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## “Taking advantage of emptiness”?

Anthropological perspectives on mountain repopulation and spaces of cultural creativity in the Alpine area

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# “Taking advantage of emptiness”?

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## Demographic recovery and compositional changes in Alpine populations

After a century of massive and apparently irreversible exodus and population decline, recent studies document for many sectors of the Alpine crescent the spreading of demographic changes moving in the opposite direction (Corrado, 2010; Dematteis, 2011; Löffler *et al.*, 2011; Bender and Kanitscheider, 2012; Viazzo, 2012a). This trend reversal looks especially surprising in those areas which had experienced an unbroken and severe demographic decline since the second half of the nineteenth century: the French Alps, where signs of recovery had already surfaced in the last two decades of the twentieth century, and the Italian Alps, where population has instead begun to grow in quite a few municipalities only in the very last years. For mountain villages long believed to be doomed to total abandonment or at most to a difficult struggle for survival, such an increased ability to keep their natives or even to attract new inhabitants is understandably welcomed as a change ushering in an “Alpine Renaissance” (Morandini and Reolon, 2010).

However, the very fact that demographic recovery is primarily due to net migration, rather than to a positive natural balance, entails that the Alps are witnessing a sizable change in the *composition* of many a local population. Especially in the western Alps, where the numbers of permanent residents had often plunged to exceedingly low levels on both the Italian and French sides, the arrival of new inhabitants, even when modest in absolute terms, may turn out to be highly significant on the local scene. Hence the need to go beyond naked figures and explore the often subtle dynamics – social and cultural as well as economic and demographic – which characterize this unprecedented phase in the history of the Alps. As pointed out by Françoise Cognard (2006) in a stimulating analysis of the case of the Diois (Drôme) to which we will revert, if

statistical sources remain essential to gauge the direction and size of demographic movements, qualitative investigations revealing the specificities of the various contexts which favour or hamper the entry of new inhabitants, and affect both their political and decisional weight and their room for manoeuvre, will prove no less important.

In this respect, a useful contribution can be offered by socio-cultural anthropology, partly because of the potentialities of its distinctive methods of ethnographic research, but also because of the attention this discipline pays to the delicate effects that processes of "neo-population" may have on cultural transmission, sometimes producing significant economic spin-offs (Zanini, 2013). The aim of this article is to reconsider some aspects of mountain repopulation in the light of anthropological concepts which have so far failed to be adequately applied to Alpine studies. A suggestive insight comes from Cognard's work, whose emphasis on the importance of the "empty spaces" left behind by depopulation is closely reminiscent of theoretical perspectives broached by a recent anthropological debate on the relationship between cultural impoverishment and cultural creativity.

## Mountain repopulation: "Alpine Renaissance" or a threat to local cultures?

Both in the scientific literature and even more in the popular press, one of the most lamented consequences of Alpine depopulation has long been, and still is, the progressive erosion of the cultural heritage of mountain populations. The abandonment of the valleys by the younger generations is generally singled out as the decisive factor, since it brings about not only a shrinking of relational networks ("social impoverishment") but also a break in the chain of transmission of a wealth of memories and traditional knowledge from the older generations. Such terms as demographic decline and depopulation are thus used interchangeably to indicate the cause of an intangible cultural impoverishment which would accompany, and be strictly interwoven with, material and economic impoverishment. There is clearly some truth to this canonically accepted picture. However, the current processes of repopulation definitely call for some rethinking of its basic assumptions, and also lay bare some terminological and conceptual ambiguities which need to be dissolved in order to gain a better understanding of the transformations – social and cultural as well as demographic – that are changing the face of the Alps.

An insidious terminological knot to disentangle originates from the tendency to treat "depopulation" and "population decline" as basically synonymous. As rightly pointed out by geographer Mauro Varotto (2003, pp. 104-105), the two terms actually refer to different aspects of a complex phenomenon: "although it seems self-evident to identify depopulation with population decline and population exodus", what really matters is "the series of consequences they have in terms of environmental and cultural degradation". According to Varotto, whereas the concept of population decline is scientifically neutral, as it merely refers to statistical figures without expressing any evaluation of their effects, the notion of depopulation carries an eminently negative connotation: "if the former can, up to a point, be seen as a normal or physiological constituent of demographic dynamics, the latter becomes pathological as soon as it translates into cultural impoverishment and environmental degradation". Moreover, it is just as important to remember not only that population decline and depopulation are

not the same thing, but also that they are not necessarily associated, since cases of population decline without depopulation or abandonment (and *vice versa*) have been recorded in the past and can still occur.

These clarifications, besides being useful in themselves, are a reminder that one needs to be as precise as possible when defining terms that are loaded with implications and extremely cautious before equating such terms and taking certain cause-and-effect relationships for granted. If depopulation has resulted in cultural impoverishment, as maintained by Varotto, should we deduce that the recent re-peopling (or "neo-peopling") of the Alps automatically engenders cultural enrichment? Is it conceivable that economic enrichment can be matched by cultural impoverishment? And that immigration flows inducing demographic recovery may have beneficial effects in some respects – for instance, to slow down or stop altogether processes of environmental degradation – and yet be at least potentially damaging in others, first and foremost as far as local cultures are concerned?

These questions are hardly new and clearly transcend the field of Alpine studies. They ultimately bear on highly sensitive ethical and political issues which are bound to emerge whenever one faces situations of migration and culture contact. However, the new scenarios brought about by Alpine repopulation reassert them with greater urgency than in the past. To be sure, a well-established literature shows that since the remote past Alpine communities have never been hermetically closed, or just open enough to allow their members to leave the mountains and flock to the plains, but for a long time mining towns had been the only high-altitude localities to experience flows of immigrants of some significance, followed in more recent times by tourist resorts (Viazzo, 2009). This is now extending to localities that had rarely received new residents from outside, which obviously undermines the dominant view of the Alps as "a reservoir of men for other people's use" (Braudel, 1966, p. 46), an area where migration only flows downwards, thus exposing high-altitude communities to the risk of depopulation and extinction, yet leaving them culturally uncontaminated and politically uncontested at least in their mountain territories.

The realization that even the Italian and French Alps are now affected by population movements which go up the valleys, instead of sliding downwards to the plains, makes it imperative to assess the effects of immigration on the mechanisms of cultural transmission. As has been underlined in the Alpine Space Forum held in Innsbruck on 22-23 February 2011 and specifically devoted to the challenges posed by the impact of demographic changes, "migration is also related to the question of cultural identity, which is a particularly delicate issue in the Alps. Whether we refer to unique settlement structures, typical Alpine crafts and traditions or regional dialect and creative work, the following question must be posed: who should be entitled to learn about and transfer, then promote and valorise local Alpine cultures?"<sup>1</sup>

The case of the many linguistic minorities in the Alpine region, and especially of the "alloglot islands" studding the Italian Alps, is in many ways extreme, and yet uniquely useful to highlight these questions<sup>2</sup>. It is significant that the scholars to whom we owe the most comprehensive studies of the current processes of demographic recovery in the Italian Alps – the team of geographers led by Ernst Steinicke at Innsbruck University – have paid special attention to the demographic evolution of linguistic minorities (Löffler *et al.*, 2011; Steinicke *et al.*, 2011a). It is no less significant that these researchers, instead of delivering an unquestionably positive judgement, see

repopulation as a "threat" to these minorities. As they write in one of their many studies of this topic (Steinicke *et al.*, 2011b, p. 3):

The preservation of the linguistic minorities in the Italian Alps has been complicated by "diffuse ethnicity" and by decades of depopulation of mountainous areas. Furthermore, the present demographic shift threatens the ethnic diversity. New immigration in form of amenity(-led) migration now adds to the minorization of the smaller linguistic groups [...] in their own territories.

It is worth noting that Steinicke and his colleagues are not simply worried about the fate of minority languages. Indeed, they refer in the first place to the *political* consequences of current demographic changes, as they fear that because of repopulation these groups may risk to be overwhelmed, or at least to become minorities, in their own territories. Such a loss of political weight would impinge not only on the vitality of the language but more generally on the whole cultural sphere. As they write (Steinicke *et al.*, 2011b, p. 6), it would pave the way to what they call "diffuse ethnicities", grounded not so much on linguistic competence as on subjective assertions of belonging:

We are witnessing the emergence of a new awareness, whereby standard language and language competency no longer constitute the most important elements for identifying ethnic groups. Instead, ethnic identity is increasingly expressed through subjective factors (ethnic self-assessment), as well as in the relationship to the respective village.

The emergence of new forms of self-definition is here presented as one of the main reasons that determine on the one hand the increasing assimilation of minorities by the new inhabitants of the Alps, and on the other a progressive weakening of minority languages which suggests a poor prognosis for their future. These scholars are not alone in alerting to the risks repopulation might entail on the cultural side. Similar concerns are raised by Bender and Kanitscheider (2012, p. 240) in their recent overview of the research agenda set by the new immigration to the Alps, where they write that:

Cultural heritage, in particular regarding the ethnolinguistic minorities of the Italian Alps, is threatened by the assimilation process triggered by new inhabitants who usually come from urban milieus and may even originate from other cultures.

Again, Bender and Kanitscheider do not consider only the linguistic dimension, but explicitly refer to cultural heritage as a whole. While especially serious for linguistic minorities also because of their small numbers, eroded by decades of demographic decline, such a threat appears therefore to loom more generally over all Alpine "local cultures".

## Cultural impoverishment, creativity, social structures

These remarks are closely reminiscent of the consternation voiced by the first anthropologists who began, in the late 1960s, to chart the impact of tourism on local cultures. The most emblematic case probably remains Davydd Greenwood's study of the *Alarde*, the ritual recreation of a victory gained by the Spanish Basque town of Fuenterrabia over the French in the seventeenth century. While Greenwood was doing fieldwork in this town in the summer of 1969, growing tourist demand convinced the organizers to break with tradition and have the *Alarde* performed twice in the same day to allow everyone to see it. The anthropologist's verdict was hard and unambiguous: Fuenterrabia was "selling its culture by the pound", and more generally tourism and

the process of "cultural commoditization" it spurred had only pernicious effects on the cultural heritage of local populations (Greenwood, 1977).

However, more recent anthropological studies – partly because of changes intervened in cultural tourism, and partly because of changes occurred in anthropology itself – have challenged or at least softened such a pessimistic attitude. While earlier anthropological observers tended to criticize tourism as a destructive force for authenticity and creative expression, later research suggests that commoditization does not necessarily destroy the meaning of rituals and cultural products, although it may change it or add new meanings to old ones. Which is to say that even "staged authenticity" may promote creativity through encounters between locals and visitors that have been explored by empirical studies supported by increasingly refined conceptual tools. Recent work has drawn attention to the role of co-creation and to processes of "communal creativity" that can develop and involve both locals and tourists and are best analyzed by sharpening such notions as creativity, authenticity and sincerity<sup>3</sup>. Examples of such a shift also come from the Italian Alps and their ethnolinguistic minorities. In his study of the Cimbrians of the "Seven Communities", a German-speaking minority settled north of Vicenza, Marangon (1996) concludes that the dynamics ignited by tourism were instrumental to avert the much feared risk of linguistic and cultural extinction, since they effectively contributed to acquaint outsiders with Cimbrian culture and even allowed them to participate in it.

Other researches reveal that in the Alps old traditions are frequently saved by new inhabitants: indeed, one of the paradoxes of repopulation is that in many cases *cultural continuity* – be it the survival and revamping of a ritual or transmission of local craftsmanship – is made possible only by the *demographic discontinuity* represented by the arrival of "new highlanders", quite often more eager than the locals to promote the valorisation of a cultural heritage of which they are disputable heirs (Viazzo, 2012b, pp. 188-189). It would seem that the "diffuse ethnicity" of the new inhabitants of the Alps and their cultural entrepreneurship, not always immune to a somewhat cynical quest for resources and opportunities such as the ones made available in Italy by the legal provisions introduced in 1999 to protect linguistic minorities (Porcellana, 2007), are the price to be paid to ensure that local languages and cultures do not die. Evaluations, practical and ethical, may diverge considerably. In our view, one point which has received insufficient attention is the room for manoeuvre allowed to this cultural entrepreneurship: whether it varies in the different sectors of the Alpine crescent, and if so why. These questions, as we will try to show, are ultimately related to the issue of cultural creativity, so often evoked in the literature on Alpine repopulation (Corrado, 2010; Morandini and Reolon, 2010, p. 51), whose socio-cultural preconditions have however only very rarely been investigated.

In a thickly argued essay, Francesco Remotti (2011, p. 290) has suggested that in every culture, and in every society, cultural impoverishment and enrichment are both detectable at the same time: "within the same culture there are areas of higher and lower density (synchronic axis), and similarly phases of intensification and depletion can be recorded diachronically". A proper recognition of this coexistence, or sequence, of areas and phases of higher or lower cultural density allows us, according to Remotti, "to account for phenomena of impoverishment and stagnation on the one hand, and phenomena of cultural creativity on the other". This would help to better articulate the theory proposed by another Italian anthropologist, Adriano Favole, who has described

creativity as "a process arising with particular force out of encounters, relationships, situations of cohabitation, sometimes even out of the clash between different cultures and societies" (Favole, 2010, p. 36).

There are at least two reasons why the concepts and the interpretative frameworks at the core of the debate between Remotti and Favole might be usefully adopted, and tested, when examining the relationships between processes of depopulation and repopulation in the Alps on the one hand and phenomena of cultural impoverishment and cultural enrichment (or creativity) on the other. The first reason is that, on closer inspection, they appear to be not so distant from the contrasting stances taken by geographers, planners and other students of the Alpine world. As we have seen, while some authors ascribe social and cultural impoverishment to mountain depopulation, others are inclined to believe that impoverishment is caused, or accelerated, by repopulation. The latter position is reminiscent of the one advocated by Remotti (and Greenwood), whereas Favole is predictably closer to the views expressed by recent work on the anthropology of tourism and contends that immigration should be rather seen as a source of creativity and, consequently, of cultural enrichment. The new inhabitants, with their professional and existential projects and their heterogeneous origins, are at least potentially vectors of a creativity which can spawn cultural forms that are "novel, unprecedented, unexpected and 'emergent'" (Favole, 2010, p. IX)<sup>4</sup>.

The second reason which makes this debate – and especially Remotti's theoretical perspective – both interesting and relevant is that it suggests some hypotheses on the concept of "emptiness" and on the relationship between cultural impoverishment and creativity in the Alpine area. It should be noticed that the concept of cultural creativity proposed by Remotti differs significantly from the one put forward by Favole, in that it conceives of creativity as pertaining to individual or collective subjects, rather than to culture or society as such. Remotti (2011, p. 291) is clear about the role of these subjects when he maintains that a culture's possibility to reproduce itself depends on the subjects' ability to act, on their agency: culture "is at the mercy of those who, at every moment, regenerate it. [...] Reconstruction and destruction are the two sides of the same phenomenon, the inescapable process of cultural reproduction. Each culture continuously requires to be re-produced, re-made, re-executed". This formulation encompasses in a unified interpretative model impoverishment and creativity, one being the prerequisite for the other. In particular, "creativity presupposes destructivity: there would be no way for subjects to express creativity if some space had not been previously produced by a sizable loss" (2011, p. 292). Remotti is thus arguing that cultural creativity "needs space to express itself", which is to say that a "thick culture" – or a strong social structure – favours creativity less than a thin and impoverished culture (or a weak social structure) does.

These arguments are very similar to the ones advanced by Françoise Cognard (2006) in her work on the Diois which has already been briefly mentioned. When presenting the case of this French district, Cognard emphasises that in the past it experienced a severe demographic decline that caused economic impoverishment. However, she is also keen to remark that this process ultimately paved the way to opposite dynamics of repopulation and economic recovery by leaving "empty spaces" which new inhabitants were able to fill socially and economically:

Thanks to the vitality of certain local actors, the Diois truly become "actors of their own development", moving from an intercommunality of services to an intercommunality of projects associated to participatory initiative [...]. This

"committed minority" includes most notably some highly qualified neo-rurals who *have taken advantage of the relative emptiness created by years of emigration* (Cognard, 2006, p. 8 [italics added]).

Remotti and Cognard thus agree on two basic points, as they grant a decisive role to individual actors in charting the social, economic and cultural courses of a territory, while also stressing that in order to express their potential creativity, cultural but also economic, these individuals need "empty spaces". This clearly points to the importance, both for theoretical reasons and to assess the extent to which best practices can be transferred elsewhere, of finding out whether and to what extent "empty spaces" are available in the different sectors of the Alps.

As remarked by Bender and Kanitscheider (2012, p. 235), terms like "new immigration", "new inhabitants" or "new highlanders" have been recently coined to describe phenomena which have surfaced at first in the French Alps (Fourny, 1994) and later in the Italian Alps, where the reversal of demographic trends caused a sensation because it came as a surprise after a long period of harsh decline. If less attention has been paid in the Swiss and Austrian Alps, this must evidently be due to the fact that population decline, while detectable in the twentieth century and occasionally severe in some areas, was nevertheless far more limited here than in the rest of the Alpine crescent (Bätzing, 2005, pp. 348-375). Although a multiplicity of amenable causes lie behind these divergent trajectories, there can be little doubt that a crucial role has been played by social-structural factors such as inheritance systems, which have favoured in the eastern Alps the maintenance of viable estates, and the variable strength of communal structures, far more solid and binding in Austria and Switzerland than in Italy or France. As a result, in the Swiss and especially in the Austrian Alps demographic dynamics have not produced those "empty spaces" which are a distinctive feature of the western Alps. No less important, we may expect that within local communities the core of long-established families has remained stronger, thus ensuring that local culture can be transmitted through family and community channels to a greater extent than in the villages of the western Alps, depopulated at first and now repopulated. Finally, it should not be forgotten that in both Austria and Switzerland there exist institutional barriers which make it more difficult for potential new inhabitants to settle in the mountains and enjoy full rights over local resources: becoming a "highlander by choice" should therefore be definitely easier in the French and Italian Alps than in Austria and Switzerland.

These hypotheses, while plausible, are still very general and should be verified through detailed investigations that are capable of capturing similarities and differences also at the local level. Studies of this kind have so far been conducted almost exclusively in the western Alps. A well-researched locality is Ostana, an Occitan-speaking community in the upper Valle Po (one of the valleys in the province of Cuneo, in the western Piedmontese Alps), which is often cited as an extreme instance of Alpine depopulation but also as an emblematic case of demographic recovery and cultural revitalization: on the verge of extinction only a few years ago, Ostana has seen its population grow thanks to the arrival of new inhabitants who have proved very creative in "taking advantage of emptiness". Significantly, a newly completed ethnographic study (Bertolino, 2014) and others still underway also highlight the fundamental role played in the process of cultural revitalization by the social networks created by locals and new inhabitants alike to connect this high-altitude village to the outside world and especially to those "knots" which are crucial to gain access to the resources needed to



support local initiatives. A very different demographic history has been documented and analyzed for Macugnaga, a Walser settlement on the Piedmontese side of Monte Rosa, whose population has only modestly declined from 653 inhabitants in 1759 to 601 in 2011. However, this seeming stability conceals not only sharp fluctuations over time but also considerable population changes caused by waves of immigration spurred at first by mining and later by tourism. As shown by a recent anthropological study (Zanini, 2013), in this German-speaking island in the Italian Alps the porous boundaries of local institutions have left room for "diffuse ethnicity" and for a sometimes tense coexistence of competing collective memories. No less instructive are the results of a research (Fassio *et al.*, 2014) conducted in the Pellice Valley, one of the Waldensian Valleys of the western Piedmontese Alps, so called because they are distinctively inhabited by Waldenses, a religious group which originated in the south of France about 1170 through the preaching of Peter Waldo. This study reveals that against a shared institutional background, which is by and large common to most sectors of the Italian Alps, the policies adopted by the various municipalities may nevertheless vary as an outcome of debates and compromises and ultimately lead to considerable differences – even between adjacent villages – in the degree of rigidity and closure of the communal structures that regulate access to local resources and therefore strongly influence the possibility or at least the desirability of settling in these places. In some municipalities access especially to pastoral resources are *de facto* restricted to the members of old local families, whereas in others their exploitation is instead incentivized, thus favouring immigration. The often surprising findings of these researches, carried out at the local level by adopting ethnographic methods, suggest that differences can be detected not only between the various sectors of the Alps but also within each sector. At the same time, they appear to confirm the significance of those social-structural barriers which as a whole tend – for complex historical and political reasons mostly linked to different processes of state formation – to be more widespread and effective in the Swiss and Austrian Alps than in the French and Italian Alps.

## Conclusions

The existence of pronounced socio-structural differences between the Austrian and Swiss Alps on the one hand and the French and Italian Alps on the other has long been recognized as a prominent characteristic of Alpine history (Mathieu, 1998, pp. 129-148). Although detailed local studies are still few and far between, and mostly confined to the western Alps, there are reasons to believe that such differences have influenced the demography of these portions of the Alpine crescent during the course of the twentieth century and may still affect the ways in which they will face the challenges of a globalized economy. If some recent anthropological theories are correct, then it can be surmised that the French and Italian Alps, while disadvantaged by their greater demographic fragility, might on the other hand be paradoxically advantaged by the wider "spaces for creativity", economic as well as cultural, left by depopulation. More careful studies of these comparative issues should be pursued, also to pinpoint likely differences in the integration experiences of the new inhabitants of the Alps, proportionally less numerous but certainly not absent in the Swiss and Austrian Alps.

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## NOTES

1. We are quoting from p. 7 of the Forum Report prepared by the Joint Secretariat ETC – Alpine Space Programme, available at <http://www.alpine.space.eu/>, accessed January 25th 2014.
2. The theoretical reflections put forward in this article originate from our participation in the research project LIMINAL (*Linguistic Minorities in the Alps. Ethnicity, Languages and Demographic Processes*, 2013-15), funded by the University of Turin. Although jointly elaborated, the first two sections have been authored by Roberta C. Zanini, while the remaining two sections have been written by Pier Paolo Viazzo.
3. The theoretical debate on these issues has been largely hosted by the *Annals of Tourist Research*, from the pioneering paper by Cohen (1988) to the recent overview by Richards (2011).
4. Favole derives his notion of “emergence” from the theory of complex systems, whose relevance for anthropology is discussed by Lansing (2003). Accordingly, “creativity” is not meant to indicate the activities of those who work in the so-called “creative sectors”, but to define the unexpected outcomes of encounters between members of different cultures.

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## ABSTRACTS

After a century of unbroken demographic decline there are signs in many sectors of the Alpine crescent of a trend reversal which looks especially surprising in those areas (notably the French and Italian Alps) that had been affected by severe depopulation since the second half of the 19th century. In a stimulating analysis of socio-demographic changes in a French Alpine district, Cognard (2006) surmises that depopulation, however disastrous in many ways, nevertheless paved the way to opposite dynamics of repopulation and economic recovery by leaving "empty spaces" which new inhabitants have been able to fill socially and economically, thus taking advantage of the emptiness created by years of emigration. This insight is closely reminiscent of recent anthropological work which suggests that cultural creativity needs space to express itself and that "thick" culture and strong social structures are less favourable to the blooming of creativity than thin and impoverished cultures and weak social structures. This article explores the possibility that the French and Italian Alps, while disadvantaged by their greater demographic fragility, might on the other hand be paradoxically advantaged by the wider spaces for creativity, economic as well as cultural, left by depopulation.

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**Keywords:** Alpine anthropology, Alpine repopulation, cultural creativity, cultural impoverishment, diffuse ethnicity

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