Exploring Ethnography for Moving Mountain Confines

An Introduction

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> For a few months of the year, your municipality resembles a nest of hornets gone wild, thousands and thousands of people cavort noisily on the slopes, roads and footpaths, there is no silence, no breathing, the going is tough. In the end, collective exhaustion. From one day to the next, the spook is over. Now, after the end of the season, anyone who takes a tour of the villages in the municipality … feels as if they are close to the apocalypse: About three quarters of the houses are uninhabited, far and wide there is no open cafe, no open restaurant, hardly a person to be seen. Social and cultural wasteland. (Vescoli, 2023 [authors' translation from German])

This is how a stunned villager in her open letter to the mayor of a touristy municipality in the Italian Eastern Alps, published in a local weekly, describes scenarios that already interested the historian Lucie Varga in the 1930s. Varga describes the phenomen of a change of perspective from "from below" to "from within":

> Today, many fewer Ladins are forced to leave to earn a living: tourism has changed everything. Instead of one hostel, there are three; instead of one job for three, there are thirty, because you not only have to provide accommodation for the tourists, you have to wash, iron, knit and sew. They buy shoes, stockings, boots and provisions. And, slowly, the inhabitants adopt a dual idea of value for work. The work sold to foreigners is much more expensive and they are still surprised to see the tourists pay without batting an eyelid. (Varga, 2023[1939], p. 145)

Part of
Schneider, A. & Tauber, E. (Eds.). (2024). *New Horizons for the Alps – Ethnographies, Reshaping Challenges and Emerging More-Than-Alpine Relations.* bu,press. https://doi.org/10.13124/9788860461988

In her research in two Alpine valleys, one in South Tyrol (Italy), the other in Vorarlberg (Austria), Varga succeeded in examining the causes of change – towards National Socialism in Vorarlberg, towards modernity in Val Badia, South Tyrol – and analysing the "turning points" that emerged in the years before the Second World War (Schöttler, 1991). Varga's work remained unnoticed for a long time (see Lanzinger, 2023; Schöttler 2023; Viazzo, 2023), but a few decades later, her interest was taken up again in various regions of the Alps with an initial strong phase (Burns, 1963; Honigman, 1972; Friedl, 1974; Cole and Wolf, 1974; Weinberg, 1975; Netting, 1981) and a later second wave (Viazzo, 1989; Heady, 1999; Stacul, 2003; Grasseni, 2009).

We started our respective field research in 2018 and we were somehow surprised not to find an international anthropological community in which researchers exchange and debate ideas in specific journals, meet at conferences and hold working groups on Alpine matters. At the same time, the term "Alpine anthropology" is widely used (Kezich, 2022; Zanini and Viazzo, 2022) and there exists something like an understanding of Alpine commonalities. Between 1991 and 2007, there had been a very active Italian working group led by Giovanni Kezich and Pier Paolo Viazzo, the Permanent Seminar on Alpine Ethnography (Seminario Permanente di Entografia Alpina) in San Michele all'Adige (Trentino) discussing Alpine particularities with geographers and historians. However, in 2018, what we missed most were recent ethnographies to fall back on, and this became a methodological and analytical challenge; due to the lack of a scholarly community concerned with this area, we missed occasions of communicative exchanges, suggestions, opportunities for orientation and criticism. Overall, this impression became rather more pronounced, and we realized that anthropological approaches were often lodged in interdisciplinary projects, some of them focusing on finding solutions in terms of concrete applications for this mountain area. When embarking on this volume, we therefore wanted to gather anthropological and ethnographic studies focussing on the region to get a sense of the present state-of-the art.

The present volume follows *Malinowski and the Alps* (Tauber and Zinn, 2023), where another phenomenon of absence had become the topic of discussion. Whilst the first volume features authors dealing with an anthropological and historical search for traces of a Tyrolean Malinowski, who had lived

with his family in Oberbozen South Tyrol in the 1920s and 30s, this second volume is to a certain extent committed to ethnography in the original Malinowskian sense, accepting that Malinowski himself "had never made the Alps an object of study, and therefore never had an impact on the Alpine anthropology" (ibid., p. 1). The contributors assembled in the present publication have been invited to focus on ethnography as the key discipline for anthropological analysis, to revisit their own, older data, present more recent research to explore new ethnographic possibilities and openings, and arive at a sense of what is needed for future research.

The Alps have been considered a showcase of beautiful nature since their tourist discovery around 1780 (Bätzing, 2019, p. 11). The "grandeur of the surroundings" that Hertz (1983[1913], p. 55) refused to be distracted by, this power of "nature", challenges the ethnographic gaze to avoid being overwhelmed and instead focus on the practices and relational networks of the inhabitants. At the same time, Hertz was convinced that the "mountain is a marvellous preserver, on condition of course, that the tides of the plain have not yet swept over it" (ibid., p. 88); just as he saw in the Graian Alps, alongside sociological phenomena such as the cult of St Besse or the presence of ibex, which he believed was already extinct elsewhere, and "where the rarest Alpine plants abound" (ibid.). More than a hundred years after Hertz's reflections, the possibilities of the mountains as preservers has changed. In this volume some authors show how practices in the Alps can be exceptionally thought-provoking, others show how the logics of the plains have overtaken the Alps.

The volume gathers stories whose heterogeneous situations and problems inscribe and shape themselves afresh in Alpine landscapes: people leaving high places, forests coming back (Paini); generational transitions on high Alpine pastures (Ledinek Lozej); the agency of microbes for making cheese (Grasseni); high-tech inventions to tame melting glaciers and save the tourist industry (Nöbauer); economic predominance in magical bubbles (Boscoboinik and Cretton); meadows becoming greener and telling of industrial farming in mountain heights (Schneider), and of people who do not have to own land for relating to it and for whom space and time "are the others" (Tauber). We divide the volume into three thematic areas: I. Anthropological

traditions, ethnographic returns, and recent approaches; II. Landscapes and agri-cultures; III. Engaged futures and perspectives from "elsewhere".

In the first part, Pier Paolo Viazzo discusses dilemmas in the anthropological study of Alpine societies, Cristina Grasseni considers mobility, the relationship with the surrounding lowlands and a "global system of commodities" and Valeria Siniscalchi scrutinizes questions of economic and political scales of analysis in relation to research in the Alps in comparison with the South of Italy.

Pier Paolo Viazzo, a profound expert on the history of social science research in the European Alps, deals comprehensively with the various traditions and approaches of anthropological studies in this region. He thus complements and completes his contribution to the first volume (Viazzo 2023), in which he traces the origins of ethnography in the Alps, where the influence of Bronislaw Malinowski is almost invisible. In his present contribution, he explores the question of different research approaches in the Alps by critically examining the work of "foreign" researchers and the impact of their presence on "local" researchers. He analyses how the research of colleagues from other countries affects existing research traditions, and is interested in the prevailing knowledge cultures and the question which knowledge hierarchies prevail. Viazzo asks how the relationship between "native" and "foreign" anthropologists should be described and what might be deduced from this for present and future research in the Alps. However, Viazzo points to various examples that show that the question of local anthropologists is not easy to answer. After all, in this region, boundaries can become already relevant a few kilometres further away; the anthropologist working in the neighbouring valley of his or her birthplace might very well be confronted with a relatively "foreign" situation.

In the author's view, the current perspectives for research in the Alps depend above all on *how* the major processes of change that can be seen in the Alps in the 21st century will be approached ethnographically. If in the 20th century the focus was on modernity and its relationship to traditional social structures, in the 21st century the attention is on questions of climate change, species extinction or new inhabitants of the Alps.

Within this context, Cristina Grasseni observes that Lombard cheese-making – formerly part of a more complex seasonal movement of herds – problematizes the connection with the pre-Alpine plains and the outside world, which was always part of the local repertoire. Reflecting on the evolution of transhumance and cheese-making practices from the 19th century into the 21st century, she notes that what was once widespread mobility has now become sedentariness imposed by the national and international standardisation of cheese as a local product. However, these people find a creative solution by transforming their "transhumance dairy product", Strachítunt, into a sedentary product, anchored in their locality.

Through this example, Grasseni shows the entire field of tension in which local practices meet global dynamics. For her, the ecological knowledge of the Italian Alps available are an acute source of inspiration for interdisciplinary research. The reasons why it is worthwhile to keep an eye on the Alps in terms of research are obvious to her. Here, in diverse contexts, global developments are sometimes radically re-thought and put into question. She refers to multispecies, microbial and high-tech research, which, according to her, is echoed in Alpine practices of fermentation, the handling of institutional guidelines for the standardisation of cheese production and the flexible applicability of low-tech and high-tech techniques. For Grasseni, the Alps remain a place "good to think with" because of their diverse nature, the character of the research traditions in and around them, and because the end of the Alps is both the surrounding plains and the global dynamics, their cities and new forms of aesthetics.

Valeria Siniscalchi approaches the French Alps from another mountain massif in Italy, the Apennine Mountains, through a comparative angle. In a re-reading of her own research and data, she observes that her analytic focus was increasingly both broadening as well as narrowing to be able to perceive different economic and political scales. Although in the 1990s she was still doing research in a mountainous region in Italy's south, and her reading was oriented alongside the new historiography of the Italian Mezzogiorno, as well as its political economy and anthropology, she became interested in the Alps. She began applying her ethnographic gaze to both mountainous regions in parallel, travelling back and forth, being involved with scholars working in both regions. Inspired by her research in the south of Italy, she

asks what the two "mountain realities" have in common, despite their different history, ecology and economic organisation. She asks how themes such as marginality, mobility, but also economic and political domination as exterior forces – important in both the Apennines and the Alps – can be compared.

Through the literature on political economy, she introduces the concept of different scales into her perspective; through dialogue with historians, she makes the non-linearity of developments visible. She is interested in how to be ethnographic when working on power relations in the broader process of expansion of capitalism. Against this background, the Alps are relevant for her anthropological comparison, and she applies Wallerstein's (1981) notion of economic space and his vision of economic power centres, peripheries and semi-peripheries to both her research regions. This approach makes it possible, so she claims, to read local social phenomena into the context of long economic and political processes and to connect different levels of analysis with each other. She illustrates this with the concept of *heritage* that in itself carries the risk of obscuring political and economic mechanisms of local practices. Consequently, she leaves the analytical instrument of heritage behind to instead deal with heritage itself as an object of research.

Landscapes and agri-cultures characterize the second part in which Špela Ledinek Lozej, Anna Paini, and Almut Schneider elaborate on the re-shaping of Alpine landscapes through humans and not-exclusively local practices.

Spela Ledinek Lozej takes us right into one of the core topics of the Alpine region: high mountain pastures. From her exceptionally detailed ethnographic description, we understand that much about the fate of these vast areas above the tree line, about this old cultural landscape, hinges on very few people and depends on how they work with the animals they look after during the summer months. We get to know Cecily, who had worked as a cow herder and cheesemaker on Krstenica Alp (Slovenia) for 23 years by the time Ledinek Lozej spent her first summer there in 1998. After her initial research period, the author re-visits the alp for five summers until Cecily retires in 2015, at the age of eighty. The author's numerous stays on Krstenica Alp, which continue with Cecily's successors, give us a rare long-term ethnographical insight into the diversity of tasks as well as the endurance required to "keep this landscape open", free from encroaching scrubs and into the so-

cial and political interdependencies which are involved in the coordination of herders, cheesemakers, animal-owners and shareholders of the pasture-land. We understand the long and varied history of the Krstenica Alp since the Middle Ages and get a sense of the challenge and risk involved when a change of generation occurs.

Cecily had always worked with her (grand-)nephews and nieces on the Alp and enjoyed transmitting her knowledge. She was hopeful when two of them took her place in 2016, but they stayed only for three summers, claiming that the work was too strenuous and badly paid. The local Agrarian Community (the Alp's shareholders) has since taken over hiring herders and a cheesemaker, and the staff is changing from year to year. Interestingly, the author relates the growing conflicts around the management of the Alp also to the decreasing role of agricultural production and to the fact that none of the shareholders depends financially on the Alpine pasture any longer.

Pastures, as well as meadows and fields that have been out of use for a long time and are therefore responsible for drastic changes in the landscape, are at the centre of the contribution of Anna Paini. Woodland is encroaching upon the village where she did fieldwork, and if the inhabitants perceive this as threatening, it is not so much because "the forest eats everything" but because they understand this phenomenon to be a sign of a lack of engagement between people and their environment. The village of Vinigo, in the north-east Italian province of Belluno, had been a vibrant place for centuries, with a solid sense of history, an unusually high level of education, always (it seemed) surrounded by fields, meadows and pastures. Like most mountain areas in the province, Vinigo experienced various forms of emigration in the 20th century. In some cases, it was a seasonal movement, in others a permanent move to other European countries or overseas. The effect of this depopulation, the neglect of the cultivated land, has a visible effect on the landscape and is acutely perceived by the villagers.

The loss of cultivated land goes hand in hand with the disappearance of knowledge, a change of microclimate in the valley, species loss, and an overall alteration of the social dynamics of the place. Vinigo inhabitants explicitly state that since the disappearance of agriculture, the land no longer receives the necessary care and maintenance. It was precisely this that was ensured by the so-called "Rule" (*Regole*), a local institution that not only controlled

community life but also the management of the land for several centuries; "if there had been no *Regole*, the environment in Cadore [the region in question] would have been devastated" is the comment of an informant. In her contribution, Paini gives a lot of space to the residents' assessments of the changed social conditions in the village and thus of the significantly altered landscape that surrounds the village, or might it be the other way round?

Taking the example of South Tyrolean mountain farmers, Almut Schneider shows how the ethnography of micro-level, small farmers, can complement and correlate with the study of economic and political macro-level, global agricultural modernisation, and vice versa. Since the two levels are interrelated, she adopts double vision as an investigative method. She shows how mountain farming practices – a "monstrous" concept of South Tyrolean identity construction, reflecting hybrids of nature and culture (Latour 1993) – are directly intertwined with agricultural policies, their local, national and supranational economic orientations, as well as their constant content changes. Here, we encounter the paradoxes of modernity, whose expression, according to Almut Schneider, depends on the respective perspective of the actors. On the one hand, an enormous bureaucratic apparatus to support the farmers, even if the yardstick for doing "business" on the mountain is the valley bottom type of agricultural business. On the other hand, the South Tyrolean mountain farmers themselves, who would not survive without the support of public money. For them, this means playing along in the bureaucratic game as administrators of contributions and as followers of countless rules. Nevertheless, from their perspective, they do not see their farms and land as subject to the industrial development it surely is, and farming practices – rather than being paradoxical – are a pragmatic survival strategy that conceals the extent to which they make use of industrialized components.

Schneider retraces how mountain farmers live an ideal of autonomy while at the same time implementing a global system of agricultural modernisation: They are far from the ideal of the farmer living off the land; indeed they effectively earn little more than the minimum wage due to the high costs of this industrialised agriculture. Her conclusion is that when comprehensive modernisation measures were introduced in the early 1970s, policy makers did not consider how small the farms were, what topographical and climatic conditions they were exposed to, and what impact the former cultivation of

mixed arable and livestock farms had had on the ecosystem over a long period of time.

Whilst change may again be underway in small-scale industrialised agriculture, we come to the final third part of engaged perspectives from "elsewhere", where possible futures and transformations of analytical categories are in full swing at various levels.

Thinking with verticality, Herta Nöbauer is concerned with another example of discrepancies and paradoxes that shape Alpine high places and human-cryosphere relations in her contribution on glacier ski resorts in the Austrian Pitztal. As her fieldwork took place at the high end of the Alps, between 1,700 m and 3,400 m a.s.l., Nöbauer pays special attention to the very fact of verticality and the analytical framework it provides for her understanding of people working in this environment. As anywhere else, high, cryosphere places need to be understood as a web of human and non-human relations where different actors and agentive powers negotiate place-making against the background of particularly concrete impacts of climate change. The author considers her main question, "how people live with snow and make a living from it", from various perspectives, working with village inhabitants of Pitztal, both those directly or indirectly involved with the resort, with technicians, legal advisors, security personnel and with company managers. However, her principal focus is the "male world" of the glacier workers, responsible for maintaining the infrastructure of the ski resort – cable cars, snow depots, snow cannons and groomers, and the enormous All Weather Snowmaker – all of which contribute to accessing and securing new spaces to be used by tourists and profitable to economic interests.

Modern winter tourism becomes part of a broader process of shaping and promoting modernity and the capitalist economy in the European Alps. This involves various highly mechanised processes of transforming natural snow into the commodity of "white gold" which is, as a matter of fact, industrialised snow. Research in this highly technological cryosphere zone leads Nöbauer to observe a remarkable reversal: the common attribution that urban and lower-lying regions in the Alps are associated with progress and modernity, while higher-lying areas are associated with tradition and backwardness, is here turned on its head: The ski resort companies, as well as their em-

ployees, attribute progressiveness to this high place, whereas, in their view, the valley lacks any belief in change.

New residential models are at the centre of the contribution of Andrea Boscoboinik and Viviane Cretton when dealing with lifestyle and working migrants who find a "magic bubble" and a "place of strength" in Valais, Switzerland. They enquire and compare how the increasing mobility of people takes part in and reshapes existing models of social relationships in Verbier and Zermatt, resorts emblematic of deep transformations due to industrialised tourism, both presenting a high number of non-local, often international residents. The authors tackle the complex relational dynamic between human practices, imaginaries and place that is brought about by the increasing mobility towards these two cosmopolitan places. Most of the new inhabitants, be it owners of second homes or migrant workers employed in the tourist industry, are "temporary residents".

What is interesting is that this is a characteristic they share with the local farming population, who change over the seasons between living in the village in autumn and winter, at middle altitudes in spring and on high mountain pastureland in summer. As the local farmers, they are multilocal and live the seasons, intensively, as well as the landscape and "nature", the latter unanimously linked to strong imaginaries with a positive connotation throughout. Whereas for the residents of Verbier, it is the entertainment, the "Verbier vibes" and the cosmopolitan, liberal atmosphere which is attractive against the backdrop of the mountain scenery, in Zermatt, it is a "special kind of energy" that makes it a "place of strength" which many seasonal inhabitants and regular guests seek out.

Most of the contributions of this volume could be placed relatively conclusively in one or other of the categories that we as editors have created. The "elsewhere" contained in the title of the third part is not meant geographically; it does not refer to other regions but to the cultural practices of the Sinti with whom Elisabeth Tauber reflects on a quite different form of and an enlarged scope of relationship to Alpine land. The Sinti are engaged in cultural practices whose categories of space and time are profoundly different from those commonly discussed in Alpine contexts. Thus, for an anthropological understanding, the categories of Alpine societies as they are familiar to us are no longer applicable. More than that, the condition of possibility by

which the Sinti conceptualise society runs counter to the Alpine categories we know, especially because they do not need to own any land to feel connected to it. The Sinti's presence in the Italian eastern Alps goes back generations, probably several centuries; yet they never appear in the literature on the Alps. They are the Others.

In her contribution, Tauber addresses a thorny situation that cannot easily be resolved epistemologically and is one of the reasons for this puzzling absence of the Sinti. The question is a double one – the silence of the Sinti themselves and of the others who do not consider Sinti as inhabitants of the Alps. It is in memory of her mentor, Patrick Williams, that she states one can only relate to this research field if one fully recognises that these groups are part of the societies they live in (Williams, 2021). She both uses ethnographic data from twenty-five years ago and draws on recent archival research to reflect on the meaning of memory and history, belonging, relations to the dead, and relations to land.

The volume concludes with an epilogue by Werner Krauß, who did research in the Swiss Alps in the late 1980 (Krauß, 1987). Subsequently, he undertook fieldwork in other parts of the world and most recently in Northern Germany on topics to do with environmental conflicts, national parks, climate change and renewable energies. With the perspective of these experiences, he looks regularly in the direction of the Alps and is an acute follower of changing developments, new data and analytical approaches in this region (Krauß, 2018).

At the end of our work with this collection of essays, we have a clearer picture. At the beginning, we complained about the absence of an anthropological community exchanging views about current events and approaches; this phenomenon might be associated to the fact that in the Alps, history, geography and folklore studies are always part of what anthropologists do. This interdisciplinary situation contributes to the fact that anthropologists often put their core business – ethnography – on the back burner. What we do, somehow automatically, in interdisciplinary situations, is the same kind of translation work, here between disciplines, that we are used to doing in inter-cultural contexts. Could the prevalence of interdisciplinary approaches over the

last two decades be a reason why the focus has shifted away from ethnography and would thus explain why there have been so few monographs recently?

The contributions in this volume confirm that the Alps can indeed be understood as "a laboratory of social innovation and a space of cultural creativity" (Viazzo, p. 17, this volume) where we can observe urgent issues concerning capitalism, climate change and loss of biodiversity more intensely than elsewhere, since the region serves as a kind of magnifying glass. We also realised the growing and indeed urgent relevance of connecting what we perceive within the Alps to what happens elsewhere, and thereby discovering stimuli for new experiences in this laboratory. What we see in the contributions to this volume is an aspect of global connectedness that needs to be taken into account with more vigour. In the contributions of Boscoboinik and Cretton, Grasseni, Nöbauer, and Paini lies huge potential for this analytical prospect. Siniscalchi, Schneider and Tauber show how the perspective from "elsewhere" – considering different political and economic scales; thinking of industrial farming when analysing the situation of small-holding mountain farmers; introducing an understanding of relationality with land that directs our gaze beyond the Alps – is necessary for considerations aiming at a longer and broader range. Krauß has chosen yet another emphasis by showing how the Alpine landscape represents "the epoch of the anthropocene" (2018, p. 1) that can best be grasped when thinking with assemblages, necessarily including non-local and more-than-human actors.

Thus, working on this volume has made it abundantly clear that the Alps do not stand for themselves but always relate to "others" and to themes emerging elsewhere. Finally, we come back to the concerned villager's description that opened this introduction. Her motive for describing the state of the village was that the mayor had been delighted to offer a building plot to an overseas millionaire who had shown interest in erecting a villa there. What happens here, happens of course all over the world: land turning into a commodity and this process accelerating without an end in sight. For the anthropologist, how can the additional challenge of thinking with an ever stronger "global other", such as land speculation, pesticides and herbicides, concentrated cattle feed, high-tech industrial items, lifestyle migrants, be put into concrete ethnographic practice? All these more-than-Alpine relations –

and the overseas millionaire could be taken as an epitome for these phenomena – call, in our opinion, also for a more orchestrated ethnographic gaze on other horizons that move these mountain's confines.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Astrid Parteli of bu,press for organising the review process, for her patience and her meticulous attention to detail in ensuring the finalisation of this volume. We are grateful to Maria Lord, Vienna University, for her valuable assistance with the thorough linguistic revision of some of the contributions. Finally, we thank the anonymous reviewers of the chapters for their constructive critiques and suggestions.

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