changes in the climate and local mechanisms developed to deal with those changes can lead to contextualized understandings of climate change impacts and thereby inform adaptation policy" (Barnes et al., 2013, p. 541).

Although noy yet as numerous as one might desire, ethnographic investigations are indeed providing valuable insights, as shown by two recent studies where a focus on tourism (or the lack of it) is instrumental in shedding light on some aspects of human-environment relations and their complexities. Herta Nöbauer (2022, p. 126) reports how, in the course of her fieldwork in a high-altitude glacier ski resort in Tyrol, she increasingly realized that ski areas are "highly moralized and politicized from diverging standpoints": while environmentalists accused ski resort companies of destroying nature, most of those who lived and worked in the resort retorted that environmentalists and environmental laws were jeopardising the very survival of economically and demographically threatened upland populations. Nöbauer's analysis of this blame game, and especially her sympathetic exploration of local people's attitudes toward tourism, work, nature, snow and the melting of glaciers allow a subtler understanding of the articulation of local and global views and of the ways in which this "frontline community" is adapting to changes in the landscape and the availability of snow.

No less revealing perspectives on local views of tourism and nature come from a study of two valleys in Italy's Trentino province where tourism is conspicuously absent. As Alessandro Rippa rightly notes, "while there are many studies of the effect of tourism development in the Alps, less attention has been paid to places in which tourism remains largely absent – yet in which the *narrative* of tourism development remains overwhelmingly present" (Rippa, 2024, p. 2; emphasis in original). The inhabitants of these valleys, whose landscape is undergoing a process of rewilding due to the abandonment of mountain agriculture, often confess that they feel "behind" compared to other places where tourism has become the backbone of local economies. However, most initiatives to foster tourism are met with scepticism and receive little support. The main reason, according to Rippa, resides in the sentiments the rewilding landscape generates in the locals: a sense of loss but also an

intimate and embodied tie with the land nourished by memories that would risk to be erased by the advent of tourism. Hence, a very ambiguous perception of tourism, "pointing at a hidden – and often not-explicit – resistance to 'hosting'" (Rippa, 2024, p. 8). Significantly, the only successful tourism initiatives are those that aim at the celebration and valorisation of the cultural heritage of the valleys.

In-depth ethnographic investigations of this kind are all the more necessary in the Alps in view of the sizeable population turnover recorded over the past decades. Whether we are dealing with attitudes to climate change or, rather, with other delicate issues such as access to local resources or the costs and benefits of tourism development, we can scarcely avoid reflecting about what insiders, outsiders and anthropologists mean by local mountain communities. What is their social, economic and demographic composition? To what extent do the attitudes, and interests, of old and new highlanders converge? These are only few of the many questions that must be raised and addressed in order to go beyond hasty and deceptive generalizations.

The largely unexpected changes that have affected the Alps since the beginning of the twenty-first century – from the settlement of new inhabitants to the hastened melting of their glaciers and the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – have given this mountainous region a new image and possibly a new centrality as a laboratory of social innovation and a space of cultural creativity. However, the Alps are also an arena where natives and newcomers negotiate their claims and may stage in various contexts their identities. And, no less importantly, they provide an invaluable vantage point from which the perceptions of environmental risk in "frontline communities" can be observed and compared to those of people who know and live the mountains from afar. Whose Alps are these? It is a thorny question faced by citizens and politicians as well as by scholars (Varotto and Castiglioni, 2012). Although they may not be able to provide definite answers, anthropological studies have an unparalleled potential to bring to light the subtle complexities of the entangled local situations where tensions, conflicts or, alternatively, cooperative endeavours arise. For Alpine anthropology, engaging with these situations is a duty and also an opportunity to bring back these remote lands to the centre of anthropological attention.

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