

Crafting Social Change: Imagining Ecological Transition in the Alps

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Abstract

In the Alps, economic and ecological uncertainties, coupled with public debates and governmental policies, have rapidly propagated the idea that ecological transition represents a necessary shift for the viability of local economies and ways of life. However, propositions on how such changes should be achieved are still modest and tend to ignore the ways these discourses circulate and are understood at the ground level. Based on a comparative ethnographic research project in the Swiss, French and Italian Alps, this essay explores ecological transition as a peculiar form of desired social change within Alpine contexts. In particular, it resorts to the notions of crafting and imagining in order to explore emerging social worlds and transition-related practices, and to describe the attitudes of people supporting change in local social spaces. In dealing with local forms of cultural imagination, the essay shows how narratives of change and transition stem from meanings and memories attached to the Alpine-ness and mountain-ness of the three explored settings. Moreover, in considering the position assigned to the authors when in the field, it explores the effects ethnographic research could have when documenting crafted, going-to-be worlds.

1. Introduction: Studying Transition in the Alps

In our tumultuous and uncertain times, everybody talks about transition¹. In vogue at the global level, the term is used to define a change of status, a movement from one point to another, as well as the temporal lapse in which such changes or movements take place. As such, the notion is largely used by institutional actors and by people and movements from civil society both when describing reality and advocating for changes. Since it provides us with a useful notion to provisionally escape the harsh dictates of defining the ambiguous world we live in, the vagueness of the concept can also account for its success in several domains of social life – economy, demography, politics – and, indeed, the social sciences.

It is therefore not surprising that discourses about transition are also findable in these fragile regions that, affected by climate change and by socio-economic recompositions, are experiencing change in significant manners. Among them, the Alpine area stands in a preeminent place, given that multiple of ecological, social, and technological metamorphoses make this region a compendium of the world's upheavals (Nova, 2023). Given the diverse domains in which it is invoked, as well as its semantic plasticity, the notion of transition seems a useful conceptual tool for exploring similarities and differences in the ways in which change and continuity are instantiated within the Alpine region.

Despite that, the very indefiniteness of the concept constitutes per se a serious obstacle for evaluating the nature and pace of such changes, as – by defining a condition of movement – the term lets its potential ends open. In a way, the study of practices and discourses concerning transition deserves the same careful exploration anthropologists once reserved to the ideas of “modernisation” and “development”, as highlighted few years ago by the French anthropologist Pierre Le Meur (2020):

¹ This essay synthesises and presents the main results of the first two years (2022–2023) of the research project “TransAlpS–Sustainable transition and applied research in Alpine territories: comparative approaches between France, Switzerland and Italy”. The project was generously founded by Paris’ Fondation Maison de Sciences de l’Homme (FMSH) within the “Emerging researches” financial framework and has hosted by the IDEAS, Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology (UMR 7307, Aix-Marseille University, CNRS) for its whole duration. Both institutions should be thanked for the valuable support we received when conducting our research.

The term [transition] is an empty one, without content or perspective. It constitutes just a horizon, in the strict sense of the term, like a line that moves backwards as we progress between two points, the first fictitious, the other fantasised. This was already the case with the terms progress, modernisation and even development, but the notion of transition that partially replaces them accentuates this semantic turn in the direction of a movement for the sake of a movement. (p. 10, translation by the authors)

Nevertheless, semantic explorations of the ways in which transition – and more specifically ecological transition – is enunciated, interpreted and framed are not less empirically fruitful. Discursive understandings of processes of development and modernization (see, for example: Grillo, 1997) showed that such processes are often less consistent than what they tend to appear: as they involve different actors, institutions, and forms of knowledge, consciously-led forms of change mostly result from the unequal negotiation between multiple visions, voices and ideas, more than from simpler *top-down* injunctions (Grillo, 1997). Therefore, an ethnographic understanding of transition-related discourses and practices in different Alpine contexts demands a careful examination of how such discourses and practices circulate and are understood at the ground level, as well as on the manners in which such practices become embedded in the local social structures. Moreover, attention should be paid to the cultural and relational resources of people who are currently championing and promoting such forms of change within these settings, as well as to their position within the community.

By constituting highly contextual and adaptive forms of social change, practices of transition mobilise and renew social imaginaries too. During the research, affects, aspirations, and fears attached to the future emerged as relevant issues in Alpine communities experiencing climate change, demographic and economic recomposition and lack in public facilities. Strictly linked with their orientations to the future, the study of transition as a form of cultural, highly contextual practice of collective imagination, entails ethnographically documenting emerging, new social worlds and phenomena that are soon-to-be (Pink & Salazar, 2017).

When approaching ecological transition as a multivocal, situated, and negotiated process, we found the idea of crafting relevant, in particular for

describing the complex and dynamic interactions played by people, institutions, and material arrangements when co-imagining and co-creating an emergent and changing world (Burke & Spencer-Wood, 2019). Moreover, considering transition a “crafted” process allows us to grasp its voluntaristic and aspirational nature, and the peculiar meanings it gets according to the issues and the contexts in which transition-related discourse occur. At last, it stresses the step-by-step mindset people adopt whilst engaging with the obstacles and the snags constraining transition to take place.

Given this, this essay discusses cultural-sensitive and located ideas of ecological transition within the Alpine region. In particular, it explores how ideas of change are culturally imagined and crafted within three different mountain contexts, respectively located in the Swiss, French, and Italian Alps². At present, the three countries all show an active commitment to promoting a transition to less energy-intensive models of society. However, these strategies differ greatly from each other, to the extent that transition may be oriented towards the development of renewables and sustainable transportation (France), to energy efficiency (Italy and Switzerland) or even the gradual exit from carbon and nuclear power (Switzerland). The selection of the three field sites should not, however, be understood as being driven by a principle of representativeness of dynamics taking place at the national level. Instead, the three cases were selected on the basis of information hinting at the existence of a diversity of ways of interpreting change and ecological transition in three similar mountainous settings, assuming that it was still possible to bring out some underlying common patterns. We chose the Airolo municipality (Swiss Alps) since there is a very vocal discourse and practices related to transition, mainly at an institutional level. This discourse is received and played out in different ways by different interest groups, resulting in different ideas and practices that might influence the future of the village. In Airolo, ecological transition certainly seems to be seen as a change that needs to be managed, an opportunity that the village must seize. The Trièves region,

2 Although the authors were all involved in the whole writing process, it should be noted that section 2.1 was specially edited by Elena Cardano (in particular the description of Airolo as an interesting case for the TransAlpS Project, pp. 5–8) and Sofia Marconi (in particular the description of the interest groups supporting change in the village, pp. 8–11), section 2.2 by Domenico Maria Costantini and section 2.3 by Gabriele Orlandi. Section 1 and 3 are the outcome of a collective discussion among the four authors.

located in the French Alps, has been a pioneering territory in regard to promoting more sustainable ways of living: there have been numerous experiments in recent decades due to cultural actors and governmental planning. Lastly, in the Grana Valley (Italian Western Alps), transition seems to occur mainly within the local agricultural sector, through a series of grassroots initiatives that interrogate the limits of the economic development models that are possible in the Alps.

Ethnographic explorations of the three localities spanned from September 2022 to March 2023. Data were mainly collected through interviews, informal meetings, as well as by participating and observing collective moments and events (meetings, festivals, etc.). Occasionally, small focus groups (about 5–10 people) also proved a significant tool for making local perspectives about transition emerge. When in the field, we monthly met online for discussing our main findings and research questions, sharing relevant literature and considering common issues and points, in order to refine a common theoretical framework and nourish our reflexion through “lateral comparisons” (Candea, 2016) between the processes and the phenomena we were progressively discovering. Once this intense, collaborative period of fieldwork research finished, short and more individual returns and/or exchanges with our informants allowed us to ensure a continuous follow-up of the processes we have first observed.

Thus, the three cases presented below describe how transition is imagined and enacted within different assemblages of people and practices in mountainous contexts. They all explore how transition embodies a peculiar form of desired social change in such Alpine settings, and present how stakeholders and interest groups are involved promoting and enacting change in such contexts. In describing the attitudes and attributes of change-supporters, namely people attempting – not always successfully – to realise forms of change in the local arena, the essay explores the values and ideas these actors attach to the future of the landscape they inhabit. We then discuss how transition is located in such settings – i.e., how it participates in defining these settings as mountainous areas – and the kind of the social and institutional mediations we, as anthropologists, have to go through when studying emergent worlds and objects in mountain communities.

2. Discourses and Practices of Transition in Three Alpine Settings

2.1 Airolo, the Swiss Case

Airolo is a mountain municipality with around 1,500 inhabitants. It is located in the upper Leventina Valley, in Italian-speaking Switzerland and is known as the village at the foot of the Gotthard, an important pass – also known as the Way of Man (Maffioletti, 1992) – which connects the canton of Ticino and the canton of Uri. The inhabitants of Airolo are closely linked to the area in which they live and to the Gotthard Pass as, historically, people, ideas and important economic activities (railway, accommodation, tourism, industry and military) have passed through it.

From an administrative point of view, the Leventina Valley is divided into a lower, middle and upper level, with Airolo and four other municipalities in the latter region. Although the Airolo area belongs to a sparsely populated valley and the number of people, activities and services has decreased significantly over time (Corti, 2016), it still has a significant number of inhabitants compared to other municipalities in the territory. More and more young people prefer to study and work in other cantons, leading to a gradual decline in the village's population. Although there are still many essential public services to which the population of Airolo has direct access – primary school, family doctors, pharmacies, post office, railway station, supermarkets – there is clearly a move away from traditional professions and skills, and not just among the younger generations, “a break in the chain of transmission of a wealth of memories and traditional knowledge from the older generations” (Viazzo & Zanini, 2014, p. 2).

In Airolo there is an organisation that keeps this chain of tradition alive and active, even if its function has changed somewhat over the years: the Patriciate. These forms of organisation emerged spontaneously throughout Western Europe from the 12th–13th centuries as village communities for the collective usership and management of fields and pastures. They remained important until the 18th century, when they were gradually combated by aggressive privatisation practices (De Moor, 2008). In Switzerland, the role of the Patriciate, together with the relations with municipal institutions – which

were introduced much later – developed in different ways in each Canton and in each Municipality. In general, a progressive loss of autonomy can be observed, which is also due to the alienation and loss of profitability of traditional activities such as Alpine farming and forestry.

The Patriciate of Airolo was founded in 1883 and is the largest in the canton of Ticino, with 8,867 hectares. In the past, it has strongly represented local interests in the municipality and was particularly representative during some land management conflicts in the 1980s, supported by a vibrant grassroots movement. Since the 1990s, however, Airolo has suffered a severe demographic slump due to the closure of several industries and the demilitarisation of the Gotthard, which has led to a decline in participation and interest in the patrician assemblies (Pedrina, 2023). Nowadays, it still coordinates the lively grazing activity, manages ten mountain pastures and employs a forestry team to look after the forests. Partly due to the agricultural utilisation of a large part of the Airolo area, tourism is modestly developed in summer; in winter, however, it flourishes, as Airolo has been an important destination for winter sports enthusiasts since the second half of the 19th century.

From the point of view of initiatives oriented towards ecological change and social justice, the municipality of Airolo is of interest in several respects. Since the foundation of the municipal power plant in 1921, new, more sustainable ways of generating energy have been shown to those responsible and the population of the village. The various municipal administrations have implemented a series of measures for energy efficiency and use of renewable energy, wherever possible. These include the construction of a municipal hydro-electric power plant and a thermal power plant that runs on wood chip and supplies the municipality's district heating network. Also worth mentioning are the municipal incentives for the installation of solar systems and the municipality's participation in the St. Gotthard wind farm. Incentives for renewable energies are provided by the Federal Government and the Canton (often in combination). The canton of Ticino, for example, promotes measures for the replacement of heating systems, the use of photovoltaics and energy optimisation at a territorial level. The Swiss Confederation, on the other hand, is committed to incentivising sustainable development at regional level.

Another issue affecting the municipality of Airolo is the achievement of the Energy City label³ in 2020, which was recently confirmed for 2024. This

3 <https://www.energiestadt.ch>

is an important recognition that integrates the municipality into a network of institutions working to implement a sustainable energy and climate policy.

Another interesting initiative is the recent activation and inauguration in August 2024 of the House of Sustainability⁴, an antenna of the University of Italian Switzerland that is bringing students, reflections and educational activities on environmental awareness to Airolo. In this context, there is also the Cantonal Museum of Natural History in the village, which houses a permanent exhibition and organises scientific and environmental education activities⁵.

In addition to the projects mentioned above, the Casa Trosi⁶ retirement home was inaugurated in Airolo in August 2023, which is intended not only as a residence for the people who will live there, but also as a place for inter-generational encounters and gatherings. Also worth mentioning is the Gotthard Park project⁷, which envisages the redevelopment of the Airolo valley floor following the construction of the second Gotthard tunnel, the rubble from which will be used to almost completely cover the motorway in front of the village, thus making 22 hectares of green space available again, which will probably become a common area. And finally, participation in the Leventina Masterplan⁸, a medium to long-term process involving Airolo and the municipalities of the valley from 2021, with the aim of drawing up a development plan for the valley by 2035.

Numerous social groups and interest groups are participating in these ongoing processes in Airolo, supporting change with their views on environmental and energy issues. Firstly, the ecological transition is being discussed in local politics. The mayor of Airolo and the four municipal councillors⁹ elected in 2021¹⁰ have common social features and experiences – which

4 <https://casasostenibilita.usi.ch>

5 Airolo and the upper Leventina Valley are considered particularly important sites for biodiversity research (Peduzzi & Peduzzi, 2022). In addition, the large number of toponyms in the Airolo area (Genasci & Genasci, 2022) testifies to the inhabitants' profound knowledge of this region.

6 <https://www.comuneairolo.ch/casatrosi.jsp>

7 https://www.comuneairolo.ch/parco_san_gottardo.jsp

8 <https://www.masterplanleventina.ch>

9 In Swiss law, the municipality corresponds to the executive body of a district. It is headed by the mayor and its members are called municipal councillors.

10 In the most recent elections in 2024, the mayor of Airolo was confirmed, as were three

have probably both sparked their interest in politics and favoured their willingness to hold positions of responsibility in the area where they live. They all are young, have a high level of education and have already gained professional experience outside the canton (mostly in German-speaking Switzerland). A special feature of the 2021 municipal elections was that the historical era that dominated the town of Airolo for many years and in which different ideologies and political groupings led to sometimes very strong and violent social tensions has apparently come to an end.

The field research shows that the mayor and the municipal councillors promote processes of renewal in the political and social fabric of the community as well as dialogue and exchange of views on land management issues. These actors appear to have built relationships with individuals inside and outside the valley and are playing a role as catalysts for change thanks to their ability to understand the complexities that connect their community to other areas and their ability to bring together and ally different groups. The Parco San Gottardo project proves that local politicians (and not just the mayor and the municipal councillors) know how to navigate the complex territorial networks and cultivate relationships that make it possible to realise change for the community. The field research has shown that without the intervention of some brokers of the ruling class of Airolo, who are in contact with supra-municipal public actors, it would have been difficult to get this project funded by the Swiss Confederation.

The narratives related to the energy transition and the sustainable policy of the Mayor of Airolo and the four municipal councillors, mostly refer to technical principles and information on energy efficiency and waste prevention. However, thanks to the presence of a female municipal councillor, who is also president of the Airolo in Transition Association, the need to think and co-create a sustainable future in the broadest sense, i.e., including lifestyles, social ties and cultural creativity, is also present in local political debates. The common political line of the Mayor of Airolo and the four municipal councillors aims to familiarise citizens and inhabitants with the principles of energy transition and ecological change and to show them the various possibilities,

of the previously elected municipal councillors. However, the female municipal councillor, who also represents the Airolo in Transition association (which will be described later), was not confirmed for the legislative term and a man from the Centre Party took her place.

e.g., incentives, to take the first steps in this direction. To achieve these goals, the mayor of Airolo and the municipal councillors promote information, education and technical advice events. According to some of the municipal councillors interviewed, institutional communication, defined as “clear and comprehensive”, helps to strengthen the good relationship with the local population and their trust in the proposed remodelling and renovation measures, which are currently mainly energy-related.

Secondly, the existence of the cultural association Airolo in Transition¹¹ seems to support change in the village, as it has revitalised the debate on sustainability and transitions. This association was founded in 2007 on the initiative of a number of people who live in Airolo or have a personal connection to the village. The main aim of the association is to promote cultural initiatives in the region – in particular through annual festivals – in order to stimulate reflection and planning of new ways of living in the Alpine region. Similarly to the mayor and the municipal councillors, main players in the associations are people with a high cultural and professional profile such as artists, psychiatrists and teachers.

Although this group seems to be a minority compared to the population and the prevailing political ideology of Airolo and not all sectors of the community participate in the association’s events, these actors seem to have partially contributed to steering some decisions of the municipal administration towards ecological change and territorial reorganisation. The most striking example is the aforementioned St Gotthard Park project, which was conceived by the architectural office of one of the municipal councillors of Airolo and then promoted by other politicians for funding.

During the fieldwork, it emerged that a third group of actors put forward their own actions and discourses for change in relation to the ecological transition: farmers and patricians. Farmers in Airolo act in different ways that also reflect their personal perceptions of sustainability and energy transition¹². They tend to ally themselves with the politics of the Patriciate – whose

11 <http://airolointransizione.ch/associazione.html>

12 For example, some farmers have used incentives to modernise buildings in order to improve energy consumption, while others do not consider this necessary. Or, some farmers have focused specifically on organic farming, while others are more inclined to invest their money and that of the Patriciate to continue farming activities, arguing for the need for new buildings or the purchase of new equipment.

power has been in the hands of the same leader for several years – on important decisions and issues of economic interest.

In general, the political line of the Patriciate in Airolo today moves between preservation and change. Preservation, because the Patriciate of Airolo is not only one of the institutions that owns most of the land in the canton of Ticino, but also the institution that is most committed to agriculture in the region. Nevertheless, the speeches at the Patriciate meetings and the interviews with some employees and patricians show that efforts are being made to renew the institution and its role and activities in the region. In particular, environmental and sports tourism seems to be a new topic (Franchi, 2020) and there is also a proposal from some patricians to make the organisation more inclusive and re-evaluate its role by extending membership to all residents of the municipality¹³. This could make it possible to promote new collective responses to the local needs of sustainable and equitable land use and strengthen the role of the Patriciate in the protection and defence of the commons (Pedrina, 2023).

Finally, in Airolo the discourses and practises of ecological change and renewal are also pursued by individual citizens, most of whom do not fit into the interest groups described above, even if some of them are actively involved in the political and associative life of the village. Their social background, age and life experiences are very heterogeneous. The concept of sustainability and ecological change of these citizens is more radical and requires a strong rethinking of our consumption and existence in the world. Despite the activism of some of these people in the territory, it seems that their ideas are not catching on and are not incisive in the political and socio-cultural discourses, perhaps because Airolo is already burdened with narratives about the energy transition and ecological change.

Although a large proportion of the inhabitants of Airolo are involved in the political and socio-cultural discourses related to the energy transition and ecological change, a group of local actors has no way of influencing the power dynamics in the village. These are the inhabitants who have no citi-

¹³ At present, patrician status is granted to those who expressly apply for it and have been resident in the municipality for at least 10 years following authorisation by the Patrician Assembly. Farmers who own a farm in the municipality, on the other hand, are granted the right to use the Alps, even if they are not patricians.

zenship and who, although they can participate in the political and social life of the territory, seem to have little interest in it, perhaps because they cannot contribute through their vote to decisions in the political sphere of the municipality. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that during the field research it was observed that the inhabitants of Airolo without citizenship are unable or unwilling to share their opinions or ideas on issues of ecological and energy transformation, at least as it is currently taking place in the village.

2.2 Trièves, the French Case

The Trièves is a rural region in France, a vast depression surrounded to the west by the Vercors Prealps and to the south and east by the Dévoluy Prealps. It has no mountainous barrier on its northern side but is nevertheless well demarcated by the deep gorges of the river Drac. Geographically speaking, the region is located in the northern Alps, right on the border with the southern Alps. The Trièves region represents the southern part of the Isère, i.e., the county of the city of Grenoble. The area is characterised by a striking abundance of surface water, with numerous small streams flowing into the main river, the Ébron, which flows into the Drac at the Monteynard-Avignonnet reservoir. Almost half of the region is forested. The rest of Trièves is predominantly an agricultural area: local agriculture is particularly lively with 220 farms on around 14,536 hectares (excluding mountain pastures) and a wide variety of production¹⁴. Mixed farming is widespread too. The main sectors are dairy cattle, beef sheep, dairy goats and cereals. Farms in the Trièves have increased in size in recent years. However, the number of farmers, although above the national average, has not grown accordingly. On average, each farm employs 1.5 people (Pernelet 2020, p. 8–10). With 40% of its agricultural land certified as organic, Trièves is one of the most active regions in this sector¹⁵.

14 The average agricultural area per farm today is 66.1 hectares, but this figure is subject to strong fluctuations: between 2002 and 2018, the average farm size went from 56 hectares to 87 hectares, as the number of farms fell sharply. In the following four years, however, the number of farms rose from 180 to 220, thus producing a reduction of the average size. See also: <https://agence-cohesion-territoires.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2022-04/crte-84-38-9%20CRTE%20Tri%C3%A8ves.pdf>

15 <https://isere.chambres-agriculture.fr/sinformer/nos-publications/detail-de-la-publication-38/portrait-de-territoire-trieves>

In Trièves, a vivid debate concerning ecology and change does exist. Connections with transition are diverse and have a certain historical depth. As early as 2004, the region's municipal organisations signed up to Agenda 21 for sustainable development. Moreover, even before Grenoble, Trièves was linked to the International Transition Network, founded in 2005 by Rob Hopkins, which contributed to the advancement of the concept of ecological transition. The approach to the Transition Network dates back to 2008¹⁶ and is inextricably linked to Terre Vivante, the eco-centre founded in 1994 near Mens by the independent publisher of the same name¹⁷. In 2011, the informal group Trièves en Transition¹⁸ became an official member of the International Transition Network¹⁹, being the second French initiative to do so. Facts such as these allow us to understand the degree to which the region was a forerunner in anticipating discourses and visions that later proliferated nationwide. It is indeed in 2017 that, with the formation of the first Macron government and the awarding of the ministry of ecological transition to former TV host Nicolas Hulot, that the notion became prominent in the French public debate.

Since 2012, practically the entire region has been united in the *Communauté de Communes du Trièves*²⁰ (Union of municipalities of Trièves), or CCT for short, which comprises a total of 27 municipalities, of which Monestier-de-Clermont and Mens are the largest with around 1,400 inhabitants and all others have fewer than 800 inhabitants. As part of its activities, the CCT is now promoting an ecological transition strategy through dialogue. Since 2022, it has launched a seminar process that will lead to the definition of priorities and concrete actions for the next four years. Involving various associations and municipalities of the area, the seminars are divided into three working tables: the multi-stakeholder workshops, the workshops with the municipalities and, finally, those dealing with the services managed by the CCT.

Today, people speak about Trièves as a true laboratory for sustainability, where organic farming, renewable energies and reuse coexist with local cul-

16 <http://www.aprespetrole.unblog.fr/qui-sommes-nous/>

17 https://www.fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terre_vivante

18 <https://www.trieves.entransition.fr>

19 <https://www.entransition.fr/2011/04/26/trieves-en-transition-est-devenu-officiel/>

20 <https://www.cc-trieves.fr>

ture and Alpine traditions. Through a series of projects, the CCT is committed to reducing its environmental impact and promoting greater local autonomy. With our research, we explored how Mens, the heart of southern Trièves, and other neighbouring areas are addressing these challenges through community projects, transition initiatives and the active participation of citizens.

The town of Mens, with around 1,400 inhabitants, is often referred to as the historical capital of Trièves. In addition to its history and charm, Mens is characterised by its active involvement in sustainability projects and the unique architecture of its historic centre²¹. In the context of the ecological transition, Mens is also characterised by its social commitment. Many public spaces such as the Café des Arts and the Café des Sports or Mixages and Bombyx, a public and a private social centre, have become meeting places to discuss, among other things, sustainability and ecological practices. The cafés are not only a meeting place for residents, but also a venue for cultural evenings and social initiatives that promote discussion and the exchange of ideas.

Bombyx, located in the former Mens' silk factory, houses several workshops, each dedicated to a specific activity²². Here it is possible to take part in workshops for screen printing, carpentry, bicycles repairing and photography or work on fabrics in the Shifumi, a couture atelier opened in 2023. Through the various craft, maintenance, repair and reuse activities, Bombyx becomes an open space where people can meet, learn and actively participate in practices that are partly from the past and look to a future of environmental sustainability.

As part of the ecological transition, there is also the government programme "Petites Villes de Demain" (Tomorrow's small towns), which was launched in 2020. This programme, which involves more than 1,600 municipalities across France, aims to support small towns in developing sustainable and innovative projects. Mens is among the towns selected for this programme, which translates into an action plan aimed at improving the quality of life of its inhabitants, reducing its environmental impact and promoting social cohesion. Several initiatives have been launched as part of "Petites

21 The historic centre is preserved by the ZPPAUP (Architectural Heritage Protection Zones).

22 <https://www.usinebombyx.wordpress.com>

Villes de Demain”, including the energy renovation of public buildings, the promotion of sustainable mobility and the creation of a co-working space in the former Trésorerie Publique (public treasury). This space, opened in summer 2023, is now providing a shared workspace for local professionals and start-ups and promotes collaboration and innovation. One of the main objectives of the project is to improve the energy efficiency of historic buildings while preserving their architectural heritage. The redevelopment of Place de la Mairie (Town Hall Square), that is an important public square in Mens, is an example of how ecological change and urban regeneration can go hand in hand.

In recent years, the municipality of Mens’ has been confronted with the lack of long-term housing. Despite the growing interest in the area, residents and newcomers have considerable difficulty finding available housing. This became apparent during the field research, where the scarcity of supply and the high turnover of seasonal rentals was a major obstacle. However, associations are being formed to address this problem, and various authorities have introduced supportive measures, such as incentives for the energy renovation of flats or the future creation of new buildings for communal living.

Debates on more sustainable practices are recurrent, as in the case of the “Switch Off the Public Lighting!” public event which took place on 7 October 2022 at the Cultural Space, in Mens. This initiative, promoted by the municipality, proposed reducing the hours of public lighting in order to reduce light pollution and save energy. The proposal to switch off street lighting from 10 pm to 6 am sparked a lively debate among residents, with issues such as public safety and the protection of biodiversity being raised. Many in the public supported the proposal and emphasised the importance of reducing pollution. Some concerns were also expressed, particularly with regard to the safety of older people who could get into difficulties without adequate lighting. In short, this type of open and participatory dialogue strongly marks social life in Trièves, where collective decisions are often the result of a direct confrontation between citizens and the administration.

Another important event was the “Faites du Vélo”, a day dedicated to the promotion of sustainable mobility. The festival, organised in collaboration with several local associations, was attended by children and adults who took part in workshops and activities around the use of the bicycle as an environ-

mentally friendly means of transport. During the event, participants had the opportunity to take part in a workshop where they made customised reflective waistcoats for cyclists. This type of initiative not only promotes greater awareness of environmental issues but also strengthens the sense of community. Through practical and engaging activities, events such as “Faites du Vélo” help to create a connection between people and the environment and promote a more sustainable lifestyle.

In addition, there are places such as the Friperie Solidaire for clothing and the Recyclerie for the rest, which are concrete examples of how the circular economy and reuse can be integrated into daily life. The Recyclerie, located opposite the local landfill site, is a collection and redistribution centre for used items. Its speciality lies in the free price system, which allows everyone to take what they need and make a voluntary donation. This model encourages critical consumption and challenges the traditional consumer paradigm. The Recyclerie is not only a physical place, but also a symbol of practical ecology that is accessible to all. With these projects, Trièves shows that ecological change is not just about big technological innovations, but also about small, everyday actions that can have a significant impact on reducing waste and changing consumption habits.

One of the main associations working on the environment, sustainable development and social ties is Trièves Transitions Écologie²³ (TTE). TTE was founded to promote ecological transition through the direct participation of the population and organises seminars, workshops and public meetings to raise awareness on issues such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and the reduction of the ecological footprint. TTE also organise a Transition Fair, known as “Quelle Foire!” (What a fair!), which has been held annually in Mens since 2012. This event is a showcase for local initiatives in the field of sustainability, with the participation of associations, craftsmen, farmers and various professionals who share their experiences and knowledge. During the Fair, practical workshops, conferences and convivial moments (e.g., shared lunches, walking dialogues, etc.) are organised. The Fair not only serves to reflect on the ecological transition, but also to strengthen ties between communities. With events like this, TTE wants to show that the change

23 <https://www.trieves-transitions-ecologie.fr>

towards sustainability can emerge from the bottom up, involving everyone in building a fairer and greener future.

The *Stratégie de transition écologique* (Strategy for ecological transition), represents undoubtedly a key project for Trièves. It is based on four main axes: energy savings, development of local autonomy, territorial resilience and accessibility of the transition for all. These axes were defined through a participatory process involving citizens, associations, local administrations and businesses, with the agreement of the Union of municipalities of Trièves. The strategy aims to reduce energy consumption by promoting more sustainable practices, encouraging the use of renewable energies and improving the energy efficiency of buildings. The development of local autonomy focuses on the creation of self-sufficient food and energy systems. The promotion of local markets and the creation of agricultural cooperatives help to strengthen the local economy while reducing CO₂ emissions associated with the transport of goods. Territorial resilience is an important issue, as the Trièves region is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The strategy develops adaptation plans that include the sustainable management of water resources, the protection of biodiversity and the promotion of resilient agricultural techniques. Finally, the accessibility of the transition for all is a principle that guides all measures in the strategy. The ecological transition must not be a privilege for a few, but an opportunity for all citizens, regardless of their economic or social conditions. To this end, the CCT is committed to ensuring that the benefits of the transition, such as energy savings and air quality, are accessible to all by promoting inclusive social policies and offering support to the most vulnerable households.

Trièves is an emblematic example of how small communities can tackle the global challenges of climate change and sustainability through concrete local action. Thanks to the commitment of a public actor (the CCT), civil associations (the TTE) and the active participation of citizens, this region is becoming a model for ecological transition. Trièves is certainly a place where new inhabitants have been introducing new lifestyles and new political practices for about thirty years, but which are well integrated into an environment that existed before and has a historical depth²⁴ (Viazzo & Zanini, 2014).

24 Mens is home to the Musée Du Trièves, founded on a major grassroots initiative represented today by the Association des Amis du Musée, and its Fonds documentaire triévois.

The number of associations in relation to the number of inhabitants and the number of people involved in municipal working committees testify the exceptional nature of the social ferment associated with this transition. Trièves provides all the elements to understand how, within the social complexity of larger scales, there are a number of concrete and situated practices that must be taken into account when analysing the broad ecological issues that concern us all.

2.3 Grana Valley, the Italian Case

The Grana valley is a small valley in the south-western part of the Alpine arc, in the Piedmont region. It extends between 600 and 2,647 metres above sea level. Due to its location, this area is characterised by a Mediterranean-influenced mountain climate, which produces a great variety of landscapes. Being a territory of fluvial origin, the Grana valley has a *talweg* that is wide and fertile at the bottom and then narrows considerably in the middle part. Continuing upwards, however, one encounters numerous large meadows: for this reason, fields, apple orchards, chestnut, birch and beech woods, and pastures can be found within a few kilometres.

As elsewhere, agricultural numbers have shrunk, albeit to a lesser extent. A quarter of the working population of the valley still work in agriculture and/or in forestry. The only form of industry once present in the past – a small farm tool factory – has been closed for more than 30 years now. Between the 1960 and 1990, the valley was a renowned tourist destination, particularly in summer. The multi-storey hotels that stand empty in its villages, and the speeches of older people, are the most important testimonies of a “golden age”, which is now over. The majority of the workers (civil servants and artisans) commutes every day to the lowlands.

With a population of about 1,300, the high portion of the valley is administratively separated into four municipalities. These communes are joined with those in the valley's lower portion into a higher entity called the Mountain Association (Unione Montana), which is made up of a council of mayors and a few officers. Both locals and local administrators frequently criticise this body, which was established in 2014 to ensure coordination between the various local initiatives and policies in small territories. They also point out

that the strong sense of parochialism in the area prevents it from making the qualitative leap necessary to establish itself as a destination for tourists as well as a place with a high standard of living. These considerations are often intertwined with the regret of seeing the younger generations leave the valley for study and work. Indeed, the demographic decline that began at the end of the 19th century has not yet stopped, although it is proceeding at a slower pace today.

Despite these negative observations, the valley also shows a certain vitality of initiatives that, more or less explicitly, seek to transform its present and future. A number of cultural associations and collectives are indeed active in this small area, dedicated to enhancing the valley's natural and cultural heritage, its history and memory and typical agricultural productions. These actions primarily take the form of events or festivals that, taking place mainly during the summer period, aim to attract tourist flows and bring new wealth to the area.

More generally, the valley has been the subject of numerous developmental efforts since the end of the 19th century. These initiatives, which sought to boost the local economy and increase agricultural revenue, were supported by provincial and regional organisations that were concerned about the emigration of people from the valley to other nations and the “backwardness” of the local agro-pastoral sector in comparison to the surrounding lowlands (Orlandi, 2023). Most of these actions were oriented towards enhancing the dairy sector, first with the creation of dairy cooperatives and later with the early institutionalisation (in 1982) of a PDO – Protected Designation of Origin label for the local cheese. This has largely contributed to the survival of Alpine livestock farming, albeit nowadays is threatened by rising prices and by the return of the wolf.

Among the consequences of these economic development policies, there has thus been a progressive “peasantisation” (Viazzo, 1989, p. 117) of the Grana valley which, from a mixed economy, has – during the second half of the 20th century – turned towards horticulture and mountain farming. This had a profound impact on the residents of the valley's perception of the future as well as their relationship with their land. Indeed, it is not unusual to hear valley residents argue that high-quality, organic mountain agriculture – often

certified – serves as the cornerstone of the local economy due to its ability to maintain the landscape and provide a living for the next generations.

It is therefore not surprising that, when it became part of the first area – at regional level – of experimentation of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (*Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne*), one of the consultation boards of this policy was dedicated precisely to the agricultural sector. Launched in 2013, this nationwide development plan aimed to improve the quality of life in peripheral, marginal areas. In order to minimise depopulation and lessen territorial disparities, specific funds were allotted to support local business as well as to enhance citizenship services (health, education, and mobility). Aiming to design interventions “on the ground”, and to define intervention priorities, this National Strategy made extensive use of discussion and exchange groups between local actors, through a bottom-up approach that is becoming increasingly widespread in the world of rural development in Europe (Müller et. al., 2020).

Neo-peasants made up the bulk of the farmers that took part in the agricultural board. These farmers, who were mostly descendants of valley’s inhabitants, had entered agriculture later in life, primarily for ethical reasons, and were therefore more prone to use unconventional practices and disruptive approaches. After an initial period of enthusiasm for the attention that the institutional world seemed to pay to this peripheral area of the Western Alps, many farmers turned away disappointed from the board, as it became clear that most of the interventions they felt they needed, and in particular a fruit and vegetable processing plant, could not be financed through the dedicated funds of this national development plan. Nonetheless, the table was an important opportunity to become aware that many of the farms active in the Grana valley faced the same problems on a daily basis, largely due to the small size of their mountain farms. Unable to grow due to both the conformation of the territory and the cadastral fragmentation that strongly characterises this area of the Alpine arc, farms in the Grana valley were forced to tackle higher production costs, difficulties of selling their production, as well as the uneasiness of legally hiring workforce for the periods of peak agricultural activity.

Favoured by a moment of collective reflection on their territory and an attitude to innovate, the farmers then found themselves in a position to con-

sider different production and distribution models. It was during one of these meetings that one of the last farmers to arrive in the valley proposed the creation of a network agreement (*contratto di rete*) between the farms in the valley. This juridical arrangement constitutes a tool for exchanging – without monetary movements – in predefined areas “services of an industrial, commercial, technical or technological nature or, alternatively, for jointly carrying out one or more activities related to their own businesses²⁵”.

By allowing the sharing of labour, agricultural machinery, but also the collective cultivation and trading, the *network agreement* immediately appeared to be a useful tool to overcome the many material constraints faced by the local agricultural sector. In Italy, the network agreement was initially created to support the recurrent crisis of the textile sector and promote its competitiveness (Cafaggi et al., 2012). It was then quickly adopted by the farmers of this Alpine valley, albeit diverted in its scope and objectives. In fact, the latter made it a tool to rethink, in a structural and long-term manner, their role as economic actors in a mountainous area, opting for the sharing of costs and workloads instead of the growth of a single farm.

Specifically, this allowed them to avoid all those financial expenditures and investments that the other members of the network agreement feel go against the characteristics of the land they live on as well as the kind of lifestyle that originated their farming practices. Because of the Alpine valley’s significant water availability, mild climate, and diversity of vegetation, the majority of the area’s farmers keep in high esteem the environment. There is also a general understanding that the region has managed to maintain its natural features thanks to the precise combination of depopulation and absence of an industrial sector. Conversely, the demands of the marketing industry are driving farms to expand even farther and to reduce production costs. According to them, an emphasis on growth and mechanisation would quickly put these farms in financial difficulties and, in the long run, have a detrimental effect on the environmental value of this Alpine valley, since a mountainous area cannot keep up with these modes of production. Hence, taking part in the network contract turns into a tool to challenge the prevalent agricultural patterns and look for alternative ways to live and work:

25 Art. 4 ter of Italian law no. 33 of 9 April 2009

If I yield 10 quintals of strawberries, but I'm well paid and I'm happy with that, I don't need to yield 100 quintals of strawberries. But today it seems that if you don't have huge quantities, as a farm you can't survive. In reality, you get paid less and less for these large quantities and, in the end, it doesn't make sense to me. Nor does it make sense to have huge quantities and not reap the rewards, because the market is saturated anyway. (Interview, 1 December, 2022)

In this sense, if, in their words, agricultural practice largely benefits from this situation – allowing them to produce high quality fruit and vegetables – it should also allow them to care for and conserve, and keep under control, a territory that, deprived of human presence, would seem to be doomed to wilderness.

During our research, there were 21 companies involved in the network agreement in the Grana valley, mainly family-based farms. Fewer than half of them, favoured by their geographical location and compatibility of work patterns, regularly shared machinery and man-hours throughout the year. Others resorted to this legal instrument exclusively in the short summer period, when the workload became particularly intense. Still others had chosen to adhere to the network contract because of its vision and of their affection for the valley rather than for the provided benefits. The possibility of participating in the contract's meetings also represented an opportunity of sociability for people who, because of their professions, often experience rarified social contacts. In addition, these moments provide room for sharing ideas and discussing best practices in agriculture.

The network agreement between farms in the upper Grana valley thus represents a space in which alternative futures and new forms of social and economic aggregation are conceived and crafted. The possibility of sharing, through a diverted use of this legal instrument, work and tools becomes the basis of a form of cultural imagination that unites a long-term vision of one's own holdings, the feeling of a value of this mountain territory, and a critical perspective on extra-local economic processes. More than a tool to increase one's economic competitiveness, the network agreement participates in the local definition of good agriculture, because it is characterised by a reduced ecological footprint and is capable of conserving the valley's environmental resources. This type of economic organisation not only materially permits

agricultural practices that differ from the dominant model, but it also serves as a platform for the group's collective creation of a territorial culture, a process that – as we have observed – is encouraged by the exchange of books and philosophical texts among its members.

After having originated as an unforeseen outcome of the National Strategy for Inner Areas, the network contract now represents an active attempt to generate change in the organisation of the agricultural sector in this Alpine valley, aiming at greater economic sustainability and ecological awareness. However, while elsewhere similar initiatives would probably be labelled as practices of ecological transition, here this is not the case. More generally, the term is rarely used in the local discourse. As in France, the Italian Ministry of the Environment has been renamed – in spring 2021 – the Ministry of Ecological Transition. Nevertheless, the elaboration of a National Plan for Ecological Transition the following year does not seem to have generated much interest in this area. Reminiscent of the recent deadlocks in the National Strategy for Inner Areas, many of the inhabitants of the Grana valley, and among them members of the network agreement, remain sceptical as to whether public institutions can induce long-lasting forms of transition through top-down action. This might explain why the discourses that advocate ecological transition as an imperative or, at the very least, as a desirable direction are rare in the area. On the contrary, the network agreement has been presented to us as a tool that allows farms in this valley to preserve their family and quality dimensions and thus resist the change (i.e., growth in size and fixed capital) imposed on them by large-scale agricultural markets. It cannot be excluded that this emphasis on continuity and sustainability echoes and is reinforced by other discourses that exist locally. Indeed, the tourist enhancement and promotion of the local architectural heritage contribute to reinforcing the image of a valley that is timeless – as one of the installations of the local Eco-museum features – or in any case preserved from modernity, a fact that can also have positive repercussions in economic terms for local communities (Grasseni, 2007).

“If we want to keep things as they are, everything has to change” said the young Tancredi Falconeri in Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *Il Gattopardo* (1958). Such a statement perfectly encapsulates the spirit of the agricultural projects that we have described here, albeit with a different attitude than the author's.

Although actively oriented towards new economic and social models, agricultural change in the Grana valley rather uses the language of heritage and environmental conservation. In fact, by blending viewpoints on single farms and mountainous areas, people make the case for the necessity of enacting specific adjustments in order to carry on with the long-standing practices of this Alpine valley. In this sense, the description of the birth of a new form of economic organisation among the farmers of this mountain area reminds us that, within the Alpine area, forms of social change that are not recognized as such might also exist.

3. Where Can Change be Imagined From?

In addressing how mountain communities in Airolo, Trièves and Grana valley tackle with ideas of change, this essay has explored how forms of cultural imagination attached to ecological transition take place in multi-scalar arenas shaped by institutional configurations, economic interests, formal and informal networks. Even more importantly, the situational approach we opted for in our research has revealed how transition-related discourses, narratives and practices are enacted by people who not only have multiple life trajectories but also stand in different positions within their own community.

Moreover, our work also showed how site-specific forms of cultural imagination are not only strongly embedded in the assets and materialities that characterise the Alpine settings we have investigated: they also mobilise plural narratives and ideas related to the Alpine-ness and mountain-ness of the localities we explored. In reflecting on the forms that ecological transition can take in the territory they inhabit; our interlocutors have shown that they bring very different perspectives on mountainous landscapes as potential *loci* of forms of directed social change.

For people in Airolo, forms of ongoing change, associated with the Alpine-ness of the area, are already clearly observable: due to climate change, winters with little snow are becoming a recurrent phenomenon in the Leventina valley. This, coupled with the memory of some extreme natural events – such as avalanches and wood fires – produces among many people the idea that life in the mountains requires a constant adaptation, a stance that, thus,

has led to the positive welcome of new and innovative practices, especially when supported by public policies enacted at the municipal or regional level.

A common understanding depicts the Trièves region as a place for experimentation, favoured in this by the low density of the region, by the vital local agricultural sector, as well as by the many and varied voluntary organisations present there. Here, the mountain-ness of the locality is mainly perceived as the necessary distance from the dominant, urban model, a condition that, in potentially allowing new and innovative lifestyles and everyday practices to be realised, frames Mens and the surrounding villages as an attractive locality.

Although they are highly involved in experimenting new economic practices, the neo-peasants involved in the network agreement of Grana valley seem reluctant to embrace a transition-related narrative. In this case, as an Alpine area, the valley is experienced as a preserved, natural space. In particular, the high environmental value people attribute to the area sustains practices of quality food production and critical perspectives on the dominant economic model. When mentioned, change takes the form of a shift in viewpoints and in the kind of culture that must underpin life there.

In addition, as our research progressed, we gradually realised that – when addressing forms of desired change – memory does matter. Narratives of transition resonate with the ways in which change-supporters situate their communities in their historical progressions. In Airolo, the ecological transition takes the form of an opportunity for further change, a necessary response to proposals, coming from other parts of Switzerland, that would enable this Alpine region to keep up the pace with the rest of the world. Quite the contrary, the Trièves seems to have been projected for years towards the new futures and is now living its effervescent heyday. Actions promoted by local institutions seem to have blurred the region's decades of depopulation and deindustrialisation and it is likely that the arrival of new inhabitants has greatly contributed to reducing the burden of the past. Lastly, in Grana valley, although there are already many forms of experimentation underway, a widespread perception portrays the area as being at the beginning of a process of revitalisation and collective thinking. Less exposed than the other two contexts to wide-scale discourses on transition, farmers in this Alpine

setting conceive change as a return to a condition of better adaptation to the environmental characteristics of the territory.

Finally, the study of emerging, going-to-be worlds also raises relevant issues linked to the positionality we, as ethnographers, have been assigned when in the field. In all three cases, the announcement of the project and of the object of our interest resulted in a mixture of enthusiasm and perplexity. While being pleased that a group of young researchers were interested in what they were trying to set up, many of our interlocutors in these Alpine contexts also quickly expressed a desire to know more about what the moving horizon of ecological transition might entail in their own context. Considered by our interlocutors as “experts” in ecological transition because we had decided to make it our object of research, we were thus confronted with the desire, expressed on several occasions, that our research project could bring new input and new ideas to these communities with respect to how to address and craft change in areas that feel peripheral. Not a few were also those, who, aware of the comparative dimension of our research, showed great interest in discovering how transition is put in place in mountain territories with characteristics and problems similar to their own.

More generally, it seems to us that the strong, albeit vague, normative dimension that the notion of ecological transition contains must be held responsible for an attitude of reflecting on change, in the awareness that there is always room for improvement with respect to the different actors with whom we were confronted. We can therefore conclude that in exploring the meanings and forms that transition takes in the Swiss, French and Italian Alps, we also contributed to those forms of cultural imagination that people relate to the idea of ecological transition. In this way, as anthropologists exploring discourses, visions and narratives related to ideas of change in mountain contexts, we become perhaps actors of the change we have decided to investigate.

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