# Negotiating the mountains. Foreign immigration and cultural change in the Italian Alps.

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# Negotiating the mountains.
# Foreign immigration and cultural change in the Italian Alps[1]

by Andrea Membretti and Pier Paolo Viazzo

**The Alps: closed to the outside world or open to socio-cultural innovation?**

Still in the late 1960s, as aptly noted by the Canadian anthropologist and historian Harriet Rosenberg, the image of mountain societies in the past as "illiterate, passive, isolated and poor" was almost unchallenged (Rosenberg 1988, 3). Since then, decades of research – including Rosenberg's own study of Abriès, a village in the French Alps – have overturned this picture. Far from being politically passive, Abriès had for centuries been able to negotiate its fate with the central powers, and it also emerged from the archives, like many other Alpine communities, as anything but isolated, poor and illiterate: the higher the altitude, the stronger a tendency for prosperity and literacy to grow (Viazzo 1989, 121-52). As shown by a spate of studies published in the 1990s, this unforeseen tendency can be mostly credited to a predominantly seasonal emigration which was more pervasive in the upper valleys and opened high-altitude Alpine communities to the outside, thus favoring the circulation of ideas and knowledge and stimulating innovation (Rosenberg 1988; Audenino 1990; Albera 1991; Fontaine 1993; Siddle 1997; Radeff 1998). Instead of mitigating their allegedly atavistic poverty and fatal backwardness, modernity had the paradoxical effect of making the mountains "archaic" and transforming them into marginal places, the living space – restricted and fossilized – of cultures that lowland societies expected to be "primitive" and, as such, resistant to any attempt at change. In a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, the identities and practices of the highlanders finally complied, especially during the late twentieth century, with this highly reifying model, thereby reproducing in fact the residualistic stereotype that had been imposed on them (Camanni 2002, 53-94; De Rossi 2017).

Much emphasis was placed in the studies that have just been mentioned on the openness to the outside world displayed by Alpine socio-economic and cultural systems in the pre-industrial past. As Luigi Lorenzetti (2003) rightly pointed out, however, this opening was accompanied by strong demographic closure. To be sure, Alpine communities have never been hermetically closed, or just open enough to allow their inhabitants to leave the mountains: cases of migration towards the high valleys are attested throughout the early modern age. Yet, for a long time mining towns and villages, which often attracted skilled labor even from distant European countries (Viazzo 1989,

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[1] A shorter and partly different version of this article is forthcoming in the Italian journal *Zapruder*. Although the article is the outcome of close collaborative work, the first two sections have been written by Viazzo, the third and fourth sections by Membretti, and the concluding remarks jointly by the two authors.

153-77), were the only high-altitude localities to experience flows of immigrants of some significance, followed in more recent times by tourist resorts. After the initial peopling of the Alps in ancient and medieval times, settlements of "new highlanders" in upland communities were rare events: measured at the municipal level, the high levels of endogamy to be found all over the Alpine region until relatively recently are the clear indicator of a modest rate of population turnover. For a variety of reasons, ranging from the development of means of transportation to the demise of agro-pastoral economies, which eroded the significance of endogamous marriage strategies aimed at keeping property within the community's territory, in the course of the twentieth century endogamy rates collapsed. With the only exception of tourist resorts and industrial locations in the lower valleys, however, this exogamic opening was mainly a matter of in-marrying spouses from neighboring communities, which generated a moderate amount of short-range mobility mostly within the same valley, in a period far more dramatically characterized by an exodus to the plains that was hardly balanced by migrations in the opposite direction, from the plains to the mountains. This is a point of fundamental importance for understanding the socio-demographic and cultural dynamics which are changing, from the beginning of the new millennium, the face of the Italian Alps.

## Whose Alps are these? Demography, identity, culture

After more than a century of massive demographic decline, from the mid-nineteenth century until the middle or even the end of the twentieth, many sectors of the Alpine crescent are now experiencing a trend reversal which is leading many an observer to talk of a "new peopling" of the Alps (Corrado 2010; Perlik 2011; Viazzo 2012a; Mathieu 2015; Zanini 2016). This recovery has come particularly unexpected in the Italian Alps, where depopulation had severely hit especially the eastern and western ends of the mountain range (Bätzing 2015) and appeared unstoppable and irreversible. Of course, local situations may be quite diverse across the Italian Alps: between 2003 and 2013, in 42.1% of Italian Alpine municipalities the growth rates of the resident population were equal to zero or negative (Alpine Convention 2015, 38). Nevertheless, over the past fifteenth years or so the population at large has begun to grow, at first along the axes of the Aosta and Adige valleys, in peri-urban municipalities closer to the plain, in the main ski centers, but also in some "inner areas" (Löffler, Beismann, Walder and Steinicke 2011; Bartaletti 2013; Corrado, Dematteis and Di Gioia 2014).[2] The natural growth rate, however, still remains negative or steady almost

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2   In Italy this label designates, also in official parlance (http://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/it/arint/), territories that are far away from large agglomerations and service centers and are characterized by unstable development trajectories and serious demographic problems. "Inner areas" represent a large part of Italy (about three-fifths of the total territory of the country and just under a quarter of the total population) and are very diversified between and within themselves, but they are mainly mountainous.

everywhere. This means that population growth, or even mere stability, is predominantly due to a positive net migration which is entailing for the local communities a far more rapid and intense population turnover than in the past, with highly significant implications (Bender and Kanitscheider 2012).

By questioning the canonical image of the Alpine communities as not permeable to migration from outside, the current changes prompt us to face an issue provocatively raised some years by Camanni (2002, 123-31) and subsequently by Varotto and Castiglioni (2012), namely: Whose Alps are these? Who is entitled to claim rights in the tangible and intangible resources of the Alpine territory? Just answering that the mountains belong to the mountaineers unduly simplifies a very complex situation. As recently pointed out by Barbera (2015, 39), the arrival of "new populations" in the inner and mostly mountainous areas of Italy generates a set of problems that appear to be worthy of reflection:

> *Among these, the most relevant one regards ownership regimes and property rights: what does the action of protection and conservation promoted by local communities in terms of property rights exactly imply? Are well-designed individual rights sufficient? Or is it necessary, as these are common goods (land, water, landscape, local knowledge), to draw collective property rights?*

Even if we narrow the focus on the transmission of intangible cultural heritage, such as "local knowledge," it is inevitable to wonder in what sense and to what extent one can take it for granted that intangible cultural heritage is "transmitted from generation to generation," as stated in Article 2 of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of intangible heritage.[3] How is local knowledge transmitted today in Alpine communities whose populations are rapidly changing in composition? And, above all, who is entitled to learn about and transmit, and then promote and valorize, Alpine cultural heritage?

A second issue has indeed to do with local identity and the cultural implications of the new peopling of the Alps. The case of the many linguistic minorities in the Alpine region, and especially of the "alloglot islands" studding the Italian Alps,[4] is in many ways extreme, and yet uniquely useful to highlight these questions. 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 (Steinicke 2008; Steinicke, Walder, Löffler and

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3   http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
4   The Italian Alpine territory hosts a variety of linguistic minority groups: Provençal and Franco-Provençal in the Western Alps, Alemannic in the Western-Central sector, Tyrolean-Bavarian and Rhaeto-Romance in the Eastern Alps.

Beismann 2011a; 2011b). It is no less significant that these researchers, instead of delivering an unquestionably positive judgement, see repopulation as a "threat" to these minorities:

> *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* (Steinicke, Walder, Löffler and Beismann 2011a: 3).

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 by paving the way to what they call "diffuse ethnicities," grounded not so much on linguistic competence as on subjective assertions of belonging by "new highlanders" eager to claim the right to promote and enhance local culture. Recent ethnographic investigations have indeed shown that the new inhabitants are very often the ones who prove most active in manipulating and negotiating processes – dealing especially with the use and re-invention of memory – whose most important aspects are not so much the "traditional" behaviors in themselves, but rather the political rhetorics of production of traditionality (Zanini 2013).

Finally, another important and vexed question concerns the potential for innovation offered by new inhabitants to the territories in which they settle – and vice versa. In this regard it is useful to note that the Alpine region and more generally the mountains appear, especially if compared to the cities, as almost empty spaces. Italy suffers the effects of a serious imbalance in the geographical distribution of its population: although less than a quarter of the total land is flat, 48.7% of the population is concentrated in this small portion of the peninsula, with only 12.4% in the mountains. The 1,749 Italian municipalities that fall within the perimeter of the Alpine Convention[5] account for 21.6% of Italian municipalities and extend over an area of 52,000 square kilometers (17.2% of the total territory of Italy) but host only 4,364,538 residents (7.3% of the Italian population), with a density of just 84 people per square kilomer compared to a national average of 198.[6] While primarily due to to the morphological characteristics of the Alpine region, this lower density has undoubtedly been accentuated by the mountain exodus of the nineteenth and

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5   The Alpine Convention is an international treaty for the sustainable development of the Alps signed in 1991 by the Alpine countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia and Switzerland).
6   Data from ISTAT  (Italian National Institute for Statistics) as of January 1st 2013 (www.istat.it). It should also be noted that 90% of Alpine municipalities has a population of less than 10,000 inhabitants and 24% of less than 500.

twentieth centuries, which engendered not only empty spaces, demographic imbalances and a shrinking and weakening of social relations, but also an erosion of local cultural heritage. If these were the effects of depopulation, is it reasonable to expect that repopulation can now bring innovation and cultural enrichment?

In this connection, it may be useful to note that stimulating and partly divergent hypotheses about cultural creativity, and the conditions that favor or hamper it, have been recently advanced by two Italian anthropologist. Mostly relying on his own research in Polynesia and on a large body of literature on Oceanian societies, but also offering a few sketchy comparisons with the Alpine world, Adriano Favole (2010: 36) has conceptualized 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." While recognizing that they can hardly arise if people and ideas do not move and meet, Francesco Remotti (2011: 281-301) has nevertheless contended that social innovation and cultural creativity "need space to express themselves," and that emptiness – an impoverished culture or a weak social structure – would therefore favor them more than a "thick" culture or a strong social structure (Remotti 2011: 281-301). This general hypothesis appears to be supported by evidence from the Western Alps, where several cases have been documented where heavy depopulation allowed the "new highlanders" to take advantage of the emptiness caused by many years of emigration, and so to start entrepreneurial activities both in the economic and cultural field (Cognard 2006; Viazzo and Zanini 2014).

It does not seem therefore foolish to surmise that disadvantaged areas may paradoxically be advantaged by their greater demographic weakness, as wider "creative spaces" may be produced just by depopulation. This is a hypothesis that appears to strengthen the widespread, if often superficial, idea according to which, precisely because they are mostly empty areas, the Alps (and other mountain regions) lend themselves particularly well to welcome new inhabitants, and, as a sort of corollary, that the new highlanders almost automatically bring them back to life by stimulating socio-cultural and economic innovations. Things are actually far more complex than this. Indeed, this hypothesis invites for extra attention when assessing the extent to which the mountains are empty and urges to identify more accurately the characteristics of the local social structures with which those who intend to settle in the highlands are bound to come in contact and interact. Even in places that have largely been emptied by depopulation it must be expected that conflictual dynamics may arise about the ownership of tangible and intangible resources. And we have seen that there are scholars who consider the "new peopling" of the Alps to be not so much a panacea as a threat: "cultural heritage [...] is threatened by the assimilation processed triggered by new inhabitants who usually come from urban milieus"; but they "may even originate from other

cultures," and this can prove especially insidious (Bender and Kanitscheider 2010: 240).

These opposite positions may look appealing, albeit for different reasons, but they are both simplistic. In fact, the new inhabitants of the Alps, whatever the proximity or the distance of the "cultures from which they originate," should not be considered *a priori* as a threat nor as an enrichment. This is what we learn from a wide literature on intergroup relations that stems from Fredrik Barth's famous intimation that the critical focus of investigation should be "the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff it encloses" (Barth 1969: 15; emphasis in original). As Andreas Wimmer (2009: 250-251) has accurately remarked, Barth's approach "implied a paradigm shift in the anthropological study of ethnicity: researchers would no longer study 'the culture' of ethnic groups A and B, but rather how the ethnic boundary between A and B was inscribed onto a landscape of continuous cultural trannsitions." It also implied a change in the definition of ethnicity, which was no longer synonymous with objectively defined cultures, but rather referred to the actors' subjective views and to the strategies they adopt to establish group boundaries by pointing to specific markers that distinguish them from ethnic others. Wimmer himself (2013) has rightly argued that Barth's insight that boundaries are not given but *made* through negotiations may have encouraged hyperconstructivist stances. But the lesson remains valid. In the case of the "new peopling of the Alps" this means "diffuse ethnicities," to use the term coined by Steinicke and colleagues, should not be seeb as synonymous with "loss" or "destruction" but rather as the outcome of interactions and negotiations between autochtonous and migrants which must be studied must be studied in depth and with attention to local contexts.

**Foreign immigration in the new peopling of the Italian Alps**

In recent years, increasing success has been enjoyed in Italy by the distinction and almost opposition between "highlanders by birth" and "highlanders by choice" (Dematteis 2011). The latter have been mainly identified, especially in the media, as youth dissatisfied with city life, seeking a new lifestyle in the mountains. For some years it has been taken for granted that in Italy the repopulation of the Alps was mainly due to internal migration, from the cities to the neo-rural scenarios promised by the mountains (Zanini 2016). However, the growing awareness that it is not only "highlanders by choice" that settle in the Alps but also "highlanders by necessity," pushed to the mountains by economic reasons rather than ideological ones, is now drawing attention to the significant role of foreign immigration (Bartaletti 2013; Machold, Dax and Strahl 2013; Membretti 2016; Membretti and Viazzo 2017).

Positive migratory balances with respect to abroad were recorded in the past decade almost everywhere in the Alps: on January 1st 2013, there was at least one resident foreign citizen in 98.2%

of the Italian Alpine municipalities. Most foreigners who migrate to the Alps come from other Italian municipalities, but often they come directly from abroad, usually through networks of fellow-countrymen who are already present in the places of arrival (Corrado, Dematteis and Di Gioia 2014). It is thus possibile to notice concentrations of certain nationalities in particular territories (which can be defined as "spaces of ethnicization") such as, in the Western Alps, the Chinese in the Pellice Valley (engaged in marble quarrying for tombstones) and the Romanians in the "Olympic Valleys"[7] near Turin (employed in the touristic sector of skiing) or, in the eastern Alps, the Macedonians of the Cembra Valley (employed in the porphyry working process). Among the main factors of attraction of foreigners to Alpine areas are: the availability of affordable housing (that allows the renting of vacant second homes in low mountainous and unattractive areas, as well as the renovation or even the purchase of old and poorly maintained houses in the historic centers of abandoned villages); the lower cost of living in rural areas than in metropolitan ones; the chance to escape the chaos of the metropolis (often foreign immigrants come originally from rural areas and seek similar contexts for themselves and to bring up their children); and of course the job opportunities on site or in nearby areas, which include pastoralism, agriculture, forestry and mining in the primary sector, crafts, small industry and construction in the secondary sector, as well as the tourist industry, cleaning and family care in the service sector (Membretti 2015).

According to data provided by ISTAT (the Italian Institute for Statistics) and by the Alpine Convention,[8] on January 1st 2014 the number of foreign residents in the 1,749 Italian Alpine municipalities amounted to about 350,000 people, almost equally divided between males and females and mostly coming from non EU countries (mainly from Eastern Europe, North Africa and Latin America): in the mountains, the incidence of foreigners in the total population is in line with the national average, or, in many cases, even higher. Indeed, according to calculations made by the National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI),[9] in 2013 the foreign residents in the mountain municipalities of northern Italy (excluding asylum seekers, as well as those illegally present) were nearly 400,000 (see Tab. 1). If we look at Italy as a whole, we find that 36.5% of foreign subjects have immigrant visas issued or renewed in the North-West of the country, in regions with substantial Alpine portions in their territories. Children account for a quarter of all foreign residents: this data is particularly significant in view of the pronounced aging of the Italian population, especially in mountain territories (CENSIS 2016).

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7   So called because they were the stage for many of the events of the Winter Olympic Games in 2006.
8   ISTAT and Alpine Convention 2014 (data reworked by the authors).
9   SNAI is the strategy implemented, at the national level, by Italian governments in the last years in order to support local development in remote rural territories, the so-called "inner areas". As already remarked above in note 3, in Italy these areas are mainly mountainous.

*Tab. 1 - Foreign residents in mountain municipalities of Northern Italy (regions with Alpine territories)*

| Region | Resident population | | | Foreign residents | | | Foreigners /100 residents | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female | Total |
| Piemonte | 369658 | 384821 | 754479 | 22876 | 28420 | 51296 | 6,19 | 7,39 | 6,8 |
| Val d'Aosta | 62564 | 65734 | 128298 | 3894 | 5181 | 9075 | 6,22 | 7,88 | 7,07 |
| Lombardia | 639873 | 661638 | 1301511 | 49375 | 54356 | 103731 | 7,72 | 8,22 | 7,97 |
| Trentino Alto Adige | 518348 | 537586 | 1055934 | 44660 | 51489 | 96149 | 8,62 | 9,58 | 9,11 |
| Veneto | 330551 | 346712 | 677263 | 25983 | 30102 | 56085 | 7,86 | 8,68 | 8,28 |
| Friuli Venezia Giulia | 238304 | 255482 | 493786 | 19734 | 20979 | 40713 | 8,28 | 8,21 | 8,25 |
| Liguria | 234047 | 248381 | 482428 | 16100 | 18776 | 34876 | 6,88 | 7,56 | 7,23 |
| **Total** | **2393345** | **2500354** | **4893699** | **182622** | **209303** | **391925** | **7,63** | **8,37** | **8,01** |

*Source: UNCEM (National Union of Mountain Communities - Italy); SNAI elaboration on ISTAT data (demographic balance, 31.12.2013)*

If "economic" immigration appears by now to have become a structural feature of Italian economy and society,[10] in recent years Italy has increasingly become a land of arrival also for new migration flows, mostly made up of people fleeing war, natural disasters or intolerable socio-political conditions: a point worth stressing is that the refugee phenomenon is more and more affecting mountain areas, as a result of national policies aiming at scattering this population outside metropolitan areas.[11] On January 1st 2015, the foreign immigrants officially present in Italy with a residence permit issued for humanitarian reasons, asylum or protection were 117,820 (100,138 males and 17,682 females); in October 2016, the overall estimate was in excess of 150.000 people.[12] As it is very difficult to make a realistic picture of the distribution of these subjects in the Italian Alpine municipalities, we can only quantify the presence of residence permits for humanitarian reasons in the regions which have Alpine areas: 24,053 in the North-West and 17,892 in North-East, for a total of 41,945 people with a large majority of males.[13]

With regard to the reception of these people, the analysis of good practices and the widespread opinion among stake-holders (Dematteis and Membretti 2016) point to a successful model of social inclusion (related to a mostly temporary but also, in some cases, more stable

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10 "Economic migrants" are part of a wider phenomenon of "poverty induced migration" (Membretti and Perlik, 2017), including legal and illegal working or jobless migrants and urban to rural working poor or jobless people who cannot afford life in the city. Poor people may move to upland regions to work seasonally in mountain economies (like agriculture or tourism), but also to find affordable dwelling (urban processes of gentrification and displacement push them towards the Alpine foothills, where real estate prices are lower).

11 It is worth noting that since the 1951 Convention, "NGOs and UNHCR have broadly followed the line that 'refugees are not migrants' as a means of protecting asylum space, despite a broad recognition that the line between a 'refugee' and a 'migrant' is often relatively arbitrary. However, the result is that a humanitarian discourse intended to protect refugees has in fact strengthened many states' restrictionist migration agendas, and prevented refugees being included within migration-development discourses" (Long 2013: 5).

12 Individuals with long-term visa, residence cards and unaccompanied minors are excluded from this count (ISTAT).

13 Stock data as of January 1st 2015 (ISTAT).

settlement of the refugees): this model is promoted by the SPRAR network (the Italian Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), structured (in 2014) at the national level into 432 projects, which have involved 381 local authorities (municipalities, unions of municipalities and other territorial bodies). Within this network, the activism of mountain villages – which have launched, especially in the North-West of the country, many hospitality projects – looks remarkable. With reference to the provinces of Northern Italy whose territory is at least partly Alpine, immigrants' overall stays in 2015 within the SPRAR system were 2,820, whereas in 2016 the places available in the system were 1,723 (it should be noted that every place can be occupied during the year by more than one person in turnover).[14]

If we consider only purely Alpine municipalities, we find that those belonging to the SPRAR system recorded in 2015 almost 800 appearances for asylum seekers, against a total availability of 473 places: in absolute terms, as well as in relation to the total number of arrivals, this figure is not very high, especially if we think of the wide availability of empty spaces and abandoned buildings in the Alps, in contexts often characterized by extreme social rarefaction. However, this is an interesting finding for at least two reasons: primarily because it indicates that the reception of refugees in the highlands is adding – in an increasingly structured way – to the historical phenomenon of "economic" migration; secondly, because the dynamism of Alpine municipalities in designing and implementing welcoming paths for refugees reveals intentions (and sometimes embryos of a strategy) envisaging a possible role for foreigners in the repopulation of territories in socio-economic crisis.

In order to discuss this potentiality, but also to pinpoint some critical aspects of the phenomenon, we will briefly present and analyze in the following sections two case-studies, located in Western Alps and chosen as representative of important differences in terms of resident foreign population (economic migrants/asylum seekers, nationality, socio-cultural aspects, process of settlement, etc.) and its impact on local society (self-segregation/resilience). Information  was collected in 2015/2016 trough personal interviews (with mayors and other institutional actors), direct observation (several spells of fieldwork in the autumn of 2015) and informal talks with local key-actors (migrants, association leaders, etc.).

**"Economic migrants" and "forced highlanders": the space of foreigners in two Alpine communities**

*Bagnolo Piemonte: ethnic economy and housing of a Chinese community*

Bagnolo Piemonte is a municipality in the province of Cuneo, in north-western Italy, at the foot of

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14 http://www.sprar.it/progetti-territoriali?sort_order=id+asc

the mountains crossed by the Grana creek. For several centuries one of the main economic activities of this area has been the extraction of a fine building stone (known as "Luserna stone"), even if some tourist attractions are also present and in recent decades have allowed a certain development of the village as a location for summer and winter holidays.

Out of a total population of 6,120 inhabitants, foreign residents are officially 822 (13.4%).[15] The largest immigrant community is the Chinese one, which consists of about 500 people all coming from the same district of the motherland and resident in Bagnolo long since: adult males are all employed in local quarries. With an evident "substitution effect," the Chinese have taken the place of Italian internal immigrants from Sardinia, who had arrived in this area in the 1970s, also attracted by job opportunities in the mining sector. The Sardinian miners had occupied the old houses of the historical center, partly restructuring them. Twenty years later, when the Sardinian community had already left the local mines in search of other employment opportunities, the same houses were rented by the Chinese (in the beginning all men), who have adapted to live in overcrowded and, often, degraded conditions.

With the passage of time, thanks to the gradual stabilization of their work position (today largely characterized by permanent contracts and, in some cases, by forms of independent entrepreneurship) and to the increase in available financial resources, a family reunification process has begun. With the arrival of women and children, the way of life of Chinese immigrants has been changing, especially as far as living arrangements are concerned: Chinese families are now looking for larger homes, more comfortable and located outside the historic center, in areas with new residential buildings. This settlement process, in its different stages, has exerted a significant impact on the local housing market, at first by allowing the reuse of old, long time vacant houses, and later by favoring the renting of the newer ones on the edge of the village, which had been erected in the years of the building boom of the late twentieth century and had subsequently proved overabundant in relation to the demand for accommodation from "historical" inhabitants.

Despite family reunification and a new focus of the Chinese on the housing dimension, however, in terms of social inclusion there remains a substantial separation between indigenous and immigrants: the Chinese community leads a parallel existence to that of the Italians, mainly structured along the home-quarry axis, with rare exchanges and relationships outside the work domain and, for the youngsters, the school environment. The fact that almost all the Chinese residents of Bagnolo, despite having sufficient economic resources, continue to resort to the rental market instead of turning to the real estate market, confirms their lack of investment in local rooting: the goal of those working in the quarries appears to be, for the vast majority of cases, to accumulate enough money before returning to China, where they will start a "real life."

15 ISTAT 2014.

In recent years, moreover, because of the effects of the global economic crisis on the mining economy, many Chinese people (often the young ones) are leaving the Piedmontese village to return to their country of origin, or to migrate to other places that may offer better job opportunities, thus emphasizing the temporary nature of their presence in the territory of this Alpine community.

*Pettinengo: hosting refugees as land-care providers*

Pettinengo is a small Alpine municipality in the province of Biella, also in north-western Italy: until a few years ago, it was economically characterized by the historical presence of a prosperous textile industry (knitwear factories), which offered plenty of local employment opportunities and had ensured for a long time the demographic vitality of the area. Over the past two decades, however, largely due to the gradual closure of all production plants, the territory has entered a deep socio-economic and identity crisis, highlighted, on the demographic side, by the persistence of a negative natural balance and a related process of aging of the population.

It is worth noting, on the other hand, that in the last decade net migration has been positive, primarily because of the arrival of foreign immigrants: today, out of 1,462 inhabitants,[16] resident foreigners are 70 (4.8% of the total population), mostly from sub-Saharan Africa and Romania. Even more sizable is, however, the number of asylum seekers, housed in the village thanks to the work of *PaceFuturo* (PeaceFuture), an NGO which has been founded in Pettinengo in 2001 and has since then been engaged in the cultural sector and in the social inclusion of "disadvantaged" people, focussing in recent years its activities on welcoming refugees.

Very attentive to the care of the territory, *PaceFuturo* has launched in 2008 the project *Sentieri, oggi e domani* (Pathways – yesterday, today and tomorrow): this initiative, undertaken in collaboration with the municipal administration and with the active involvement of the local community, is aimed at bringing back to life more than 10 kilometers of old "factory workers' paths" (the walkways that connected the farms and the larger neighborhoods of the village and were trodden by the peasant-workers to reach the sites of the now-abandoned factories) and in the meantime at valorizing the woods and the cultural landscape crossed by these pathways. The project goal is therefore to promote the responsible transformation of an area which is suffering a socio-economic and identity crisis by combining cultural growth, tourist development and social solidarity.

Since 2014 *PaceFuturo*, through an agreement with the prefecture of Biella, has offered hospitality to a group of applicants for international protection from Africa; in 2016 over one hundred refugees (almost all young males, from different nationalities) were hosted in Pettinengo,

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16 ISTAT 2014.

housed in buildings rescued from abandonment or previously underused. Most of these migrants have been progressively involved in the restoration of pathsways and rural architectural artifacts: they have been enrolled as members of the NGO and contribute, with volunteer work, to the care and maintenance of the territory. At the same time, immigrants are also active in cleaning the woods, in the collection of firewood (which is then delivered free of charge to the elderly inhabitants of the village) and in other socially useful activities such as clearing snow, or pruning in the parks.

Today *PaceFuturo*, thanks to its commitment in the reception of refugees, is the most important "company" of Pettinengo: indeed, about 30 people – all "historical" residents in the village and all hard-hit by the collapse of local production – are employed in various activities of management, entertainment, education and support addressed to foreigners (including Italian language and textiles courses, beekeeping and pottery classes, etc.), as part of an initiative whose explicit goal is to use the arrival of foreigners as a lever to revitalize the whole area.

**Treating the Alps as a common good: the importance of negotiation between old and new highlanders**

Historically, migration to the Alps from the surrounding plains has not been substantial: since at least the late Middle Ages the opening of Alpine communities to the outside was rather the outcome of a circulation of people, ideas and commodities across the Alpine space and even more of massive seasonal emigrations that could lead Alpine workforce even to distant European countries as far away as Spain, England or Russia (Viazzo 2009). Very frequently open to innovation, mainly resulting from their relationship with the external Alpine and urban world and especially spurred by returning emigrants, Alpine communities were on the other hand usually closed from a demographic point of view. If it is true that no people is born Alpine – as the historian Luigi Zanzi used to repeat, "they all made themselves highlanders" through processes of adaptation to high altitudes (Zanzi 2004: 153) – it is no less true that today's upwards migration represents a significant novelty for the Italian Alps, because of the numbers that characterize it, the speed at which it is taking place and its internal diversification. The new inhabitants of the Alps range, in fact, from mostly Italian "new highlanders" escaping from the cities and seeking alternative ways of life to refugees and foreign "economic migrants," passing though a variety of other kinds of newcomers including pensioners going back to their place of origin and commuters who settle in foothill towns or villages but work in nearby metropolitan areas.

Foreign immigrants are making a significant contribution to this process of repeopling of the Italian Alps.The data we possess show, in the first place, that they are by no means all "forced

highlanders": at least 350,000 of them (the "economic migrants", who have often been living for years in mountain communities) have to some extent chosen – even though it has often been a choice dictated by necessity – to live and work in the Alpine areas, attracted by the availability of local resources: primarily housing and jobs, but also better socio-environmental conditions than in urban areas and a lower cost of living. The data also tell us that a high proportion of them come from areas that are geographically and culturally very distant from the Alps, such as North Africa and Latin America. Finally, we know that the recent influx of refugees is bringing into Alpine communities growing numbers of foreigners (mostly males from Africa and the Middle East), whose temporary presence is adding to the more stably settled "economic migrants".

In these respects, the two case studies that have been sketchily outlined reveal some points in common between them, but also an essential difference. Both in Bagnolo and Pettinengo the cultural distance of the foreigners (Chinese and Africans, respectively) from the "historical inhabitants" they have encountered in the contexts of arrival is clear. In both cases, the foreigners' impact on housing, in terms of renewal or reutilization of abandoned or underused buildings, is also evident. Not least, in both cases there is a definite economic impact related to the foreign presence, in response to local needs of manpower with special skills (Bagnolo) or as employment opportunities that are created for local inhabitants and stem from the management of welcoming projects (Pettinengo).

Home and work, however, do not automatically produce social inclusion, let alone intercultural dialectics between immigrants and natives, even if the settlement of foreigners is of long standing: on the contrary, secure access to these basic resources can paradoxically foster a self-closure of the new inhabitants whenever significant larger scale relationships fail to develop. The case of the Chinese community in Bagnolo confirms the relevance of "empty spaces" (in terms of both available jobs and unused buildings) as factors of attraction for immigrants, but the outcome was the creation of an "ethnic niche," with a palpable socio-cultural separation from the historically resident community. The difference between the two cases is neatly brought to light by the immigrants' relationship with the territory: in Pettinengo, refugees are involved by the NGO *PaceFuturo* in many activities aimed at safeguarding a cultural landscape which is emotionally treasured by the residents but is progressively falling into a state of abandonment owing to population aging, the emigration of young people and the prevalence of manufacturing activities over the agricultural and forestry sector. An object of care and at the same time the domain of both physical and social re-production, the territory of Pettinengo comes up as a meeting ground for the newcomers and the pre-existing population: through its daily maintenance and the valorization of those features in the territory that are most significant for the identity of the local population,

foreign immigrants get therefore involved in a negotiation of meanings with the residents and with the historical memory of the village, inscribed in the places and in the artifacts that mark them.

Precisely the emergence of this process of negotiation raises questions about who might or should be considered a "highlander", the witness and promoter of a certain cultural identity. The issue is complex and delicate. Especially in the anthropological literature, cases are well attested of newcomers who prove far more active than the old inhabitants in keeping alive and reproduce, not always without tension or conflict, traditions of which they claim to be heirs: however, they are usually Italian "highlanders by choice", with definite life-projects with respect to their settlement in the mountains (Viazzo 2012b: 191-93; Bertolino 2014; Turroni 2017). One may wonder whether foreign immigrants (either "economic" migrants or refugees) can be equally interested  in taking charge of this cultural continuity, since they are unlikely to be driven and enthused in the same measure by the fascination exerted by the symbolic aspects of traditional heritage: they can rather be expected to  fluctuate between camouflage and innovation, between conflict and negotiation. On the other hand, one might more radically ask those who fear the risks the new peopling would entail for the survival of Alpine traditions whether cultural continuity is always desirable. Again, anthropological studies (Bravo 2005; Viazzo and Bonato 2013: 18-25) have demonstrated that these traditions are often a modern invention and, largely, an urban product: to what extent, then, does it make sense to insist on their necessary preservation? To whom, and to what, are these traditions functional today? To what extent, one migh also ask, do present-day challenges require instead innovation, and therefore cultural creativity and resilience? And who can bring innovation, if not, first of all, "strangers"?

In her book *A Negotiated World: Three Centuries of Change in a French Alpine Community*, mentioned at the beginning of this article, Harriet Rosenberg (1988) demostrated that Alpine villages which in the 1960s were no more than depopulated, economically backward and politically passive peripheries, had been able in the past to thrive economically and to negotiate their local policies with the central powers. One major effect of the current process of repopulation if that the Alps are becoming again a "world to be negotiated", *between* the Alpine communities and the outside as well as *within* the communities themselves, in view of the diversification that is increasingly characterizing these communities and their populations. Since both ecosystemic reasons and general social interest are today more and more suggesting that the Alps should be considered a common good – the object of multiple negotiations – then the question "whose Alps are those?" must shift its focus from ownership to use: it becomes of the utmost importance to ascertain who is actually taking care of these territories, or who may do so under certain conditions, in order to reproduce (and, to a certain degree, transform) a cultural landscape which is the outcome

of centuries of anthropization and is now at risk of quickly disappearing. From proprietary individualism, it seems more appropriate and urgent than ever to move to an approach centered on the actual use that is made of these common goods and their management with social and productive purposes. What John Emmeus Davis (2010: 4) has called "an ethic of stewardship, in which land is treated as a common heritage," appears therefore consistent with an open attitude to immigration and the new peopling of the highlands. It is crucial, however, that the new inhabitants, both Italians and foreigners, are directed and accompanied towards a care of the territory and that this work of care is shared with the natives. There can be little doubt that this sharing, which may foreshadow the traits of a place-based governance, will decisively rely on the negotiation between the actors involved, all the more so if they come from socio-cultural contexts which are very distant from each other.

Much remains to be learned, however, about the "margins of maneouvre" that are allowed for negotiations between different categories of inhabitants in mountain regions. A recent anthropological study of changes and continuities in pastoral economies in a cluster of valleys in the western Italian Alps has shown that the actual or potential role of "new highlanders" largely depends on local socio-political configurations and may be subject to several structural constraints (Fassio *et al.* 2014). Although the institutional background appears to be largely the same across the Italian Alps, fine-grained investigation reveals that the policies adopted by different municipalities may nevertheless vary as a result of local debates and compromises (Bailey 1973), and indicates that these variations may in turn significantly affect the chances of prospective new inhabitants to settle in the highlands. In the specific case examined by this study, the exclusivist emphasis placed by some municipalities on the residents' preemption rights in agro-pastoral resources is the main reason why livestock farming continues to be practiced only by local families, or by "new highlanders" who have grafted themselves through marriage onto these families. Immigration of herders or shepherds from outside is severely hindered, or indeed virtually prevented. The situation looks quite different in neighboring municipalities which have adopted more open and welcoming policies.

This is just a tiny example. Yet, this small-scale divergence between adjacent valleys or municipalities bears intriguing similarities with the much larger scale contrast between the structurally closed communities of the Swiss and especially Austrian Alps and the more open communal structures of the Italian Alps, whose significance has long been underlined (Viazzo 1989: 258-85; Mathieu 1998: 129-48). This suggests, on the one hand, that a multi-scalar approach is required that pays attention both to the micro-variations ethnographic investigation is especially apt to pinpoint and to regional and macro-regional differences. No less importantly, it also points to the

need for comparative research that extends to the rest of the Alpine space the exploration of the cultural and social structural features of the processes of migration and negotiation dealt with in this article.

Comparative analysis should actually be extended not just to the whole Alpine space, but in a broader perspective to other European upland areas, where repopulation is also underway. After all, we have just be reminded by Jon Mathieu (2016) that Fernand Braudel once famously wrote that historically the Alps are in many ways "une montagne exceptionnelle" – an exceptional range of mountains (Braudel 1975: 33). Was Braudel's remark pertinent? And if it was, which were the causes and which the effects? Mathieu is urging his fellow historians to put Braudel's bold argument to the test as far as the past is concerned. It seems no less important and timely for anthropologists and sociologists to turn to the present and look at commonalities and differences between the Alps and the other mountainous areas of Europe when it comes to repopulation, foreign immigration and cultural change.

The results of research conducted in other European mountain areas do indeed suggest that such a comparative exploration is likely to prove fruitful. As we have seen, there are scholars working on the Alps who have warned against the risks cultural heritage may run because of population inflows (Steinicke *et al*. 2015; Bender and Kanitscheider 2012). Focusing especially on amenity migrants and tourists, some studies have argued that the urban or even foreign origin of "outlanders" can pose a threat to local cultures, as they might consecrate as "authentic" a set of lifestyles and values that are alien to the local traditional context. Yet, it would seem that the penetration of urban lifestyles and the commodification of locality need not end up in the annihilation of local traditions and cultures. On the contrary, the local culturescape might be rejuvenated in mutually creative processes that bring together local old timers, new residents, and tourists alike. The heterogeneous "outlanders," with their professional and existential projects, may emerge as promoters of territorial and socio-cultural transformations that are capable of overcoming local tendencies to self-referential isolation.

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