

# Inhabiting the Margins Nowadays: Ethnographies of Alpine Villages in Italy

**Laura Bonato – University of Turin, IT**

**Roberta Clara Zanini – University of Turin, IT**

## Abstract

This chapter presents the theoretical and methodological background and the first provisional results of ethnographic investigations conducted by an anthropological team complemented by an economist and an agronomist. This research is part of a broader Italian nationwide project specifically designed to conduct in-depth ethnographic investigations in several villages in marginal areas of Italy. The piece of research on which this chapter is based will extend over a period of three years and its aim is to understand perceptions, conceptions, and practices of inhabiting in peripheral and small-scale living contexts, calling into question the notion of margin and exploring innovative processes of cultural production and sociality creation. Adopting a comparative perspective, it focuses on four communities in the Italian Western Alps, affected for decades by demographic decline and progressive reduction to marginal lands, which are now experiencing new practices for a more balanced and sustainable growth and virtuous processes of local development. It also looks with particular interest at the emergence of associations and farms that are reintroducing historically documented but almost abandoned cultivations, as a creative way of addressing the issues of living in marginal surroundings and using local environmental resources. The goal is to provide illustrations of possible responses to the processes of marginalisation, taking into consideration the limitations that these processes impose, but also the opportunities that arise from them, and observing the ways in which local communities are facing questions that have become increasingly important for the whole territory of the Alps over the last twenty years: who are the inhabitants of Alpine villages and marginal areas today? What kind of resources, networks and social and cultural capital are, or can be, produced in upland communities?

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This chapter is based on the first outcomes of an ethnographic research conducted as part of a nationwide project named “Inhabiting the margins, nowadays. Ethnographies of villages in Italy”, which involves research units from five Italian universities in a wide-ranging campaign of field investigations whose main goal is to explore the practices through which the dimension of living is interpreted in areas that display elements of marginality, at a territorial, social and economic level<sup>2</sup>. These ethnographic investigations are being carried out in contexts which may be very different from each other – mountain districts, island territories, coastal villages, rural areas – and aim at understanding perceptions, conceptions, and practices of inhabiting in peripheral and small-scale living contexts, calling into question the notion of *margin* and exploring innovative processes of cultural production and sociality creation.

Our research team decided to address the general issue which is at the core of project from an Alpine perspective, selecting as case studies four communities in the Italian Western Alps, a sector of the Alpine arc that has been affected for decades by demographic decline and progressive marginalisation (Bätzing, 2005), and investigating in particular the agricultural and horticultural practices activated at a local level as a creative response to these very processes of marginalisation (Clément, 2004)<sup>3</sup>. Adopting a comparative stance, we focused our attention on localities which are now experiencing new practices for a more balanced and sustainable growth and local development. We are looking with special interest at the emergence of associa-

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1 Although this chapter is the result of shared research and common reflections, sections 1 and 6 have jointly written by the two authors, sections 3 and 5 by Laura Bonato and sections 2 and 4 by Roberta Clara Zanini.

2 The project “Abitare i margini, oggi. Etnografie di paesi in Italia” is funded by the Italian PRIN Programme (Progetti di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale – Research Projects of National Relevance). Coordinated by a research unit based at the University of Perugia, it involves four other teams from the University of Turin, the University of Siena, Sapienza University of Rome and the University of Basilicata (code 2020EXKCY7, P.I. Daniele Parbuono). The Turin unit is an interdisciplinary group that includes four anthropologists, an economist and an agronomist (Laura Bonato, Lia Zola, Roberta Clara Zanini, Nicola Martellozzo, Damiano Cortese, Sara Straffon Díaz).

3 For a more in-depth look at this topic, see the section on ancient seeds and resilient fruits “Semi antichi e frutti resilienti. Coltivazioni in area alpina e prealpina” in *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo* (2/2021) <https://journals.openedition.org/aam/4175>.

tions and farms that are reintroducing historically documented but almost abandoned cultivations, as a way of living in these marginal surroundings and using local environmental resources. The research intends to illustrate examples of possible responses to marginality, evaluating both limits and opportunities and observing the ways in which local communities are facing questions that have become increasingly important for the whole territory of the Alps over the last twenty years: who are the inhabitants of Alpine villages and marginal areas today? What kind of resources and social and cultural capital are, or can be, produced in upland communities? How can these resources be included in economic planning and place valorisation projects?

Our team's research activities, which began in September 2022 and are still ongoing, make use of a composite methodology: the participant observation typical of anthropological research, conducted through multiple trips to the four localities, is complemented by in-depth interviews and focus groups with local community actors particularly involved in agro-agricultural recovery projects and land valorisation. Moreover, the presence in the research team of an economist and an agronomist has made it possible to carry out, in each of the study contexts, training courses aimed at understanding the doubts and necessities expressed by the inhabitants with regard to agricultural activities and to the need to imagine innovative strategies capable of facilitating the handling of the critical issues that emerge in an increasingly changing context such as the mountainous one, in terms of climate, demography and, as we shall see, with unprecedented relations between humans and non-humans.

In this chapter we will present two paths of reflection, which complement each other within the same interpretative scheme and yet require to be examined independently. On the one hand, in fact, reflecting on similarities and divergences between the four communities makes it possible to outline a broader scenario within which we will put forward some considerations on the issue of inhabiting in the Alpine area. In particular, in our argumentation we will resort to Tim Ingold's epistemologically very dense notion of inhabiting (Ingold, 2015, 2021) as an analytical tool to unravel the complex relations of negotiation, resistance, power, which connect local village communities with broader and interrelated scenarios. On the other hand, in the fourth section of this chapter we will take another path that will lead us to consider the

delicate relationship between territorial marginality, development projects and tourism, in which we will see how the sustainability of the tourist enhancement of places can only go hand in hand with approaches that pay close attention to the actual, everyday minute practices of inhabiting, which allow the populations of the highlands to move beyond the margins.

## 2. A Methodological Overview

As mentioned earlier, this chapter is based on research conducted as part of a larger project whose title “Inhabiting the margins, nowadays. Ethnographies of villages in Italy” contains three keywords that point to as many conceptual, theoretical and methodological axes, namely *inhabiting*, *margins* and *ethnography*, which we have decided to mention also in the title of this chapter, where they are mobilised in an Alpine context. In a perspective that explicitly refers to Tim Ingold’s theoretical proposal (2021), inhabiting is here understood as a processual practice of transforming the world, through which to explore the present and imagine future scenarios. In this sense, the dimension of living, as it is construed in the project, leaves the strictly domestic spaces of the dwelling, of the house, to place itself more fully in community spaces, in the village. Relationships of neighbourliness, of care for the territory, of reciprocal attention, sometimes of conflict and friction, are some of the elements on which the research concentrates and which define what Italians call *paese*, a term which can be roughly translated into English as *village*. In Italian, however, the semantic connotation of the word *paese* refers not only to the – obviously small-scale – size of a village or small town, but also to a stronger communitarian and sentimental relationship of proximity and cultural intimacy (Herzfeld, 1997), which connects the inhabitants and relates them to both the environment and the broader spatial dimension. These are clearly complex and multifarious relations, often ambivalent and ambiguous, even more frequently characterised by elements of conflict both at the level of representations and at the level of policies, at various scales.

The need to adequately respond to this complexity, and to the challenges that arise from it, is reflected on the methodological side. Intensive ethnographic practice is proving once again an essential tool for anthropological

investigation because of its ability to grasp, in their processual becoming, the dynamics of change and uncertainties that involve the communities. It is indeed on the concept of community that we now intend to propose some reflections, since it constitutes the theoretical junction that allows us to include both the idea of village (or, better, *paese*) and the need to *practice* ethnography in a single interpretative scheme.

Community studies have been for a long time an important, possibly the dominant, approach in Alpine anthropology. Starting with the first pioneering fieldworks carried out around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a sizeable number of scholars from British and especially American universities, and since the 1970s also by *native* anthropologists (Viazzo, 2024), this style of ethnographic enquiry that identified the village community as the privileged scenario for research, through intensive and long-term ethnographic investigations, gradually consolidated. Attention to what have been classically defined as community studies then declined during the 1990s, when research practices more inclined to the use of extensive and comparative methods of data collection began to spread. Over the last decade, however, a gradual reversal of this trend can be observed, and intensive ethnography conducted in small community settings is returning to the centre of anthropological practice (Viazzo & Zanini, 2022).

In line, therefore, with these recent developments in Alpine anthropology, the investigations conducted by our working group identified the community as an ideal setting to observe the practices of living in marginal areas. However, it is important to emphasise that while what we might call the *community dimension* remains an essential starting point, the gaze and focus of the research was not limited to the individual community, or to the individual village, to borrow the term that gives our project its name. On the contrary, we felt it necessary to take into account the relationships and processes that shape the practices of inhabiting, in order to understand how at the micro level, in the village communities, those who inhabit the highlands activate practices that respond not only to the stimuli and challenges that complex contexts such as those at high altitudes pose, but also very often to the constraints that derive from relations with the institutions.

To proceed in this direction, and with these objectives, we deemed it essential to resort to three fundamental concepts, which constitute the core of

our theoretical approach, namely those of frame, negotiation and friction. In the next sections we will see in more detail how these concepts have operationally underpinned our observations and the reflections that have resulted from them, but before proceeding further a brief outline of these notions is in order. The ethnographic focus on specific localities makes it possible to reveal the existence of different attitudes and interpretations not only about what is meant by inhabiting the mountains, but also about specific themes that our investigation allows us to highlight. What emerges, therefore, are those which are called *frames*, that is to say the different interpretative settings through which actors with different positioning or roles read the reality within which they move. The concept of frame, developed by Ben Orlove and his team (Orlove et al., 2019), has proved particularly useful as a heuristic tool. This notion was introduced to analyse perceptions and representations of climate change, and in particular of the retreat of glaciers, in three high-altitude communities in the Alps, North America and the Andes. The ethnographic investigations conducted by Orlove and his collaborators have brought to light how the interpretative frames of the *frontline communities*, the term they use to designate those communities that live immediately next to the glacier, differ quite markedly from the ways in which climate change is described, and experienced, by those who look at the mountain from afar and, not infrequently, by those who have the power to decide for the mountain and those who live there.

Reflecting on these different interpretations, on the frames with which communities relate to the marginal territories in which they live, necessarily leads one to question the complex relationship between the communities themselves and the institutional actors who, at different levels, administratively regulate the way in which the territory is managed, cared for and intervened in. Not infrequently, in fact, this relationship is opaque, often conflictual. Later in this chapter we will attempt to highlight how the concept of *frame* proves useful for understanding the misalignment that we ethnographically detected between how those who actually inhabit the mountains imagine the environment and the institutional constraints that rule and limit the practices of inhabiting.

It is at this conceptual junction that it seems to us that the notion of frame might be complemented and made stronger by resorting to a key concept,

classic not only for the anthropological tradition in general but for Alpine research in particular, namely that of *negotiation*. Seminal, in this regard, is the historical and anthropological analysis by Harriet Rosenberg in her classic book *A negotiated world* (1988), in which she showed how the inhabitants of Abriès, a French Alpine village in the Queyras, had managed, over a long historical process of continuous negotiation, change and resistance to the State, to maintain active spaces of agency, despite the strengthening of centralised power.

More recently, a new line of Alpine research has resorted to the concept of *negotiation* to analyse the effects of the demographic dynamics that are today affecting the Alpine arc, and in particular the noticeable change in the composition of local populations due to the coexistence and frequent intersection of persisting flows of emigration and consequent depopulation with inverse dynamics of a return to the mountains which is actually mostly fed by the settlement of new inhabitants. For a long time, the Alpine territory has been traversed by migratory movements, both incoming and outgoing, which have profoundly modified the composition of mountain populations, and the current demographic dynamism of the Alps is a theme on which an increasing number of anthropological studies are focusing (Viazzo & Zanini, 2022). Many of these works are now starting from a somehow generative question – whose are the Alps? – from which a cascade of related questions descend: who are Alpine communities composed of? Who are the mountain dwellers and what does it mean to inhabit the mountains? As Pier Paolo Viazzo and Andrea Membretti (2017) appositely pointed out, ethnographic investigations and anthropological reflections have shown a complex, heterogeneous, multifarious panorama, which confirms, following Rosenberg’s insight, the relevance or indeed the centrality of the concept of negotiation: “the Alps are becoming once again a world to be negotiated – *between* the Alpine communities and the outside, as well as *within* the communities themselves – given the diversification that is increasingly characterizing these communities and their populations” (2017, p. 103).

However, the theoretical stance underlying both Rosenberg’s (1988) and Viazzo and Membretti’s (2017) works only conceives of processes of negotiation and potential conflict within communities that are played out on a human level, as it were. The ontological turn which has gained prominence

within sociocultural anthropology, though, has made it clear that the practices of inhabiting also engage human beings in relationships with other-than-human inhabitants, and these relationships seem to be particularly relevant in a context such as the Alps (Krauß, 2018). From this point of view, the conceptual framework proposed by Anna Tsing (2005, 2015) seems to us to be particularly useful for investigating the dynamics between humans and non-humans that we were able to observe in the course of our fieldwork. In particular, the concept of *friction* (2005) allows us to frame the strongly conflicting relationships which set the inhabitants of the highlands, and especially those who practice agriculture, against the wild animals that are increasingly present in the territories of our research. Indeed, it does not seem illegitimate to ask, with an eye also on this non-human presence, who the inhabitants of the mountains actually are, and envision an expanded notion of community that mitigates its anthropocentric bearing by also including the non-human inhabitants of the territory.

### 3. Four Villages

The literature dealing with the highlands and the processes of change that these territories are undergoing is very large and multifaceted, both in terms of the issues addressed and the disciplinary perspectives through which mountain territories are viewed (Zanini & Viazzo, 2020; Boos & Salvucci, 2022). On the international scene, the emergence of a research perspective proposing what is termed *montology* (Sarmiento, 2020), a transdisciplinary study of the highlands at a global level, which makes comparison its most obvious methodological slant, has aroused great interest.

In Italy, scientific interest in the topic of inhabiting the upland areas has grown considerably, albeit mostly from disciplinary angles that are not strictly anthropological. In recent years many studies have probed the changing conditions of habitability of territories at high altitudes and the emergence of new needs among mountain populations that are going through processes of social and demographic change. Of the foremost importance is the line of research started by the multidisciplinary working group *Riabitare l'Italia*, which, with an attentive look at territorial planning and the political dynam-

ics that derive from it, has focused on those areas of the country that experience social, economic and political marginality. They are referred to in Italian public discourse as *aree interne* (inner areas) and appropriately include a large portion of the country's mountainous areas (De Rossi, 2018; Carrosio, 2019). Moreover, comparative and interdisciplinary works have pointed out how, in mountain territories, the rarefaction of proximity services is accompanied by the process of marginalisation of the highlands and the progressive misalignment between the needs and requirements expressed by mountain dwellers and the actual responses that institutions offer to these needs (Leggero & Lorenzetti, 2024).

In our research setup, the comparative dimension, as mentioned above, constitutes the central methodological axis (Candea, 2016): it is, in fact, for comparative purposes that our research team selected as case studies four villages, all belonging to the Italian Western Alps, which share the common feature of being located in high-altitude territories but also display interesting differences. Before introducing the villages, and the valleys within which they are located, it is necessary to preliminarily stress that we have stipulated that special attention should be paid, in the comparative analysis, to the role attributed by the local community to tourism in shaping economic and development trajectories. In fact, we will see how it is precisely around this aspect, namely the centrality and the critical issues that development projects raise, that some of the reflections prompted by ethnography are articulated.

But let us now turn our attention to the four localities selected for our study, three of them (Salbertrand, Formazza and Sant'Anna di Valdieri) administratively belonging to the Piedmont Region and one, Morgex, to the Aosta Valley Region. Since Sant'Anna di Valdieri has only recently been included in our sample of localities, research in this village is still in its early stages. For this reason, in this chapter we will mainly focus on the findings of the ethnographic investigations conducted in the other three communities. We will nevertheless also briefly introduce this fourth village, so that the overall research picture can be more fully understood.

Located at an altitude of 923 m above sea level, Morgex has a definite vocation for tourism, largely explained by its proximity to Mont Blanc and to some famous resorts where both Alpine skiing and mountaineering are practised. The relevance of tourism in influencing the development trajectories of

Morgex, and indeed of the whole Valdigne, the territory to which it belongs, is clearly signalled by the village's demographic history since the mid-nineteenth century, as shown by Figure 1, which offers a synoptic picture of the demographic evolution of the three municipalities on which we focus in this chapter. Population censuses indicate a slow but progressive decline in the number of inhabitants of Morgex between 1861 (when national population censuses were taken for the first time, just after Italy's political unification) and the years immediately after World War II, when a trend reversal began, coinciding with the decades of the mass winter tourism boom: this led to a doubling in the number of residents, which has now reached the figure of approximately 2000, with only slight downward changes in recent years. However, this area has been selected as a research setting because, in spite of the undisputed pre-eminence of the tourist sector, viticulture has been revived and expanded in recent years, even in portions of the territory at high altitude (1200 m), protected and managed through the establishment of a local consortium. In addition, the cultivation of mountain saffron, while not yet widespread and still practised at an almost amateur level, is also attracting interest.

Salbertrand, in Piedmont's Susa Valley, after experiencing a strong demographic decline, has now stabilised at around 600 inhabitants. Although it is officially located at an altitude of 1032 m above sea level, the hamlets in its territory range in altitude between 994 and 3217 metres. In addition, Salbertrand is part of a very complex valley system. Crossed by one of the main road and rail routes between Italy and France, marked in the last two decades by major conflicts and frictions over the project to build the cross-border high-speed train (Aime, 2016), the Susa Valley has found its main socio-economic horizon in mass tourism since World War II. However, the already visible effects of global warming on Alpine tourism call for reflection on how the practice of living – and working – can be modified in a context that will necessarily have to come to terms with climate changes. The investigation has therefore focused on recovery projects, often in high-altitude hamlets, of areas otherwise subject to the advance of the woods, where attempts are being made to reintroduce the cultivation of hemp and rye (Bonato, 2017). Moreover, the socio-demographic dynamism of the valley is particularly interesting since not infrequently these paths of recovery and resettlement are due to the action of new inhabitants or commuters who describe their personal and family decisions in terms of responsibility and the ethics of care.

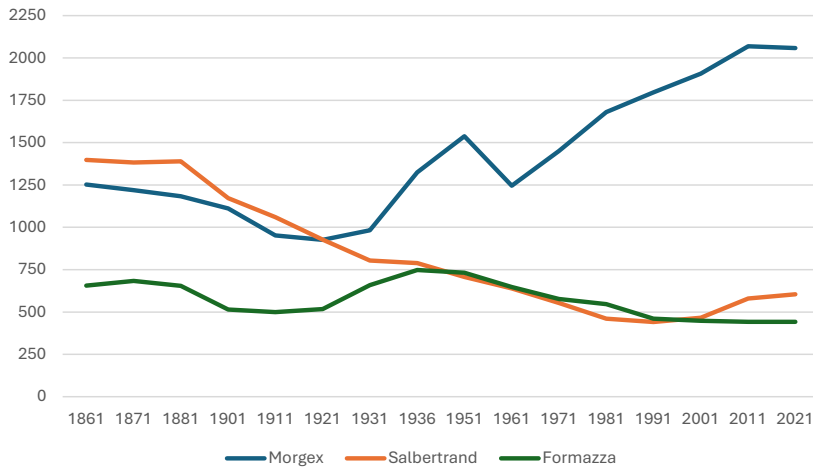


Figure 1 – Demographic evolution of the Municipalities of Morgex, Salbertrand and Formazza, 1861–2021. Authors’ elaboration based on data from Italian Institute of Statistics – Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT, National population censuses).

The third village is Formazza, in Piedmont, a high-altitude diffuse municipality with approximately 430 inhabitants on the border with Switzerland: the main hamlet is located 1280 m above sea level, but the territory reaches 3375 metres. The village is not only the northernmost municipality in Piedmont but also one of the fifteen Walser communities in the Italian Alps (Rizzi, 2015)<sup>4</sup>. The economic history of Formazza and its valley, quite differently from the other two localities, has not been so strongly affected by a massive inroad of Alpine tourism. On the contrary, the twentieth-century decline of agro-pastoral activities is mainly due to the economic reorientation linked to the construction of the dams and reservoirs that feed the valley’s hydro-electric power stations, which are still one of the main employment outlets for valley dwellers (Cannata, 2019, 2023). Again, the economic history of this village is mirrored by its demographic evolution. The consolidation of the

<sup>4</sup> The term *Walser* designates a large number of historically German-speaking settlements whose foundation dates back to the second half of the thirteenth century, when the high valleys at the foot of the south-eastern face of Monte Rosa, in the northernmost part of Piedmont and the adjacent Aosta Valley, as with many other high valleys in a geographical range stretching from Savoy to Vorarlberg and Tyrol, were colonised by Alemannic settlers coming from the Oberwallis (Zinsli, 1968; Mortarotti, 1979; Zanzi, Rizzi, 1988; Führer, 2002).

hydroelectric industry and, before that, the start of the construction of dams and reservoirs led to a surge in the number of residents between the 1930s and 1950s, which then declined in the following decades once the construction work was completed. Certainly, here too tourism plays a significant role, but in general we observe multi-activity practices that integrate tourism-related activities with employment in the national power company and, most importantly for our investigation, with horticultural and agricultural activities.

The landscape is dotted with small individually owned parcels where herbs, vegetables and especially potatoes are cultivated. At the same time, however, some farmers are attempting to recover the cultivation of rye, which has been abandoned over the past decades. The intention is to attempt recovery also for food and festive purposes, by planning the autumn Rye Festival, an event that is not historically attested, but nevertheless intends to refer to an imagery of rural tradition that seems attractive in a cultural tourism framework. Notwithstanding this, it is another aspect that we find most interesting about the practice of growing rye. We refer to the cultivation of this cereal, but also of spelt and buckwheat, as adjuvants in the agricultural rotation process for the subsequent sowing and cultivation of potatoes. A cultivation not useful in itself, therefore, but reinforcing for more widespread and established practices such as potato cultivation. The latter constitutes, together with horticulture, the central element of local agricultural activities and has given rise in recent years to the establishment of a consortium of local producers who have promoted the recovery of three local varieties, historically attested and currently included within a local and valley micro-economic circuit.

Finally, as we mentioned, it was recently decided to include in the research plan also the locality of Sant'Anna di Valdieri, in the upper Gesso Valley, in the Maritime Alps. A hamlet of the municipality of Valdieri, Sant'Anna (980 m above sea level) is the only settlement in the municipality to be inhabited throughout the year, although the number of permanent residents hardly reaches ten inhabitants during the winter. What makes it distinctive is its being at the centre of an ecomuseum project totally dedicated to the rye, cultivated in the past not only for food purposes but also for its use in construction. One of the territory's most interesting elements, moreover, is the pres-

ence of female entrepreneurship; in fact, many of the projects for the recovery and tourist enhancement of accommodation facilities and local activities are due to a small nucleus of women who have invested economic and personal resources with the aim of reversing the demographic trend.

#### 4. Negotiated Worlds

The ethnographic investigations we have conducted so far have brought to light how, albeit with different nuances, in all contexts a layered set of negotiation dynamics between various actors in the territory emerges with great evidence. The picture that comes out is thus characterised by the complex relationship, ridden with friction and often unresolved, between cultivation and land management and care practices implemented at a local level by communities and/or specific groups of inhabitants and the institutional and political constraints that, at a superordinate scalar level, condition or limit these practices.

The *voids* that characterise inland and marginal areas, and mountain areas among them, are evident; however, looking at voids also means highlighting the spaces of potential creativity, the possible ways in which those who inhabit the highlands may “take advantage of emptiness” to imagine new forms of rootedness (Zanini & Viazzo, 2014). Resorting to the notion of margin, finally, leads us to include within our sphere of attention also the dimension of power. Indeed, doing ethnography *from* the margins, and not only *of* the margins, allows us to observe the unfolding of more or less resolved processes of complex negotiations involving those who inhabit the highlands.

Entering into dialogues with the inhabitants about the theme of cultivation, frequenting the fields, observing the changing and seasonal unravelling of land and field care activities, allows us to investigate the theme of the margin from multiple, interrelated perspectives: demographic, social, economic, but above all environmental, territorial and political. Applying the concept of margin to the highlands makes it possible to draw attention to complexities of Alpine territories, not only alluding to the constraints and deficits that characterise them, but on the contrary bringing to light the strategies and “frontier” relations that communities establish with the environment that hosts them and with its non-human inhabitants.

Most of the time, meeting our interlocutors *during our fieldwork* implied meeting them while they were *working in the fields*, walking alongside them in a by no means improvised wandering, following directions that for those accompanying us were on the usual paths of living, the manifestation of a space of familiar, historical, emotional and symbolic recognition. As conversations progressed, it would become increasingly clear how the social and relational dimension sustains agricultural and horticultural practice and is both its origin and outcome. Agricultural activities are conducted through collaborative practices that involve not only members of one's own family, but often also other members of the local community, within a scenario where sometimes, paradoxically, cooperation and competition coexist.

The ethnographic research conducted in Morgex showed very well how the traditional practices of territorial care and cultivation sometimes collide with the norms that institutionally regulate these activities. We refer, in particular, to the bureaucratic problems originating from the incompatibility between the locally activated ways of collectively managing the phases of vineyard cultivation and the constraints imposed by institutional rules and labour laws. As our interlocutors pointed out, problems arise in connection with what is called, in Aosta Valley, *corvée*, a local institution which would traditionally require each member of the community to provide a portion of free labour for the common management of the vines. This practice, although consolidated and historically attested in the region, is not legally framed under labour regulations, and is therefore problematic. Notwithstanding this ambiguity, all practices of reciprocity in caretaking, land maintenance, and viticulture management, which are bureaucratically informal (and thereby problematic), are very important and very strong on the local social and community level.

This aspect became particularly evident in the research carried out in Formazza, where the more explicitly amateur dimension of agricultural and horticultural activities, compared to a scenario that is more markedly oriented towards economic profitability such as that of Morgex, allows the sociality dynamics to emerge clearly. The sharing of space and time in agriculture produces a collective practice of caring for the land, in the context of which creative ways of producing and reproducing the world are experimented, sometimes in the form of *bricolage*. A *production of the world*, to use a concept dear

to Ingold (2021), that is at the same time a production of community, and in which elements of resistance can be found: an implicit resistance, very often unexpressed, but practised and *acted out* in daily life through actions of care and protection that allow one to actually stay, to activate forms of what anthropologist Vito Teti, by resurrecting and giving new life to an old Italian word, has called *restanza* (*staying* or *remaining*), to designate the attitudes of those who, in spite of difficulties, choose to stay in their homelands with proactive intents aiming at innovation and renewal (Teti, 2022).

The margins are then to be understood as privileged spaces in which to observe the practices of environmental care and territorial protection, the relations of coexistence and, as we stated before, friction (Tsing, 2005) with non-human inhabitants, and the experiences of sociality and sharing linked to the forms of cultivation. For a number of years now, the debate on the relationship between human and non-human inhabitants of the mountains has revolved around the presence of large predators such as wolves and bears, considered more or less legitimate and acceptable depending on one's point of view. In Formazza Valley, but also in Susa Valley, the human-animal relationship manifests itself in not entirely expected ways. The main protagonist of the stories told by the valley's inhabitants is not the wolf, on which much of the scientific literature and media storytelling has focused lately, but the deer, whose presence is increasingly intense in numbers.

The practice of inhabiting and cultivating, therefore, develops through a series of strategies of coexistence between humans and ungulates, which pose a major threat to agricultural activity, as they devastate gardens and fields, trample pastures and meadows, and put a strain on the local population. The landscape is indeed dotted, as we mentioned above, with fields and vegetable gardens, but it is impossible not to notice that these are all vegetable gardens with substantial metal fences, of dubious aesthetic value, but of obvious community importance, since they represent the main strategy – to be honest, not always effective – available to the inhabitants for containing the destructive action of deer. An action, indeed, that we should interpret, to borrow Anna Tsing's notion, as a *disturbance*: “disturbance is a change in environmental conditions that causes a pronounced change in an ecosystem” (2015, p. 160). The attitudes of our interlocutors towards these disturbances, however, is far from unanimous and consistent, and in particular they strik-

ingly reveal how frictions with non-humans produce effects that go beyond strictly ecological relations, to move to the level of relations with administrative and bureaucratic bodies. On the level of interspecific relations, it has been particularly interesting to observe how, in the words of our interlocutors, the destructive action of the deer is obviously represented as a source of annoyance and concern, but is also paradoxically becoming ordinary, part of a routine scenario. Tsing's words about the ordinariness of disturbances are again illuminating:

disturbance is always in the middle of things: the term does not refer us to a harmonious state before disturbance. Disturbances follow other disturbances. Thus all landscapes are disturbed; disturbance is ordinary. But this does not limit the term. Raising the question of disturbance does not cut off discussion but opens it, allowing us to explore landscape dynamics (2015, p. 160).

When we shift our gaze from interspecific relations to the ones with institutions, though, we see how annoyance and concern give way to an *interpretative frame* fuelled by more markedly conflictual and confrontational feelings. In fact, if at a theoretical and epistemological level anthropology is moving towards an interpretative framework within which the human being is inextricably entangled with other non-human actors (Krauß, 2018), ethnographic investigation does not cease to bring out a multiplicity of situations and representations in which the relationship and above all the coexistence between human and animal show themselves in all their complexity and, not infrequently, difficulty. To take up, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the effective definition of *community frame* proposed by Ben Orlove and his team (2019), it seems to us that in Formazza, as well as in Salbertrand, our fieldwork – and our research in the fields – has brought out a very defined vision, shared at community level, of the difficult relationship between human and animals, often very much at odds with the legal and official frame that emerges from the directives concerning slaughter and containment practices promoted at provincial and regional level. This complexity is also due to the intertwining with the dynamics of climate change. The progressive increase in temperatures and the reduction in snow cover mean that the portions of territory in which these ungulates find refuge are ever larger, and the greater

availability of spaces where they can search for food means that the number of animals counted during the survey campaigns, promoted at provincial level to estimate the number of ungulates present in the valley and, consequently, organize controlled culling operations, is increasing.

The relationship between the institutional bodies which manage wildlife conservation, protection and control projects and the communities in the valleys where these projects operate are complex: the containment campaigns recruit local hunters for the culling of surplus specimens, bringing out elements of support and collaboration with the institutions, but the friction between those who would like more incisive campaigns and a higher number of animals culled and the directives that push in the opposite direction are very evident in the testimonies we have collected. This confirms that the Alps are increasingly and more and more evidently a place of unprecedented negotiations, revealing positions that are also very different, when not irreconcilable, within the communities and, perhaps to an even greater extent, between those who inhabit the mountains and those who instead look at or think of the mountains from afar.

It is time, now, to give an example of the discrepancy that can be found between the ways of reading the environment and its dynamics, its variations, its disruptions, activated by those who inhabit it, and the policies activated at the institutional level through recourse to external expert knowledge. From the very first conversations we had in the field on these issues, the friction between institutional positions and community frames (Orlove et al., 2019) emerged in the words and claims, sometimes quite heated and vehement, of the people we asked what it meant to live in a high-altitude context, in a *frontline community*. A brief excerpt from the field notes of one of the authors of this chapter illustrates well this tension between local and external expert knowledge, and at the same time the asymmetry of power and agency that characterises actors placed at different levels, with the locals sometimes hinting with a sort of angry resignation at the difficulty of resisting the decision-makers:

S. accompanied me to see the *vallum*. It is an artificial structure, produced after the landslide of 2009 that had come very close to the inhabited centre, built with the landslide material with the aim of containing further landslides. As we walk, he

tells me that there were two other, very large landslides, and it was necessary to raise the rampart further. He shows me the steel containment nets and explains that, in his opinion, they are a mistake, because they hold too much material, then when they give way, they cause a sort of explosion in which the boulders come down violently. He is very critical of the planners, engineers and geologists, because he says that they completely ignored the opinions of the locals, whereas, in his mind, they should have taken shared decisions, listening to the opinion of those who actually know that mountain and *"know how it behaves and moves"*, because what the locals predicted would happen, then actually happened. Apparently, however, at the next landslide they restored the nets despite the fact that they had burst. As we walk away, he shakes his head, I don't know whether more resigned or angry (2 April 2023)<sup>5</sup>.

These brief ethnographic notes are useful to show how the answer to the questions we referred to above – Whose mountains are they? Who are the inhabitants of the highlands? Are they only human? – are even more complex than one might have expected. This entails that fine-grained empirical evidence and deep and rigorous reflection are both required to ponder over the delicate relationships between community and resources that are so central for the future of the highlands. Local communities, once again, are the privileged places where concrete examples of responses to marginalisation processes can be operationally observed and where a relevant and yet to be discovered growth potential can be identified. It is therefore necessary to wonder how elements such as the environment, agriculture, land and landscape resources intertwine with an economic sector that constitutes a well-established asset in the Alpine space, but no less problematic for that, namely that of tourism. In the next few pages, therefore, we will try to articulate these reflections, emphasising the need for multi-scalar reasoning and development plans that, in order to promote the protection of agrarian landscapes and cultural heritages, directly involve local communities and the requests of recognition that they express.

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5 All translations from Italian to English are done by the authors of the text.

## 5. Beyond the Margins

While the issue of resources in general has gained increasing importance in the debate on Italian inner areas since World War II, it has assumed even greater weight with regard to mountain areas. Community, heritage and landscape are the elements that intervention projects must take into account when they address decentralised, inland, marginal and abandoned areas, which present themselves as contexts for the development of new resilience strategies. For some years now there has been a growing assignment of value to these territories in terms of regeneration, repopulation, environmental care, and experimentation with new forms of living.

On several occasions one of the authors of this chapter had the opportunity to reflect on that imposing process of deterritorialization, a consequence of the exodus from the countryside and the massive flight from the fields to the industrial and urban areas that began in the 1950s, which triggered a slow but inexorable process of environmental, social and economic degradation and an inevitable and profound change in the relationship between population and territory, a rupture of the existing balances between places and those who inhabit them (Bonato, 2017, 2024; Magnaghi, 2020). Small towns began to empty out, in some cases to the point of complete abandonment, in others the decline has been partial and those who remain are mostly elderly inhabitants, unable to sustain the local economy. In order to try to reverse this process of impoverishment, a first institutional attempt was made in 2003, with the promulgation of a Bill<sup>6</sup> that over the years has activated many projects oriented towards the development of unused resources in the territory and the enhancement of the territory's potential, respecting the needs and characteristics of each context and above all with a view to environmental sustainability. This perspective is particularly complex "in localities [...] demographically poor and characterised by a predominantly elderly population, and even more complex [is] the affirmation and entrenchment of the drastically new behavioural models and relationships with the environment that characterise a new agency within the framework of sustainability" (Bravo, 2017, p. 39).

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6 Realacci-Bocchino Law no. 1942/2003.

But it is precisely in areas that are considered marginal that it is possible to envisage re-territorialisation strategies and interventions that filter through culture, understood here both as the instrument of an incremental path, which generates stimuli and reflections that can contribute to the construction of a community aware of its own resources and capabilities, and as the recovery and reactivation of the wealth of knowledge and know-how of local tradition. This takes concrete form in the revitalisation of territorially based economies and in the growth of small business systems that enhance what comes from productive assets, which are then measured and reverberate in the culture of inhabiting.

Undoubtedly a potential generator of difficulties, frictions and even conflicts from an ethnic, identity, linguistic, economic and environmental point of view, this renewed centrality of the local compels us to rethink the role of the territory, its care and its valorisation (Magnaghi, 2020), because cultural planning must identify and make usable the common goods through a shared management between local administrators and inhabitants, so as to valorise the local heritage through generative and participatory interventions. At the same time, it must start from a judicious governance of the territory, based on the potential resources of people and places and on the enhancement of the latter, on the incisiveness of their peculiarities. It may be useful in this connection to take up the concept of iconema, proposed by Eugenio Turri (1998). An iconema or, rather, a set of iconemas, is the imprint of a territory, the distinctive features of its landscape, but also the organisational devices and the specific manners whereby social actors order themselves within it, an imprint in which the local population recognises itself and which are important for the construction of the sense of belonging and of the very meaning of landscape. A project will therefore be more fruitful to the extent that it refers to the landscape and its iconemas.

It goes without saying that culturally motivated innovation practices and creative improvement processes cannot renounce confrontation with the local population that possesses and continually produces experience of the places they inhabit. As mentioned in the third section, the community claims its role in the destiny of the territories and shows a rediscovered vocation for activism: as the enthusiasm and willingness shown towards our research have demonstrated, communities often supports joint development actions

and research projects; they join the territorial assistance network and committees for the management of environmental resources; they promote moments of sociability and protect and safeguard – sometimes even through various forms of resistance and opposite manners – the cultural heritage. In what appears to be an unprecedented innovative attitude, the community seems to reaffirm its bond with the territory and to refer to a fundamental and involving way of bringing individuals together. Above all, it is the way of producing culture that departs from the traditional practices of its mere preservation or even valorisation: aspects of local memory, elements of everyday life and the rituality of the past are chosen, revitalised and placed at the centre of a creation of value with the precise objective of conveying through them the local specificity, of transmitting outside the community an image of the uniqueness of the local cultural landscape.

Obviously, the heterogeneity of marginal contexts does not allow the same intervention methods to be applied everywhere. In order to draw up effective projects and better orient their application, taking up the suggestion of the SNAI (National Strategy for Inner Areas), one could first of all investigate the actual possibilities of the inhabitants to fully exercise their citizenship rights and then take note of the shortages in terms of access to culture and essential services, which in fact produce the processes of marginalization of places<sup>7</sup>. We reiterate that it is precisely in these scenarios, in these empty spaces, that it is possible to set up appropriate territorial policies that are effectively oriented towards the real needs of the inhabitants, and that promote creative ways of dealing with a place in terms of living, doing business, using local resources and fostering a proper fruition of the environment, which represent opportunities for improved development. Theoretical reflections on the concept of emptiness, and on the processes of demographic emptying that have been followed by unexpected reversal trends, have shown how the availability of physical, social and symbolic spaces has not infrequently, and paradoxically, proved to be an essential condition for the development of new forms of settlement (Viazzo & Zanini, 2014, 2022). As stated by geographer Guglielmo Scaramellini, “how can a society plan its present and design its future without having spaces on which to rely for new perspectives,

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7 [www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/](http://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/).

new opportunities, new uses?" (2016, p. 34). Already about twenty years ago, another geographer, Françoise Cognard (2006), had observed that the phenomenon of depopulation unexpectedly originates fertile circumstances, that might be considered as preconditions for implementing innovative practices, also favouring – thanks to the availability of demographic and social voids – repopulation and economic revival. In this interstice of cultural agency, abandonment and recuperation, impoverishment and creativity coexist in an almost paradoxical manner: as anthropologist Francesco Remotti emphasises, "creativity presupposes destructiveness: subjects would have no way of expressing creativity if sufficiently substantial lacerations did not determine an available space" (2011, p. 292).

Over the past few years, an interesting reflection has developed in the Italian public and academic discourse on the different meanings conveyed by the terms *paese* and *borgo*. Both correctly translatable with the English term village, they nevertheless express profoundly different meanings. If the semantic core of *paese* is, as mentioned in the preceding pages, oriented towards highlighting the dimension of cultural intimacy, liveability, and community togetherness, the rhetoric of the *borgo* is enjoying a considerable fortune outside the community, so to speak, and completely bypasses these aspects of actual daily liveability of the territory, conveying instead an imaginary of mere landscape amenity and tourist enjoyment. Without going into this intricate debate<sup>8</sup>, and paying attention to the potential critical issues that arise from emphasising alleged authenticity, it is however appropriate to be aware that the potential of villages and small towns is often realised through their redevelopment and regeneration, their cultural and landscape protection and their valorisation. Fruitful cultural planning requires weighing the positive effects of development projects for the community and keeping changes and possible territorial emergencies under control by foreseeing the risks they may entail. A dangerous unknown quantity is closely linked to the fascination and often excessive attraction exercised by tourism in Alpine sites. In many cases, a possible antidote to over-tourism consists in promoting sustainable, responsible, nature-based, ecological, and alternative types

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8 A well-argued critical discussion is provided by the short but incisive volume, *Contro i borghi. Il Belpaese che dimentica i paesi* (2022), edited by Filippo Barbera, Domenico Cersosimo and Antonio De Rossi.

of tourism that, in addition to not generating negative repercussions, positively affect local and natural wellbeing, the working dimension, living conditions, and pursue the active involvement of communities. But activating sustainable practices means confronting both macro-strategies at the supra-national level and decisions exercised at the individual level (Sbardella, 2019). And then there is the issue related to local responsibilities. As Alessandro Simonicca has aptly pointed out in a book on the anthropology of tourism, the notion of locality cannot always be understood as a guarantee of social equity or environmental protection: some communities are “deaf to ecological problems” or simply directed towards a view of productivism that damages the surrounding environment, which means that “the cognitive and governance rudder of tourism must be continually updated and does not find any linear solutions” (2013, p. 6). The critical issues related to the implementation of sustainable tourism practices can be schematically summarised as follows: there is no guarantee that tourists who describe themselves as responsible are actually aware of what is sustainable; there is a contradiction between the message that theoretically sustainable travel experiences convey and what they actually are, short stays that do not really allow contact with local communities, except for a short period of time; who or what establishes how tourism experience can be properly enjoyed?

## 6. Conclusions

This lengthy reflection on the role, and prospects, of tourism in marginal mountain areas now leads us to conclude by reconsidering once again the dimensions of marginality and inhabiting as closely interconnected. If tourism orientation seems to emerge in each of the territories we have observed, albeit with different specific weights, and above all always variously interwoven with other kinds of multi-activities, we cannot fail to consider the central role of the local population in defining, and negotiating, the space and the ways in which tourism development can fit into the local scenario.

In this sense, the different trajectories observed in Morgex and in Salbertrand look very interesting. In both contexts, in fact, the tourism industry, and especially a massive orientation towards winter sports, represents the

territory's central economic asset. What differentiates the two contexts is the positioning that our interlocutors imagine for agricultural and viticultural activities. In Morgex, which is very close to prestigious resorts involved in luxury tourist practices such as Courmayeur, wine production, despite the misalignments and criticalities we have observed regarding the difficult integration of traditional collective practices into a market economy, is conceived of as an integral part of the tourist scenario, on which it feeds and of which it contributes, in turn, contributes to raise the quality.

On the contrary, the agricultural and horticultural activities we discussed with our interlocutors in Salbertrand are apparently understood as alternative economic forms, sometimes openly oppositional, to Alpine tourism. "We are islands in the middle of uncultivated land", one of our witnesses effectively reported, underlining the difficulty with which those who practice agriculture are confronted with the progressive abandonment of the territory, and with the processes of neglect that ensue. A fallow land, however, which in the words of our interlocutor appears to be the result not only of cultivation abandonment, but also, and above all, of cultural abandonment. In this sense, the recovery and the consolidation of agricultural activities take on an openly political value, as ways of making a future world, to borrow once again Ingold's phrase, in which the relationship between tourism and agricultural activities is produced not to the detriment of the latter, but in a balanced, slow, manner.

For tourism to be really sustainable, therefore, it is more than fundamental to rest on the direct involvement of communities that demonstrate to be aware of their needs, as well as of their own potential, thereby contributing to the realisation of a sustainable management of the environment and natural resources, thus favouring local development, and ensuring the effective enforceability of the rights of a citizenship that demonstrates to be truly not marginal.

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