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How and why to study mountains: topics and types of research between limits and opportunities

This is a pre print version of the following article:

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/2029330> since 2024-11-03T10:39:56Z

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UNIVERSITA' DEGLI STUDI DI NAPOLI FEDERICO II

DIPARTIMENTO DI SCIENZE SOCIALI

Attestato

La Prof-ssa Laura Bonato dell'Università degli studi di Torino - Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature straniere e Culture moderne, ha presentato nello scorso mese di ottobre alla redazione scientifica della rivista di fascia A EtnoAntropologia il saggio in lingua inglese intitolato "How and why to study mountains: topics and types of research between limits and opportunities".

Reso anonimo e sottoposto a revisione effettuata, come da regola, da due studiosi, anche essi anonimi, il contributo è stato valutato positivamente come evincibile dalle schede di referaggio conservate dalla redazione.

Si attesta quindi che il menzionato saggio sarà accolto e pubblicato su EtnoAntropologia nel n° 2 – 2024, attualmente in composizione e in uscita nel prossimo mese di dicembre.

In fede

Napoli 1 novembre 2024

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How and why to study mountains: topics and types of research between limits and opportunities

Abstract: Field practice in a neighbouring ethnographic context - both culturally and geographically -, of which the researcher is a part, entails specific difficulties, epistemological and practical problems quite different from those faced by classical anthropology. Based on the experience gained in three different projects involving the western Alpine arc over the last decade, we intend to highlight the fact that in some contexts it is appropriate to prefer 'peripheral' anthropological research, less localised and based on shorter stays. The research conducted in the Piedmontese highlands, despite their differences in terms of assumptions and concretisation, in fact highlights the predominant thematic strands through which mountains are studied in this area.

Keywords: research methodology; marginal areas; mountain policies; environmental resources; cultural entrepreneurship.

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Doing research "on the mountain" and "in the mountains": it is not a question of prepositions but of different intentions, motivations and outcomes. In the first case, it is a matter of «analysing and deepening the specificities of the complex mountain reality as a whole, focusing on some of its aspects» [Puttilli 2012: 36]; in the second, the mountain reality is considered only as the context in which the object of study is set. By analyzing below three different projects involving the Western Alps in the last decade, I intend to remind that fieldwork, «a mixture of research practices with particular characteristics of depth, extension and interaction» [Clifford 1999: 72], represents the specificity of anthropology, the element that ensures its legitimacy: far from being a simple research technique, it is still the basic training experience for anthropologists. Ethnography can unfold in different ways – from intensive to extensive investigation to the blended mode –, it can be based on assiduous, repeated frequentation rather than intensive residence, as the classical ethnographic method intended: in any case, even if we do not observe the spatial practice of staying, of taking up residence in a community, the researcher's movement can be "in" and "out", their coming and going systematically. The cases presented here emphasise that conducting research in an ethnographic context close to oneself – both culturally and geographically –, of which the researcher is a part, entails specific difficulties, epistemological and practical problems quite different from those faced by classical anthropology. And then the stresses coming from the current political, cultural and economic conditions impose a rethinking of fieldwork: the range of possible research sites has widened and anthropology itself «moves within somewhat vague and guarded boundaries, using strategies of hybridisation and re-utilisation, of assimilation and exclusion» [Clifford 1999: 81]. This seems to make intensive field research practice unnecessary in some cases in favour of "peripheral", less localised anthropological research based on shorter stays. For some years now, we have observed a tendency to forego exotic ethnography in favour of domestic observation: there is a "repatriation" of anthropology, a return home, a propensity to deal more and more with the anthropologist's own societies and cultures of origin. The "domestic" ethnographic research, which often implies a methodological strategy of the long round, can be no less fruitful and no less "real" than the intensive one with "the tent in the middle of the village". It was already known that "the longest tour" – whose main objective is to bring out a network of connections between the multiple and diversified

realisations of humanity [Remotti 1990] –, «does not belong to everyone and, in any case, cannot be exercised as a reserve of method for those many neo-intellectuals of popular traditions [...] many times engaged in a precious substitution of institutions» [Grimaldi 2000: XII]. According to Remotti [1990], the longer the tour, the more articulate the discourse on man becomes, and the more willing to incorporate the various facets of human reality. On the other hand, the “short turn” is the one travelled by every society that inevitably comes up with some notion of man. In doing so, however – one must not forget this – it always thinks, however, and in some way, of others.

1. Research Themes and Methodologies

I will now briefly give an account of three different research projects conducted in the Piedmont highlands which, despite their differences in assumptions and concretisation, in fact highlight what are the predominant thematic strands through which mountains are studied in this area.

Cultural Heritage: E.Ch.I.

In recent decades in our country, the set of facts referable to popular and local traditions has presented itself as a congeries of phenomena of revitalisation and continuity, of rediscovery and reinvention. These elements of culture belong to the subset defined as demoethnoanthropological cultural assets (DEA), which includes the products of everyday life, work, relating to the domestic and ritual dimension, constructed and transmitted on the basis of a set of knowledge, skills, beliefs and techniques. And anthropology has increasingly devoted itself to the study and valorisation of such goods, not only material but also (and perhaps even more) immaterial assets: festivals, memories, local knowledge, etc. The project *E.C.H.I., Etnografie italo-svizzere per la valorizzazione del patrimonio immateriale (Italo-Swiss Ethnographies for the valorisation of the intangible heritage)*, started in 2009 and concluded in spring 2013, was born with the aim of surveying, recovering and valorising the intangible cultural heritage, the protection of which is one of the main objectives of contemporary cultural policies. It involved the cross-border Alpine regions between Italy and Switzerland: Valle d’Aosta, Canton Valais, Piedmont, Canton Ticino, Lombardy, Canton Grisons and the Province of Bolzano.

The investigation of the Piedmont task¹ force focused on the two largest valleys in the eastern part of the region, Valsesia and Val d’Ossola, which show traits of particular interest due to the presence of German-speaking minorities (walser) and a history of environmental adaptations and migrations that has produced a multiplicity of local differences and often the emergence of social and cultural boundaries even within the same community. In addition to the classic and more established fieldwork techniques, the research experience has been enriched with other tools for the investigation and involvement of local populations, from focus groups to the elaboration of community maps, while enabling the design of a computerized fact sheet capable of providing a real, concrete document that can be used by a variety of users.

The objective of the research, in addition to acquiring greater knowledge of the Alpine reality in Piedmont, was above all to communicate, to disseminate this same knowledge.

The fieldwork required the researchers to remain on site in order to interact with the local community, in the certainty that the collection, cataloguing, protection and promotion of DEA assets do not only involve “insiders” but concern the entire local population: in fact, they are a set of resources that positively qualify the territory, its products and the inhabitants themselves, contributing to its cultural, social and economic development. In their construction of value, intangible demoethno-anthropological assets are linked to the territory in which they come to life: in this sense,

¹ The Piedmont task force saw the joint efforts of the regional administration, the Cultural Heritage Enhancement and Promotion Sector, and the then Department of Anthropological, Archaeological and Historical-Territorial Sciences of the University of Turin, in the persons of Pier Paolo Viazzo and the writer. The research team also included Lia Zola, Giulia Fassio, Roberta Zanini and Alessia Glielmi; as well as Marianna Bertolino, Carlotta Colombatto, Alice Servi and Nicola Colajanni, who worked on the cataloguing of the assets surveyed in the area.

the territory is a sort of warehouse, a repository, which contains the cultural “stocks” on which the community draws.

Belongings, emigration, memory, ceremoniality, knowledge and know-how, local history and economy are the elements that define the different heritage strategies implemented by the communities examined.

Important points of reference for research in the field, as they have material evidence, news and images concerning the surrounding area and the groups that have settled there, have been the ecomuseums. A documentation, research and communication project involving the territory on which it is located, the ecomuseum is an institution that promotes the life of the local population, collects its memories, documents its history and transformations, problems and current conditions of existence, organises and plans; as far as DEA heritage is concerned, it stimulates investigation beyond the agro-pastoral and pre-industrial world, towards industrial production, contemporary institutions and the environment [Bravo, Tucci 2006]. The ecomuseum represents the life of a territory and its heritage and is increasingly configuring itself as an important resource for cultural tourism, a sector of primary importance in our country and one that is registering continuous growth stimulated by the change in tourism models, increasingly oriented towards shorter and more frequent stays during which people seek experiences that involve intellectually and emotionally.

When it comes to working on intangible cultural assets spread across the territory, one finds oneself working on a composite category of testimonies that cannot be readily related to a tangible production and artefact, on a heritage that is complex and fragile at the same time for two reasons that are – paradoxically – diametrically opposed: on the one hand, these assets can tend to be abandoned, forgotten; on the other, they can be revitalised, reinterpreted, re-proposed and made the subject of communication and promotion by social actors interacting in the area and investigating, interpreting, elaborating and proposing elements of the local tradition for communication. These initiatives, «important and very demanding, involving [...] energy, time, sometimes expense, generally on a voluntary basis» [Bravo 2004: 41], are the manifest expression of the revival of local cultures and identities. Often, these activities are part of scientific projects promoted by international organisations, such as UNESCO, regional, provincial and municipal administrations, and research bodies, and involve reflections and tasks related to recognition, census, protection and archiving precisely in the perspective, mentioned above, of making heritage accessible. Safeguarding therefore means making an asset available for community use and thus the object of communication.

Environmental Resources: M.A.S.K.A.

With a view to observing and documenting new sustainable practices in the mountains, which need encouragement not so much in a productivist direction as in the maintenance of the cultural landscape, the project *Marginal Areas. Sustainability and Know-how in the Alps* (M.A.S.K.A.)² project, whose objective was to document some examples of possible responses to the concept of marginal lands, evaluating their merits and limits, and to collaborate with existing realities in the Piedmontese Alps, also attempting to coordinate residual initiatives of individual operators by bringing them together in an overall project supported by the entire community. In consideration of the fact that each territory is a heritage that includes memories, facts, relations, values, identifying its typical features is the first step to be taken with a view to a promotion and development strategy; implementing policies aimed at the protection and enhancement of Alpine landscapes that are well elaborated and communicated are better able to attract resources, starting with tourism, and to present an image, a brand, to external centres of power, that benefits all productive activity but also local cultural initiatives.

Through concrete actions, the M.A.S.K.A. project set out to provide some local realities, which for some years have been trying to reintroduce different types of vegetable cultivation, with the

² The research (2015-2017), for which the writer was responsible, was funded by the Compagnia di San Paolo (CSP) within the framework of the “Call for the funding of University research projects - year 2014”. The research team included Giampiero Lombardi, Lia Zola, Maria Anna Bertolino, Teresa Biondi.

necessary tools for the reconversion of marginal lands into productive areas, making it possible to reuse uncultivated lands or lands that have been subjected to the advancement of the forest area, thus reactivating both the economic and the cultural and territorial chain. In the areas of the Piedmont Alps still characterised by depopulation phenomena, initiatives such as this can generate new practices for a more balanced and sustainable growth. In the areas surveyed, we established relevant relations with local social actors, associations and companies operating in the recovery of abandoned crops, specifically hemp, lavender and rye.

The areas under investigation in this project, located on a geographical continuum extending from the Cottian Alps to the Maritime Alps, still represent 'depopulation regions' in comparison to the rest of the Alpine arc: in particular, in contrast to the rest of Europe, the metropolitan region of Turin is the only one in the Perialpine area that has not grown for many years. The valleys being researched - Susa, Cenischia and Gesso - are areas that from an anthropological point of view have enjoyed both a great deal and very little attention. Anthropological studies have highlighted and analysed aspects relating to ritual and festive practices; recently, some researchers have drawn attention to the problem of depopulation, however, the issue of 'marginal' lands had not enjoyed the attention it deserves until the project began. Some of the actions that M.A.S.K.A. proposed to implement were: a) the construction of development scenarios at a territorial level: in particular, it aimed at documenting, observing and supporting the realities that were already active, giving them the necessary tools to carry forward the systematic points that already existed in each of these and that until then had not had the possibility of finding valid support; b) the strengthening of internal and external networking: specifically, the research tended towards the establishment of a network between the existing realities that would put them in communication both among themselves, so that they could share and make use of their heritage of knowledge and practices, and with the outside world. To this end, we organised training courses - coordinated by an agro-ecological, agro-engineering management, land and environment research expert - aimed at bridging the "grey area" of knowledge relating to the cultivation of cereals and medicinal plants, during which the origin, spread and economic importance of the various crops, their botany, biology, cultivation requirements, cultivation techniques, variety selection, harvesting and possible processing were dealt with.

The fieldwork to collect, study and valorise the realities researched by the M.A.S.K.A. project made it possible to investigate forms of associationism linked to the themes of agriculture and sustainability. In some cases, these are associations whose members are young people or "new inhabitants" who have chosen to move to the mountains: their numerical contribution is certainly minimal, but it is significant in socio-cultural and economic terms [Pettenati 2012].

There is now evidence that a process of return to the mountains is taking place that cannot simply be recognized as counter-urbanization - even in view of the fact that the mountains can compete with the city only from the point of view of the environment but not of services - but that highlights new ways of inhabiting and using the land, new lifestyles, revitalization of various economic activities; communities themselves are being renewed on the basis of arrivals and relationships between old and new inhabitants. This recent migration, which in the Italian Alps took place somewhat later than in the European context, and drew an uneven picture, delineated above all by territorial differences, is defined by Cognard [2006] as a "rural renaissance" and interrupts an emigration flow that, at least as far as Piedmont is concerned, had lasted for more than a century [Bender, Kanitscher 2012]. Specifically, the one in the Susa Valley can be interpreted - in part - in terms of amenity migration, fundamental «for the revitalisation and revitalisation of peripheral settlements» [Löffler et al. 2015: 284], obviously with the appropriate caution. Aware of neglecting various interpretations of this complex phenomenon, I will limit myself to recalling Lawrence Moss's [2006] definition of amenity migration as a move to peripheral, predominantly mountainous or depopulated places, deemed by the "migrant" - who moves there to reside permanently, seasonally or intermittently - to offer a better environmental quality of life and cultural differentiation.

The absence of the economic dimension in this type of migration, as far as our area of investigation is concerned, perhaps leads us to consider it more appropriate to speak of neo-ruralism, which outlines

a situation of new opportunities both for forms of production (and consumption) and for “marginal” systems that can not only recover from their disadvantage but prove to be more dynamic and capable of adapting to new scenarios [Corti 2007]. Neo-ruralism is not based on the dichotomy flight from the city/attraction to the countryside/mountains but on the perception of the various possibilities from the point of view of occupation and living arrangements. The new inhabitants of the investigated valleys are not all neo-mountain dwellers: it would be wrong to attribute «to anyone who moves to the mountains the intention to undertake activities, precisely, of a rural nature. Neo-mountain dweller does not necessarily mean neo-rural and specularly a case of new ruralism does not automatically imply that one is in mountain territories» [Zanini 2015: 38]. Nevertheless, it can be said that the new inhabitants seek to invest in a sustainable economic system. In the case of M.A.S.K.A., the concept of sustainability was translated into the reconversion of marginal land into productive areas through the cultivation of medicinal herbs and other plants, with a view to more food obtained with less resources. Sustainable development is normally recognised as the outcome of those human activities that use the resources of certain territories to increase the quality of life.

The concrete actions that the project set out to implement – and that it has carried out – have highlighted the advantages of the sustainable production system: in fact, development can be considered sustainable if it meets the needs of the current local population without compromising those of future generations; its objective is to counter depopulation processes by stimulating professional employment and equal opportunities. In terms of rural development, territorial innovation must be considered and associated with sustainable development, with the reorganisation and pooling of territories and the strengthening of internal and external communication networks that can lead to territorial competitiveness and economic development. With this in mind, significant results have been achieved with regard to the establishment of a solid network between existing realities that puts them in communication both with each other, so that they can share and make use of their heritage of knowledge and practices, and with the outside world.

To raise awareness of the disappearance of certain traditional crops and their recovery within the M.A.S.K.A. project project, an ethnographic film was made for dissemination and didactic purposes entitled *ColtivAzione*, in which the situation that emerges – with respect to the recovery of the crops examined, i.e. lavender, hemp and rye – bears witness to a changing but “leopard-spot” landscape-cultural framework: in fact, it is possible to observe a series of different ways and practices of recovering agricultural and craft activities, almost all of which are activated by a family-based entrepreneurial spirit or sometimes even linked to local associations and groups. Some of these activities have already been underway for some time and others are still at an early stage, but taken together they have already given rise to a new use of the land and its possible “fruits”, both in the direction of what appears to be a recovery of tradition but which in reality proves instead to be a new form of “culture of cultivation” linked to its practices, and especially to youth entrepreneurship, which changes the perspective of the lifestyle of those engaged in these new trades by encouraging a return to the mountains; both in the perspective of recovering certain natural products and materials that can encourage and renew environmentally sustainable projects.

Some brief considerations on the survey conducted in the Susa Valley are in order, because the reintroduction in the territory of historically documented but disappeared crops seems related, indeed almost intrinsic, to the twenty-year struggle of the NO TAV movement³, even if never openly declared by the witnesses interviewed. If it is true that the NO TAV follow non-violent paths, marked by an absolutely pacifist spirit, albeit a combative one [Aime 2016], the reintroduction of ancient crops seems to manifest the local population's desire to assert their right to land ownership and can be interpreted as a laboratory in which new forms of democracy are being experimented in which the asset to be shared is the territory.

³ No TAV is a protest movement born in the early 1990s that opposes the construction of a high-speed railway line mainly because of the cost, considered excessive compared to their usefulness, and then because of the environmental impact and the damage to human health in the places affected by construction.

Socio-cultural and economic development: GROWING CONSCIOUSNESS

I will now briefly introduce a project for which I was responsible that did not involve the mountains specifically but, being in thematic continuity with M.A.S.K.A., allows me to demonstrate the validity of the research methodology and a model applicable in European contexts with similar characteristics. The objective of *Growing Consciousness* (2020 and 2021)⁴, funded by EIT Food – European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), an independent EU body that stimulates innovation and entrepreneurship throughout Europe⁵ – was to reactivate agri-food chains in rural areas through sustainable innovation. In particular, with the help of a series of educational activities that moved within the framework of agricultural biodiversity, an attempt was made to produce and promote skills, techniques and knowledge aimed at sustainably revitalising the cultivation of ancient and/or abandoned varieties of cereals, medicinal plants and herbs in rural areas of the RIS (Regional Innovation Scheme) countries of Southern and Eastern Europe, i.e. those where technology is not as developed as in the surrounding territories. The intention was to try to bridge the existing know-how gap (at a technical, commercial and logistical level) between traditional agricultural entrepreneurship, typical of flat areas with high intensive production, and the agriculture of rural areas, characterised by small fractions of cultivated areas, often in mid-mountain or hillside areas, with niche production of local varieties. The ambition was to train farmers who wish to continue living and working in rural areas by also providing them with the cultural tools to produce crops in a technologically advanced and sustainable way and, at the same time, to experiment with new business models using advanced entrepreneurial tools that have not been tested in such contexts. Value will thus be added to the food chain by introducing innovative farming of ancient/traditional crops, which could be the basis of new or renewed edible products, and stimulate the development of local industry.

As regards Italy, the aim of *Growing Consciousness* was to support and experiment with crops that favour a cultivation-use-dissemination-innovation circle; to critically evaluate the impact of food on the environment, climate change and health, particularly for local communities; to increase knowledge of good practices by involving different stakeholders; and to create activities that promote skills and knowledge, including providing expertise on sustainable farming techniques and innovative tools for the digitisation of agriculture in order to increase production. In addition, the survey involved mountain areas in various regions.

Our activities have moved – and will move in the future – in the area of agricultural biodiversity, as our ambition was/is to train people who wish to continue working and living in a certain context so that they can do so with the support of innovative tools. We consider it useful to activate awareness-raising campaigns in schools, with the realisation of educational workshops. This project, if properly supported, can lead to a relative growth of the population, especially young people, who want to invest in a sustainable economic system. Rural production can promote traditional cultural heritage, generate and foster rural tourism, ecotourism, food and wine tourism, experiential tourism and define a new framework of actions to increase the competitiveness of tour operators and their capacity to foster sustainable growth in their territories. For this reason, we are planning to create an application for mobile devices (smartphones, tablets) and multitouch surfaces through georeferenced paths in which it will be possible to visualise all the existing realities that are activating a cultivation network in the RIS territories under investigation.

We have been able to document that its recovery is both economic, cultural and touristic and plays a significant role in the interaction, collaboration and exchange between local communities: it functions as a *trait d'union* between tradition and contemporaneity. This paradigmatic case shows that the reintroduction of local and historically documented crops, while revitalising the regional economy and at the same time protecting the environment, allows us to emphasise that investigating

⁴ The research group I coordinated in 2020 was formed by Maria Anna Bertolino, Damiano Cortese, Alessandro Stanchi, Alessia Verri, Lia Zola; in 2021 by Damiano Cortese, Lia Zola, Alessia Verri.

⁵ EIT Food is the leading food innovation initiative in Europe working to make the food system more sustainable, healthy and reliable: it connects corporate partners, academics, research centres and institutes from 13 countries. Its activities include support for innovation projects, training, communication and the creation of innovative companies.

the Alpine space through the implementation of models of cultural and economic sustainability, emphasising the relational network and reinforcing integration and behaviour through knowledge-learning-remembrance, involves local communities in a more active role in society.

The creation of a local micro-supply chain enables the preservation of crops, the creation of innovative products, and is the basis for the creation of added value from which both local communities and consumers can benefit. The reintroduction of many of these varieties is seen as a socio-economic redemption, an engine for rural development, particularly in inland areas. These crops, according to the sample, should be increased, given the great demand on an international scale. The people who engage in these actions are the so-called “new farmers”, although there are no statistics to represent their incidence. In most cases they are people with successful experiences abroad in other sectors, or young agronomists who have just graduated and wanted to bet on these “new” productions.

2. Reflections

The schematic presentations of the three projects aimed at highlighting the transformations that mountain territories are undergoing, where for some years now the abandonment, depopulation and inevitable progressive degradation that began in the 1960s [Bonato 2020, 2024] are gradually being stemmed by the phenomenon of the “return to the land” – here understood in its double meaning of re-inhabiting Alpine spaces and devoting oneself to abandoned trades –, by the investments of small entrepreneurs, by the initiatives of a part of the residents who are experimenting with virtuous practices of sustainable and responsible development, and by the incoming migratory flows. The results of our research show a regeneration of the Alpine region through new, or almost new, housing, economic, social and cultural models, the effect of planning and the desire to remain and/or start a new way of life: the desire to reaffirm and protect one's roots and traditions and the desire to adhere to a sustainable lifestyle, especially from an environmental point of view, of old and new inhabitants intersect, mix and integrate. There is a tendency to consider marginal areas as a scenario that is mostly conservative, localist and “stuck in the past”: in reality, Alpine communities move in lively and dynamic contexts in which the recovery of tradition seems to develop in an original recombinatory game, between re-elaboration of the past and re-use of the existing and creative re-appropriation of the cultural and physical elements of the territory [De Rossi, Dini 2021]. And in a perspective in which «the redevelopment of the rural territory is achieved by recovering a popular cultural repertoire» [Grimaldi 2005: 14], anthropology's task is – it will be – yes, to analyse the complexity of Alpine areas, but also to contribute to making the inhabitants of the highlands more aware and responsible by involving them in its own research, listening to their needs, sharing resources and opportunities, thus implementing a collaborative ethnography; but not least it will have to try to create a network between communities, public and private bodies.

The study of the mountains today needs this more conscious gaze, «a “cultural turn” [...] a change in methods and approaches» [Puttilli 2012: 62], as well as in themes. In addition to those conditioned by a vision of the mountains filtered through the gaze of the city and considered on the one hand as an environment of tradition and on the other as a stage for mass sports and high-altitude tourism, attention must be paid to themes such as those that emerged in the previous pages: «the valorisation of ecosystem and agro-food resources, the changes in land use and settlement that will impose themselves as climate change increases, the opportunities for residency [...], the creation of local production chains, the exchange of skills» [Barbera, De Rossi 2021: 23].

Today, Alpine anthropology aims to recover the concept of the local community from the perspective of agency, the active capacity for intervention of local actors, who are fundamental subjects in the processes of studying, protecting and enhancing the Alpine area. The realities of Alpine communities are studied and protected, in particular the transformations of culture and identity, the propensity to change and the collective resilience of a territory that is no longer idealised but studied and known in depth, no longer considered an insurmountable barrier but open to dialogue with the outside world. As Viazzo and Zanini [2014] point out, the attempt to compensate for the demographic

crisis of recent decades through immigrations and returns to the mountains has provided further material for Alpine anthropological studies, which now focus on new experiences and returns, on new balances in the human-territory relationship and on strategies for recovering the values, traditions, buildings and hamlets that highlight the characterising heritage of Alpine areas. Viazzo and Zanini [2014] reiterate that the Alpine community, aware of the impending risk of total depopulation and cultural extinction, has opened up to the migratory flows that affect the territory, which bring manpower and generational change⁶, and to projects in which they are called upon to participate in order to revitalise its economic and social structure. From this perspective, tourism can be an opportunity for development that fits – among other things – within the deseasonalisation of the offer: cultural, sweet, wine and food, sporting-naturalistic, hiking, experiential tourism, etc., if they are proposed as practices that are attentive to sustainability and the territory's environmental load capacity, can have significant repercussions not only on an economic level but also – and above all – on a cultural level, contributing to the enhancement and promotion of the area.

The anthropology of Alpine valleys studies the territory and its communities as a heritage of memories, knowledge and values; the areas under investigation are predominantly regions of depopulation: re-inhabitation, dedication to abandoned trades, physical and social phenomena – such as that of the neo-mountain dwellers – become distinctive features of a place, and the difficulty in studying such a region is inherent in the ability to grasp its specificities, particularly within communication and the relationship between actors and territory. Alpine valleys are the subject of anthropological research in terms of practices, communities and traditions, which are observed and documented; it is in the scientific, anthropological and community interest itself, reserved for inland areas, that is the prerequisite for the survival and sustenance of the territory and the socio-economic sphere linked to it. Through the creation of internal and external communication networks, good planning, creativity and active participation, the territory, with its historical memory, can be valorised and given its due dignity and awareness. Some practical examples of projects aimed at territorial and environmental revitalisation and the recovery of ancient knowledge and traditions were presented here.

At present, the Alps are considered a wealth and an asset closely linked to the socio-economic dynamics of the territory and to the development and wellbeing of the community: they are a resource for the mining industry (minerals), water and energy (water, forests and renewable energy), agri-food tourism (crops and pastures), they qualify as an enormous potential for development and represent a fundamental opportunity for present and future communities; for this reason they need adequate plans and initiatives aimed at their valorisation and management, as the basis for a broader technological, social and cultural, as well as economic, innovation [www.unimontagna.it]. And if these resources constitute the necessary assets for the (sustainable) development of the region, they must be managed through specific policies for the Alps [www.forumalpinum.it] that provide for interconnection and reciprocity between local knowledge, management methods, governance and social actors.

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⁶ The presence of new mountain people can become an opportunity for rebirth and shared creativity a key tool in the revitalisation process.

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