Doing Research in the French Alps. Spaces, Places and Politics

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Abstract

What does Alpine anthropology bring to the study of other mountain spaces, and vice versa? How does observing the Alps from the south of the Italian peninsula contribute to the anthropological analysis? In this article, the author explores the implications of taking a comparative look at two mountain areas that are not usually considered in comparative terms. Going back to her early fieldwork in the French Alps, which focused on the economic issues and conflicts that the production of "locality" generated, the author shows the construction of an analytical regard on space and places. Although there are certain elements of proximity between the Alps and the Apennines –such as their real or apparent marginality or the mobilities that have characterised them for centuries– a comparative view is constructed more through an ethnographic and analytical back-and-forth. Mountains are "good for thinking" about some political and economic processes, but it is the "expansion" of the ethnographic focus and the widening of the comparative perspective that allows us to capture continuities, ruptures and specificities.

Alpine Encounters

In 1998, I attended the Seminario permanente di etnografia alpina (Permanent Seminar on Alpine Ethnography) in San Michele all'Adige for the first time. The seminar had been initiated a few years earlier by Pier Paolo Viazzo and Giovanni Kezich as a space for debate among scholars doing research on the Alps from different approaches. Viazzo and Kezich had launched a collection of translations of classic works on Alpine anthropology. That year, Harriet G. Rosenberg attended the seminar for the presentation of the Italian edition of her book *Negotiated World: Three Centuries of Change in a French*

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Alpine Community (1988). She had done her research in the Queyras, on the French side of the Alps, on the transformation of a rural microcosm, the village of Abriès. My interest in the Alps was twofold. At that time, I was still doing research in the Apennines, in San Marco dei Cavoti, a mountainous area in the South of Italy far removed from the Alps. My readings had followed the thread of the new historiography of the Mezzogiorno, the political economy and the anthropology of the Mediterranean. Within these theoretical and ethnographic frameworks, Alpine research was part of my references in a comparative way: studying the mountains of the South encouraged me to take into consideration also Alpine ethnographies. I am thinking, among others, of the works of Paolo Viazzo, *Upland Communities* (1989), Robert Netting, *Balancing on an Alp* (1981), Eric Wolf's work on peasantry, and in particular *The Hidden Frontier* (1974) written by Wolf with John Cole, books that the San Michele all'Adige group had translated into Italian only a few years earlier. But in my research on the Apennines, I had approached the Alps not only comparatively through reading. During spring 1998, I accompanied a group of friends from San Marco – some entrepreneurs and some members of the municipal administration – on a ten-day trip to Gap, the main town of the French *departement*[1] of Hautes-Alpes (Siniscalchi, 2002a), to participate in an exhibition of regional economic activities (as an extension of the participant observations I had carried out in San Marco since 1990). Alongside institutional meetings, we visited parts of the area, including the Queyras and the villages close to the one where Harriet G. Rosenberg had conducted her research twenty years earlier. Subsequently, I began to think about a possible future fieldwork in the area. And the chance to meet Harriet G. Rosenberg was a valuable opportunity for exchange, even though our research focus was quite different. The trip to Gap had made me feel more legitimate among the specialists of the Alps with whom I had begun to discuss and, along with my attendance of the seminar, which I continued to attend for several years, this was the beginning of an ethnographic, professional and life journey.

In this contribution, I return to this research itinerary from the Apennines to the Alps and to a part of the fieldwork carried out in the French Al-

1 In the organisation of the French State, the *departements* – created in 1789 – are both administrative districts and the area of responsibility of the State's decentralised services, administered by a *Prefet* (see Marx, 1977).

pine area in the early 2000s.[2] From an anthropological point of view, how did the research in Southern Italy benefit from the Alpine studies and vice versa? What did these two mountainous spaces, which differ in terms of history, ecology and economic organisation, have in common? How did observing the Alps from the south of the Italian peninsula affect the anthropological perspective?

It is possible to examine these areas comparatively through their real or apparent marginality, through the mobilities that have characterised them for centuries, or even by considering domination and the "external forces" Cole and Wolf referred to, which have left their mark on the ways of occupying space and organising local societies.[3] Beyond these elements of proximity, these questions have to do with the specificities of anthropology, the role of fieldwork, and the ways in which the fieldwork is conducted. In questioning the specificity of the Alps and their relevance as a lens for the study of other mountain areas, I would like to interrogate the comparative dimension of the discipline.

The Political Economy of Alps and Apennines

Attending the San Michele all'Adige seminar helped me to cross the frontier, but my passage from the Apennines to the Alps was a gradual process. This displacement did not simply mark a change in the location of the fieldwork: it contributed to a change in my perspective, which had already been evolving through my previous fieldwork.

Throughout the 1990s, my research was centred in San Marco, a southern Italian town of 4,000 inhabitants, situated around 400 km south of Rome. For many years, San Marco had been a place of research (directed by Italo Si-

2 I take up some passages from a reflection on fieldwork evolution, published in the *Anuac* journal (Siniscalchi, 2018). In that article, I used the notion of "economic spaces" to rethink my approach to fieldwork. This chapter is in a way an extension of the reflections I had started then. I would like to thank Ben Boswell, Almut Schneider, Elisabeth Tauber, and the anonymous reviewers.

3 Cole and Wolf's book (1974) studies the micro-context of two villages, on the border between the Trentino and South Tyrol regions, in order to understand diversities and convergences in the way space is occupied, resources are utilised and heritage is transmitted. The differences between the two communities and the practices of their inhabitants are analysed by the two authors in relation to the great historical changes and economic-political dynamics that have affected these Alpine areas over the last few centuries.

gnorini) for a succession of a dozen or so anthropologists studying the urban and agricultural spaces of the small town. Their research had contributed to its construction as an anthropological place.[4] I had been the last in this series of anthropologists, and this had given me the freedom of prolonged fieldwork over a ten-year period. I had wanted to take up the challenge of producing a "true" work of economic anthropology in a context that had long been interpreted in terms of underdevelopment. My main references were the Mediterranean anthropology and the anthropological political economy. The "world system" of Wallerstein helped me take into consideration the overlaps between centres and peripheries, and the role of semi-periphery played by the regions of southern Italy at the time. Marxist economic anthropology – and more particularly the North American studies – underlined the relationship between human groups and their environment in terms of constraints and adaptation. Many of the researchers working in the area of Mediterranean anthropology have approached economic questions: tenant farming and financial relationships, social stratification, and pastoralism. Although I was inspired by the work of Mediterranean anthropology (Siniscalchi, 1993, 1995), this analytical framework was becoming too narrow for me. These studies already seemed outdated, although, from a chronological point of view, John Davis's *People of the Mediterranean* (1977) was still very close at the time. In my view, this book marked the end of the collective enterprise and the abandonment of the comparative ambition within that historical and geographical area. Later on, the very creation of a more or less artificial entity of the notion of "the Mediterranean" – by scholars such as Anton Blok, John Campbel, Julian Pitt-Rivers, Jean Peristiany, Sydel Silverman, Jane and Peter Schneider, and John Davis himself – would be strongly questioned.[5] The often uncritical

4 For a more detailed analysis, see Siniscalchi (2018) and Palumbo (2021). Berardino Palumbo reflects on the role of ethnography, through his own ethnographies, in the progressive change of perspective in anthropology. He was the first, with Italo Signorini, to conduct research in San Marco, inaugurating the ethnological mission in the Sannio region, establishing the framework in which other young researchers, including myself, conducted their own fieldwork.

5 Mediterranean anthropology looked at the South of Italy and more generally to the South of Europe as a cultural area, essentializing it. Years later, the debate on whether the Mediterranean could continue to be considered as a field of study, without making it an object of study in itself, was reopened thanks to the book edited by Dionigi Albera, Anton Blok and Christian Bromberger (2001), and the colloquium from which the volume emerged, which aimed to rethink the anthropological work of the 1960s and 1970s in this area.

use of this notion by researchers from other disciplines, particularly in the Italian intellectual field, has reinforced my own distancing from the notion. I can take for example the way it was used in the works of Franco Cassano (1998) and Mario Alcaro (1999). Although they set out to overturn the stereotypes that characterise southern Italy and the South(s) in general,[6] paradoxically, these works and the perspectives that underpinned them re-essentialised a presumed Mediterranean "culture", "family" or even a hypothetical Mediterranean "man". [7]

The approaches to the anthropological political economy suggest paying attention to the historical dimension of social phenomena and to power relations inside a broader process of expansion of capitalism. This literature allowed me to be more attentive to both the extended temporalities and the overlaps among different analytical scales (Roseberry, 1988; Wolf 1990, 2001; see also Steward et al., 1956, where the notion of scale was already used). One of the most interesting analyses was Eric Wolf's work on peasantry, where he considered social, economic, and political institutions as well as exterior forces and the dimension of power. Studying the "hidden" frontier that separates the region of Trentino from that of South Tyrol, John Cole and Eric Wolf (1974) exposed the relationships between economy, ecology, and politics. They underlined the necessity to situate local practices (economy, residence, kinship, and inheritance) and ideologies into broader frameworks, incorporating a diachronic and spatial viewpoint from which they take their meanings. Notably, they also emphasized situating these practices in the long history of economic relationships, their links with the market, and the successive periods of political domination to which the region was submitted. Political economy and the research on the Alps strengthened my dialogue with the historiography of the Mezzogiorno (Delille, 1985) and the long history of the Apennines, necessary to understand what I observed in the present. While the dialogue with the work of historians allowed me to observe continuities, it also highlighted the distortions and misunderstandings produced by the projection of long-term history into the present, which left aside the ways in which so-

6 The plural of South underlines the fact that there are enormous differences between southern regions, but these disappear behind stereotypes.

7 This is a recurring problem in the history of anthropology: units of analysis often escape the will of researchers and, reified, migrate into other disciplinary fields, and then into public debate, to become commonplace, carrying stereotyped visions.

cial actors use and manipulate categories. For me, these appeared to be missing, even in the most recent research on the Alps (Siniscalchi, 1993). Over the years, my analyses had moved outside the boundaries of the municipality of San Marco to follow the trade networks and economic activities (agricultural and industrial) that extended over a much larger part of the province of Benevento. My approach to the economic dimension was now eminently political: I had not abandoned the study of "real people doing real things" (Ortner, 1984, pp. 144) in situated contexts – factories, artisanal workshops, fields and the relationship between them and the agricultural history of the Campania region – but I was also interested in the political uses of productive activities on the local and national scene.

From the Apennines to the Alps – The Heritage Thread

After ten years of working in Southern Italy, it was necessary to think about a new research project in a foreign country. My choice of a French terrain – the Hautes-Alpes – was initially inspired by a fortuitous event: the municipality of San Marco, with the help of local historians, was reconstructing the town's past around an imaginary kinship with the town of Gap. The French town was considered to be the place of origin of San Marco's first inhabitants. In the hope of establishing a "twin towns" arrangement, they invited the Hautes-Alpes representatives to some events organised around the economic and entrepreneurial future of the town. The French guests represented the historical roots necessary to imagine the future (Siniscalchi, 2002a). The municipality of Gap had returned this invitation, and my friends in San Marco – the mayor, some councillors and some entrepreneur – asked me to accompany them on the trip to France, that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. These two meetings, a year apart, had raised my interest in comparison. Beyond the declared motivations of the travel, what had intrigued me was the fact that the politicians of Gap had accepted, if not twin towns arrangement, at least the idea of an exchange with a town that was extremely different from their own, particularly in terms of size (Gap is a town of 38,000 inhabitants). The explanation and the possibility of thinking about the French and Italian contexts in comparative terms was made possible by the similar-

ities between the processes of place-making observable on either side. At the same time, in San Marco and Gap (and more generally in the Hautes-Alpes) local people were negotiating their political and economic existence based on their peripheral position within Europe. In the process, they were using each other. In some respects, these negotiations were in continuity with Rosenberg's analysis of the long history of Abriès and the Queyras and with what I had highlighted in the San Marco context: an ability to deal with the constraints and economic changes that were largely imposed from the outside. This capacity appeared also at the political level. This new ethnographic research required learning ways to conceive spaces and places and legal regimes that were different from those I had studied in Italy. It meant learning how a different country worked, one that was very different in institutional terms, despite its close physical proximity to Italy.

Going to the Hautes-Alpes, I was travelling in the opposite direction to the path that had led European (and American) anthropologists to Southern Europe, and to Italy in particular. My research project focused on "Cultural heritage, economies and local identities in an Alpine area in south-eastern France", and it increasingly dealt with the notion of "heritage" as it emerged from French scientific literature (Audrerie, 1997; Babelon and Chastel, 1994; Kalaora, 1997; Poulot, 1998, 2008) and began to attract the attention of researchers in Italy. One of the "passers" of this notion was Daniel Fabre, who was close to the intellectual milieu of Italian anthropology, especially in Rome where I lived and worked at the end of the 1990s. At the time, the toolbox provided by studies on heritage had enabled me to interpret the attention that local San Marco actors paid to local history or *terroir* products in terms of heritage interests. This focus on heritage was not about typical traces of the past. It concerned the historical continuity of current productive practices, and the whole range of local economic activities. Using heritage rhetoric similar to that of other case studies (Poulot, 1998; Bromberger and Chevallier, 1999; Rautenberg et al., 2000), the social actors in San Marco were trying to transform local entrepreneurship into a specific feature of the city. This kind of interpretation was relatively new in the approaches to heritage, and it differed from the interpretation of the patrimonialisation of products or economic practices as forms of revival of activities that were disappearing or losing their economic and social functions (see Bromberger and Chevallier 1999, Bromberger

et al., 2004). In reality, the phenomena I was observing were only partially related to heritage mechanisms, which quickly led me to distance myself from this concept in an attempt to gain a more detailed understanding of the political dynamics, conflicts, and processes of competition and legitimisation at work on the local scene. During the first steps of my fieldwork in France, I was even more surprised that the notion of heritage appeared (by then) almost as an irrefutable element, both for local actors and researchers. The interest in patrimonialisation processes did not really seem to challenge the notion of heritage itself. And furthermore, I had the impression that it was used as a pacifying element towards which local actors had to converge sooner or later. So, I began to handle it critically, with extreme caution, and it soon became a research object rather than an analytical tool: how did local actors use it? And for what purposes? I had the impression that the notion of heritage, while useful for understanding some practices, in San Marco as well as in the Hautes-Alpes, had the effect of obscuring the political mechanisms at work.

Spaces, Places and Politics

The Hautes-Alpes gave me the opportunity to consolidate a change in the focus and the mode of investigation I had already practiced. Even more than in my previous research, it meant crossing and varying scales of analysis since my fieldwork now covered a *departement* (province) rather than a municipality. Reflecting on developments in fieldwork (Siniscalchi, 2018), I already wondered how the construction of fieldwork changes when we expand beyond the "village" to investigate and assemble different scales of analysis.

At the very beginning of my research in the Hautes-Alpes, I noted the comments of my friends and colleagues who knew the area and were surprised by my ethnographic choice because they considered the region to be of no specific interest. Based on absence, on the lack of something, on marginality, these representations of the Hautes-Alpes comforted me even more in what I had chosen as my research theme: the forms of appropriation and construction of territory. At the beginning of the 2000s questions relative to "location", "localities", and the production of spaces and places animated the anthropological debate in Europe and across the Atlantic. Following the per-

spectives of Appadurai (1996), Gupta and Ferguson (1997a, 1997c), and Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003), I started my analysis of the dynamics of affiliation and construction of places by investigating the actions and discourses of local politicians and associations that were interested in the definition of the local space, image and history of the Hautes-Alpes. I explored the paths that my fieldwork in southern Italy had opened up to me by following the activities of members of the Pays Gavot folklore group, local historians from the Société d'études des Hautes-Alpes and members of heritage associations. I discovered a dense network of actors and groups involved in defining the territory. Gradually, my analysis included the staff and the heads of various municipality offices – architects, town planners, municipal employees – their interactions, their kinship ties and political affinities. From different, even conflicting, political and historiographical positions, these different actors helped to shape not only the history of the region, but also its social, economic and geographical specificities. By manipulating stereotypes produced from outside, members of associations, local historians, elected representatives, staff from local institutions, tourism managers and agricultural producers built the specificity of the Hautes-Alpes out of the apparent emptiness that seemed to characterise the department. As Michael Herzfeld points out, a stereotype "always marks the absence of some presumably desirable property in its object. It is therefore a discursive weapon of power. It does something, and something very insidious: it actively deprives the 'other' of a certain property" (Herzfeld, 1997, pp. 157). So, stereotypes are constantly re-appropriated by the individuals and groups to whom they refer: they "do represent a cruel way of 'doing things with words' (Austin [1962] 1975) and they have a material consequence" (Herzfeld, 1997, pp. 158). In this way, the stereotype of an empty, unknown territory, "split" and "shared" between the two historical regions of Provence and Dauphiné, was assumed by local actors, appropriated, manipulated and ultimately claimed. The notion of "frontier" is one of the elements in this inversion of meaning. It was not hidden or invisible – as in Cole and Wolf (1974) – on the contrary, it was exhibited. Based on the historical, administrative, fiscal and religious divisions that had criss-crossed the region over the years, the notion of a frontier made it possible to turn the department's history and controversial position into a resource. I thus interpreted the expression "to be 'between' Provence and Dauphiné" as

a social rhetoric, as a way of talking about the identity of the *departement* of the Hautes-Alpes and of oneself, and at the same time as a way of "making" belongingness (Siniscalchi 2003, 2004, 2016). The rhetoric of sharing, of "being between", produces meaning and makes it possible to construct the local space itself as a frontier space and to situate oneself within it in a way that is always situational and relational, by favouring one or other of its components. Its boundaries are not simply blurred, they are mobile and constantly shifting: the frontier itself becomes an elastic space in which distance or (historical) belonging to one entity or another had a political character, constantly subject to changes in shape, tensions and conflicts. It is only by situating the practices of the various actors within the social, economic and political dynamics in which they take place that we can understand these phenomena in terms of processes, and analyse the conflicts that arise around the objectification and commodification of the "local". What I want to emphasise here is the shift in research focus and perspective that I underwent at that time. Heritage objects have to do with our relationship with the past and with time; with the ways in which a group constructs and represents itself; and with the political dimension and the management of power. Through the space or absence of memory in the public arena, social actors construct their local belonging, establish hierarchies and create legitimacy. Places become symbolic and material operators of political and social conflict.

My analyses focused on economic issues and conflicts generated by the production of locality. The creation of *pays*, under the impulsion of the Voynet law and the Pasqua law,[8] and then on the political agenda in the early 2000s, seemed to me to be a good entry into local dynamics: how would these spaces, neither historical nor administrative, which the legislative interventions promoted, be constituted? What administrative and political actors were involved locally in these dynamics? What were the advantages of adding a new territorial level to an already extremely saturated organisation of administrative spaces in the French territory? The meticulous work required to understand the complexity of the French institutional system, its political rules and its mechanisms of territorial division, carried out with comparative attention

8 Law 95-115 - February 4, 1995 (*Loi d'orentation pour l'aménagement et le développement du territoire*, [Land Use Planning and Development Act]) and law n. 99-553, June 25, 1999. The *pays* is a French category designating an area characterised by "geographical, economic, cultural or social coherence", and allowing the realization of development projects.

to the Italian context, prompted me to go behind the scenes of associations and institutions. From a perspective close to the anthropology of policies (cf. Shore and Wright, 1997; Shore et al., 2011), I analysed them as political actors, focusing on the processes of constructing the legitimacy of policies, their economic dimension and the power dynamics they entail. I refer in particular to the creation of environmental protection mechanisms, to which institutions such as the Office National des Forêts (National Forests Office), regional parks and national parks have contributed. The establishment of *pays*, rather than connecting territories with a historical coherence, as indicated in legislation, seemed to reveal the weight of local and pre-existing political alliances.

Thinking Nature and Defining Space

Re-reading today the research carried out between 2000 and 2005 in the Hautes-Alps, I was constantly widening or narrowing the focus, varying the scale of analysis. The part of the research on which I have most written (and published) concerns the Parc National des Écrins and its staff, which in some respects was the result of narrowing the focus to one of the actors active in the construction of the Hautes-Alpes territory. I was interested in the park's policy changes that occurred between 1980 and 2000. Looking at the evolution of the notions used within the institution, in particular those of nature, natural heritage, cultural heritage and then heritage, I explored the relationship between the changes in the park's language and policies in the framework of the transformations that these same notions were undergoing on a national scale (Siniscalchi 2002b). From the 1990s onwards, the notion of "heritage" was increasingly used in the park's documents and actions. Over the years, the park has become a key actor in the process of redefining the locality through the rhetoric of nature and heritage. I examined these dynamics in terms of their material effects on spaces, transforming them into places, and simultaneously constructing local subjects (see Hirsch and O'Hanlon, 1995; Appadurai, 1996; Low and Zuniga, 2003a).

The choice to analyse the Parc National des Écrins as one of the actors on the local scene, enabled me to avoid rigid dichotomies such as "local populations" versus "park managers". Indeed, in common discourse, and often in

scholars' works on protected areas, these reductive representations conceal the multiplicity of roles assumed by individuals by essentializing categories that are actually much more porous and malleable. I analysed the efforts of park managers to legitimise the presence of the park in the local context. The park's existence was highly conflictive and controversial from the beginning of its institution in the 1970s. When it was first conceived, the park was seen by many local actors as an obstacle to the economic development of the Hautes-Alpes. But by the 1990s and 2000s, its managers and staff were increasingly presenting the park as an economic tool. Collaborations and partnerships with the municipalities were established. The notion of heritage was the vector of this change, allowing the image of the park to move from opposition (nature versus economy) to convergence (heritage for economy) (Siniscalchi, 2010). In reality, these two apparently contradictory approaches arise from the same struggles on the management of resources and the definition of economically efficient actions. They express power dynamics and power relationships that change over time. The policies promoted by successive directors were different and the internal organisation chart of the park changed with the creation of different offices: communication, planning, scientific. The negotiations that accompanied the implementation of park policies revealed the process of legitimisation of the institution within the local space and the frictions that accompanied it (see also Tsing, 2005). Texts, maps and projects that emanate from the park seem to refer to stable entities; in reality, the spaces to which they refer become flexible elements used to construct places and belonging. First the notion of "massif" and then the very name of Écrins (*massif des Écrins*) became identity markers, symbols of the unity of the geographical area over which the park extends (Siniscalchi, 2007). While local politicians, historians and members of heritage associations manipulated the elements used by specialists from different disciplines to classify this region – thereby escaping the classifications and assignments produced by outsiders – the park staff aimed to shape this same territory, for which the park is both the common denominator and the unifying institution.

The approach I have adopted to analyse these dynamics considers rhetoric as having a performative value (i.e., a way of producing meaning and acting on social reality), and conversely, it considers practices as also having an expressive dimension (de Certeau, 1990). Changes in the notions used by

the park are matched by changes in the attitudes and actions of park managers, which in turn reveal the economic and political issues at work in the park (Siniscalchi, 2002b, 2007, 2010, 2013).[9] By studying the dynamics of power in protected areas, I explored the relationships between the State, local institutions, and social groups in their processual dimension (Donnan, Wilson, 2003; Tsing 2005), using economy to define the territory. Within a global political and economic framework managed by the actions of States and national bodies, the territory, the environment and local culture have become issues around which levels of social and political identity can be defined and around which strategies can be devised to control economic and symbolic resources. Conflicts in protected areas do not simply reveal different visions and uses of nature. The management of financial resources, regulatory activities and decision-making on a territory are political issues. Protected areas are "contested" sites, "geographical locations where conflicts in the form of opposition, confrontation, subversion and/or resistance engage actors whose social positions are defined in terms of differential control of resources and access to power" (Low and Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003b, pp. 18). Using the notion of power as defined by Eric Wolf (1990, pp. 586), heritage can be interpreted as a complex field of power struggles, at once a hegemonic idiom that reinforces and extends the power of the State, and an instrument of resistance and agency used by local actors to defend their positions and rights of action on the territory (Marmol et al., 2016).

Alpine Literature and Economic Spaces

What do the processes of defining and constructing places and those of redefining protected spaces in economic terms have to do with Alpine anthropology, which was my entry point for rethinking the Apennines in comparison with the Alps and vice versa?

For a long time, because of the severe constraints imposed by the environmental context and by an isolation that was more imagined than real (see Burns, 1961), the Alps had been regarded as a "magnificent laboratory" (Viazzo 1989, p. 49) for studying the ways in which populations adapted to their

9 More recently, I have continued to follow the transformations of protected areas in the Hautes-Alpes, particularly in the wake of law 436/2006.

environment from a social and economic point of view. Other studies, such as Rosenberg (1988) have highlighted the dynamism of breeders and farmers in their search for a balance with their environment, while emphasising the importance of their exchanges with the outside world. Commercial migration and the networks of credit and debt have prompted anthropologists working on these regions, following in the footsteps of historians (Fontaine, 1993, 2003), to focus on the circulation of labour, wealth, and debt rather than on forms of production. Seasonal and temporary emigration was increasingly seen as the basis of European mountain economies (see Viazzo and Albera, 1986; Viazzo, 1989). History does not have the same role in these works that it has in the research of Cole and Wolf or for other political economy scholars who tried to explain modes of production in terms of power relations and the history of capitalism. It was the long history of social and economic interactions in the framework of an anthropology that based the comparative enterprise precisely on historical connections. Without denying the relevance of the Alpine area as a comparative space, in my view, the relevance of comparison in anthropology lies elsewhere.

To analyse the phenomena of territorial restructuring in a comparative way, particularly the processes of transforming objects, places and identities into commodities, I used Wallerstein's (1981) notion of "economic space", revisited in the light of an anthropology of localisation processes. Wallerstein's vision of the world in terms of economic power centres, peripheries and semi-peripheries made it possible to read localised social phenomena without falling back onto culturalist explanations, all the while paying attention to long-term economic and political processes and the interweaving of different scales of analysis. When I trained as an anthropologist in the 1980s, and when I conducted my fieldwork in southern Italy in the 1990s, interpretive frameworks such as Wallerstein's seemed to have lost their explanatory effectiveness. As Ortner (1984) reminded us in a text on theories that dominated anthropology from the 1960s onwards, the approaches of political economy had benefited anthropology by preventing it from imagining the contexts studied – often small-scale societies – as isolated; they had made it possible to shift the attention to the analysis of large-scale, regional economic and political systems and to study the effects of the penetration of capitalism over the long term, by reasserting the importance of the historical dimension. On the other hand, Ortner criticised the vision of history inherent in these ap-

proaches: a history that is imposed from outside on each micro-context. She proposed shifting the focus to the agency of the individuals studied, as subjects of their own history, by emphasising the importance of concepts such as agent, actor, person, subject and practice, which brought us closer to the experience of social actors. While I shared some of the positions summarised by Ortner, I was interested in the dimension of power, and in the long-term political and economic phenomena. The spatial transformations I observed in the early 2000s were part of (capitalist) dynamics of redefinition of local economies (see also Narotzky and Smith, 2006).

It was only later, at the end of my research in the Hautes-Alpes, that I began to experiment with the notion of "economic space" in a more systematic way, making a broader use of it from both a spatial and a temporal point of view. This notion helps to look at the economic and social transformations in shorter temporalities (than those considered by Wallerstein, 1974, 1981).[10] It appears useful for analysing the construction of places or the spatiality of economic activities, but above all it can be an analytical instrument for defining the spaces of economic and political action. Then it becomes a useful tool for thinking about the interrelationships between different geographical areas and for identifying and understanding the connections and reconfigurations of the economy at different scales. It is a flexible analytical instrument that helps to understand diverse and localized phenomena by situating them in larger contexts. It makes it possible to grasp the links between productive spaces and political arenas in which networks of actors negotiate and fight to define, regulate, and circulate goods and merchandise.

Conclusions

Anthropology is a comparative discipline, often attempting to arrive at a closer understanding of what appears more distant and to keep a certain distance from what is apparently more familiar. In this attempt, one of the original

10 For an economic interpretation of the notion of economic space see Perroux (1950). According to Perroux, an economic space is defined by economic relations and, therefore, by balance of power. For a review of Perroux's work and geographical uses of this notion, reintroducing the material dimension of space, see Couzon (2003).

aspects of anthropological work is the possibility of analysing one terrain through another: through our own ethnographies, which stratify over time, and the ethnographies of others. Moreover, fieldwork is a space-time, delimited by specific, historically and theoretically situated research practices: fieldwork only exists within the anthropologist's research practice, which circumscribes it, declares it, and constructs it over time, through her own presence and her gaze, as a specific place – or set of places – as "her" or "his" fieldwork. In the late 1990s, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson analysed the field as the site, method, and the specific location of the anthropologist (1997b, 1997c). Introducing the collective book *Anthropological Locations*, they pointed out the apparent contradiction within anthropology "that loudly rejects received ideas of 'the local', even while ever more firmly insisting on a method that takes it for granted" (1997d, pp. 4). Fieldwork, and the idea of "local" on which it is based, changes and evolves over time in an attempt to understand and follow as closely as possible the social life of the men and women that the researcher has decided to observe. That social life is also always changing, however imperceptibly. This means that anthropologists always observe a piece of social life in motion in a series of multiple and different locations. Reflecting on their joint fieldwork in Colombia, Gudeman and Rivera (1995, pp. 244) wrote that "fieldwork is a process, an education and a theory in action … an encounter, and the anthropologist participates in making ethnography". Gudeman and Rivera criticised the dichotomous view that locates the fieldwork in a separate space and time from analysis and writing, as if each produced a different kind of knowledge.

> In our view, anthropology is done within a community of inquiry, and this collectivity is multiply defined: it is a community "at home" and "out there" at once. Sometimes the anthropologist is physically located "there" and sometimes "here", but the two together locate her. Joint fieldwork makes manifest this multiple location and alters the experience. (1995, p. 245)

Gudeman and Rivera encourage us to rethink the role of the fieldwork as place precisely situated. Their critics can in turn be used as a critique of the all-purpose use of the expression "multi-sited" ethnography (Marcus, 1995). Anthropology is multi-sited by definition, although in some research the

multi-sited dimension takes a different form (e.g., when research follows value chains, circulations of goods). Fieldwork is constitutively situated in multiple places and these places are closer to or further from each other depending on the subject matter and the researcher's perspective. But fieldwork forces us to expand our gaze: it is an experience of life and research that modifies the researcher's way of observing. Beyond some elements of proximity between the Alps and the Apennines – such as their real or apparent marginality or mobilities that have characterised them for centuries– it is through an ethnographic and analytical back-and-forth that we can refine and build a comparative vision. Mountains are "good for thinking about" some political and economic processes, but it is the expansion of the ethnographic focus and the widening of the comparative perspective that allows us to capture continuities, ruptures and specificities.

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