

**Highlanders “by birth”, “by choice”,
“by need” and “by force”:
political and social-structural
variables across the Alpine space**

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The reasons of a subtitle (I): social-structural factors and population growth in the Alps, 1750-1850

Nearly thirty years ago I published a book on environment, population and social structure in the Alps from the sixteenth to the late twentieth century, and one of its main findings was that differences in social structure were to a very large extent responsible for the markedly different rates of population growth recorded in various parts of the Alpine space between approximately 1750 and 1850.

An especially striking contrast was provided by the upland regions of Switzerland and Austria: the argument was that factors ranging from inheritance patterns and the degree of structural openness of local communities to marked political differences at the state level had been instrumental in accelerating or braking potential population growth. (Growth, incidentally, was much faster in Switzerland: see next slide.)

A decade later, the Swiss historian Jon Mathieu confirmed from a partly different perspective that the Alpine space was partitioned into different social-structural worlds. He also alerted to the danger of focusing on the Alpine space only and forgetting that the various sectors of the Alpine crescent were part of nation-states whose different formations processes and socio-political structures could exert a decisive influence on what was going on in their Alpine more or less peripheral regions.

- Pier Paolo Viazzo, 1989. *Upland Communities. Environment, Population and Social Structure in the Alps since the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Jon Mathieu, 1998. *Geschichte der Alpen 1500-1900. Umwelt, Entwicklung, Gesellschaft*, Wien, Böhlau.

<i>Population growth in Austria and Alpine Switzerland 1700-1850</i>						
Year	Alpine Switzerland		Non-Alpine Austria		Alpine Austria	
	Population	<i>r</i>	Population	<i>r</i>	Population	<i>r</i>
1700	408,000		725,000		1,395,000	
		1.3		5.2		2.8
1800	466,000		1,216,000		1,848,000	
		5.5		7.4		2.8
1850	614,000		1,758,000		2,122,000	
Note: <i>r</i> is the annual growth rate per thousand.						

The reasons of a subtitle (2): social-structural factors and differential depopulation in the Alps, 1850-1990

Another major point I made in my 1989 book was that between approximately 1850 and the late twentieth century very substantial differences between different sectors of the Alps could be observed in the rate of depopulation.

The exodus looked far more massive in the French and Italian Alps than in the Swiss and especially the Austrian Alps – and again these differences appeared to be amenable to differences in social structure both at the local and supra-local level.

The reasons of a subtitle (3): social-structural factors and differential repopulation in the Alps, 1990-2017

I will now jump forward twenty years, to 2009, when I was asked by the Italian Ministry of Environment to serve as President of the *Working Group of the Alpine Convention on demography and employment*.

Strange as it may seem now, only eight years ago the phenomenon of the new highlanders had been hardly noticed by many Alpine Convention people. When I suggested that this had to be one of the major issues to be addressed by the Working Group, my proposal was met with perplexity, but it was eventually put on the agenda.

The impression I received (also from more superficial involvement with other projects – e.g. DEMOCHANGE) was:

- that processes of re-population again differed markedly in their ways and size between the various parts of the Alps;
- that again a mixture of social-structural factors working at both the local (municipal) and supra-local level were/are proving decisive.

▪ WG Demography and Employment of the Alpine Convention (2012), *Preliminary Paper to the XI Alpine Conference* (pp. 132).

WG Demography: Recommendations

In one of the last meetings of the Working Group we had in Turin, there was much discussion about differences in the very notion of citizenship in the various parts of the Alps, and it was agreed that this line of comparative enquiry had to be pursued, as stated in the recommendations (pp. 97-98) which conclude the (long) preliminary report produced in 2012.

The evidence collected and systematized by the WG also strongly suggests that behind the naked figures which measure the declining or growing number of inhabitants or even the structural ageing of the Alpine population hide compositional changes. An all-important issue is represented by the compositional changes many upland communities are experiencing in their ranks owing to the “immigration” of new inhabitants, generally younger than the majority of the local population, mostly coming from the lower reaches of the Alps or indeed from the cities in the plains, and quite often also from afar. Needless to say, these compositional changes must be especially pronounced in those areas where population is growing in spite of a negative or at best stationary natural balance of births and deaths. But even in those municipalities where the number of inhabitants is falling there are such flows of immigration.

Although studies are still few and far between, there seems to be evidence that quite often these “new highlanders” are those who are most active in finding ways to revamp local economies. Somewhat paradoxically, these newcomers may also be those who are keenest to defend and revitalise local traditions and cultures and to promote a revival of local craftsmanship as part of a more general attempt to preserve the cultural heritage and strengthen local identities. Quite often they are, in a word, those who try to devise and promote “good practices” from below, possibly blending tradition and creativity. This largely novel socio-demographic phenomenon – a still largely unknown quantity which is nevertheless likely to play an important role in the future development in the Alpine region – must be better measured and understood through a collection and sifting of the available studies which requires a more delicate analysis than has been possible in the time span allowed to the WG.

▪WG Demography and Employment of the Alpine Convention (2012), *Preliminary Paper to the XI Alpine Conference* (pp. 132).

Highlanders “by choice”

The subsequent work that led to the writing and publication of RSA5 took (Alpine Convention 2015) a more conventionally statistical direction.

→ ALPINE CONVENTION, 2015. – *Demographic Changes in the Alps. The Fifth Report on the State of the Alps*, Innsbruck, Permanent Secretariat of the Alpine Convention.

However, in the meantime the processes of re-population, or re-settlement, of the Alps have received much attention, and especially in Italy a term has become very popular, namely *montanari per scelta* (highlanders by choice) as distinguished from, or possibly opposed to:

- *montanari per nascita* (highlanders by birth)
- *montanari per necessità* (highlanders by need)

New highlanders: intra-Alpine differences

- It is no accident that the book that has mostly contributed to popularise this “label” (Dematteis 2011) is focused on the Italian Western Alps.
- As remarked by Bender and Kanitscheider (2012, terms like “new immigration”, “new inhabitants” or “new highlanders” have been coined to describe phenomena which have surfaced at first in the French Alps 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.

- Giuseppe Dematteis (ed.), 2011. *Montanari per scelta. Indizi di rinascita nella montagna piemontese*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- Oliver Bender, Sigrun Kanitscheider, 2012. “New immigration into the European Alps : emerging research issues”, *Mountain Research and Development*, 32, pp. 235-241.

Taking advantage from emptiness?

- Along with Roberta Zanini, I have advanced the hypothesis (borrowed from Cognard 2006), that depopulation, however disastrous in many ways, might nevertheless pave the way to opposite dynamics of repopulation and economic recovery by leaving “empty spaces” which new inhabitants are 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.
- One might therefore surmise 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.

- P.P. Viazzo, R.C. Zanini (2014). ““Taking Advantage of Emptiness”? Anthropological Perspectives on Mountain Repopulation and Spaces of Cultural Creativity in the Alpine Area”, *Revue de Géographie Alpine / Journal of Alpine Research*, 102-3.
- F. Cognard (2006). “Le rôle des recompositions sociodémographiques dans les nouvelles dynamiques rurales: l'exemple du Diois”, *Méditerranée* 107.

Variable scopes for choice?

- Although a multiplicity of potential causes lie behind Alpine “differential depopulation” in the twentieth century, a crucial role has apparently 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 presumably not produced those “empty spaces” which are a distinctive feature of the western Alps.
- It would also seem 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: **can we deduce that becoming a “highlander by choice” should therefore be easier in the French and Italian Alps than in Austria and Switzerland?**

Large- and small scale contrasts

- The rather unexpected results of recent investigations conducted in the Italian Western Alps on the role of the family in mountain pastoralism (Fassio et al. 2014) have revealed a small-scale contrast between adjacent valleys which bears intriguing similarities with the much larger-scale one between the structurally more closed communities of the Eastern Alps and the more open communal structures of the Western Alps, whose significance has long been noted (Mathieu 1998).
- Since it can only be observed through detailed local analysis, it is often overlooked. Yet it can significantly affect access to communal resources, which may prove crucial to the success of pastoral enterprises (in this specific case). More generally, it can favour or severely hamper the settlement of new highlanders.
- Giulia Fassio, Luca M. Battaglini, Valentina Porcellana, Pier Paolo Viazzo, 2014. “The Role of the Family in Mountain Pastoralism – Change and Continuity. Ethnographic Evidence from the Western Italian Alps”, *Mountain Research and Development*, 34, pp. 336-343.
- Jon Mathieu, 1998. *Geschichte der Alpen 1500-1900. Umwelt, Entwicklung, Gesellschaft*, Wien, Böhlau.

New highlanders “by force”: how do political and social structural factors affect their reception?

As we have seen, there is a tendency, at least in Italy:

- to equate “new highlanders” with “highlanders by choice”;
- to oppose “highlanders by choice” to highlanders “by birth” on the one hand, and to highlanders “by need” on the other.

However, it has been objected that highlanders by birth may well be highlanders by choice if they decide to stay in the mountains. And also that highlanders “by need” (economic migrants) may well exert agency (choice) when moving to the Alps.

The contraposition is obviously even stronger between highlanders by choice and the new category of (mostly temporary) highlanders “by force”, the refugees.

Final questions:

- How and to what extent do political and local social-structural factors affect their reception across the Alpine space?
- Does the “differential emptiness” of the different sectors of the Alps matter?

Need for comparisons and sharing of experiences within the Alpine space

When issues concerning the reception of refugees in Italian mountain areas have been discussed, comparisons have been attempted only between uplands and lowlands, or – still very tentatively – between the Italian Alps and the Apennines.

Comparisons between the various sectors of the Alpine crescent are lacking and badly needed.

This is why we are here.