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The Consequences of Modernity in the Deep Europe: The Transformation of Industrial Landscapes in Alpine Regions¹

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Abstract

The alpine region is undergoing a process of deindustrialization that has brought significant changes in the local communities; the large amount of brownfields in the Alps not only affects its economic growth but also the social context and the community development. This study aims to investigate the social fabric of a deindustrialised Austrian alpine community dealing with a brownfield regeneration process and to analyse the consequences of the industrial modernity from a social, cultural and symbolic perspective. For this, the wellbeing of the community in terms of social cohesion is examined as well as relevant identitarian aspects and representations of past and future. A mixed-methods research design is used and it combines data from structured questionnaire survey with data obtained by in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldnotes.

Keywords: post-industrial society, deindustrialization, alpine identity, alpine community, social cohesion.

¹ Sections 1, 2 and 5 should be attributed to Lorenzo Migliorati, while 3 and 4 are the work of Liria Veronesi. The conclusions are the fruit of their shared reflections.

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1. Introduction

As often happens, this article, and the research programme giving rise to it¹, is the product of the observation and the formulation of hypotheses surrounding phenomena forming part of the daily life of the person describing them. The idea of working on the subject of the social consequences of the deindustrialisation processes in alpine regions first arose from my holidays and the obsessions which accompany them, as well as the roads I travel every day.

My holidays.

As a lover of decaying buildings and places marked by time, and someone with a certain fascination for the edges of human experience rather than the hubs, I have often traversed the valleys of the Vosges mountains in the east of France. Anyone following the Moselle river through Le Thillot towards Remiremont, wandering among the tiny villages dotted around there and in nearby valleys, can witness a contrasting landscape: on the one hand, the wonder and magnificence of the surrounding nature, where mountains and rivers come together to create breathtaking views, and on the other hand the marks left by former wealth – numerous industrial sites (mostly textile factories) abandoned and decaying since the second half of the twentieth century, after more than a century of industrialisation, which enjoyed its peak between the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth (Edelblutte, 2003). These are the backdrops to my everyday life. I come from the hinterland of Bergamo, from the valleys that start down in the flatlands north of the Po and stretch up to the Bergamasque Alps. For many centuries, the people in these valleys lived with a subsistence economy, but for a few decades in the second half of the last century the valleys became the scene of rampant and badly managed economic development², with fleeting wealth

¹ This article presents the first results of a broader project for cooperation between regions in Europe. Named ‘trAILS – Alpine Industrial Landscapes Transformation’, it is financed by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund, and is part of the Interreg Alpine Space programme. The authors are members of the research team based at the University of Verona (Italy), one of the project partners, which is in charge of making a description and analysis of the initial social impact in the event of large-scale closure of industries and of the possibilities for regeneration in the pilot sites. The results presented here concern the work carried out on the first of the four pilot sites chosen for study by the project: the municipality of Eisenerz in the Styria region of Austria, with particular focus on the abandoned production site known as ‘Münichtal’. More details will be given below.

² On this point, we could take a look at the most clichéd of the analogies between these territories: political consensus for forces which today we define as sovereignist and populist. This is not the place for it, but an analysis of the reflexive movement (Giddens,

created – as in many different landscapes – by the modern industrial practices of the textiles sector. That short-lived golden age has left behind many material and symbolic ruins and calls for an analysis of the various features which accompany the closure of industries in the communities affected by this process.

2. Alpine industrial landscapes transformation

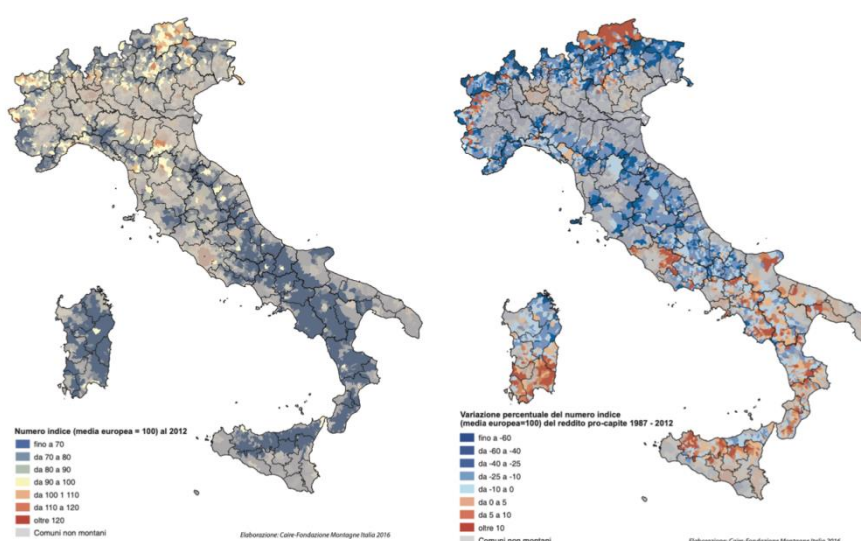
The alpine space certainly presents some unique features. Let us take the focus off the arcadian, bucolic stereotype usually associated with it and which a certain type of literature (and even certain sociological studies) has tended to dwell on³, especially in the past. Let us also forget the rhetoric of impoverishment (Baldi, Marcantoni, 2016) (due to economic difficulties, depopulation and/or diminution of human capital) which sees the mountains as a marginal space, in the best light a kind of reserve needing to be protected, and in the worst a land which should be abandoned to its own devices as it is clearly inferior. In our opinion, it is rather interesting to note that the alpine space constitutes one of the driving forces behind national economies – and not only thanks to segments like tourism or exploitation of natural resource: as noted by Modica and Weilacher, ‘located in the core of Europe, at the crossroad of strong economic regions and dynamic metropolises, the Alps were pushed through a modernization process far earlier than other mountain ranges’ (Modica, Weilacher, 2019, p. 3). If we look only at Italy, we can see that a significant portion of the national surplus value (16.3%) is produced in the mountains, with fairly insignificant differences between territorial units. Indeed, while the ‘lowlands’ record a per capita surplus value of 24,300 Euros (in 2014), the mountains display an average of 21,600 Euros, but with highly significant

1994) of these communities as they close in on themselves would be worth more than a brief mention. Successful political slogans such as *La France avant tout*, *Prima gli italiani* or Donald Trump’s MAGA are also born on the edges of the brownfields dotted around the communities that structure them.

³ To cite one example: ‘Le moniteur de ski qui emboîte le pas à son mulet chargé de foin souhaitait il y a quatre mois un hiver long et neigeux; aujourd’hui il réclame «de beau temps» pour rentrer la récolte. Hier il préférait les pentes Nord, fortes et peu ensoleillées, aujourd’hui il privilégie les terrains plats faciles à cultiver. Les techniques qu’il emploie le situent dans deux mondes. Le temps de loisir des urbains coïncide avec son temps de travail le plus intense, et il ne sait plus quel est son véritable univers. [...] Vedette pour le citoyen facilement enthousiaste, il est maintenant redevenu ou presque le paysan de tous les temps; jusques à quand la rupture pourra-t-elle être évitée?’ (Rimbaud, 1961, p. 281).

variations between regions. In Calabria, for example, this indicator reaches only 13,200 Euros, while the more developed mountain regions (Valle d'Aosta and Trentino-Alto Adige) reach 33,000 Euros of surplus value produced per capita (Baldi and Marcantoni, 2016, p. 63). Therefore, the alpine space does not appear to be so different from the lowlands as far as the production of wealth is concerned; on the contrary, there are a number of cases where it acts as a considerable producer of wealth.

FIGURE 1. Disposable income by Italian geographical area compared with the European average in 1987 (left) and 2012 (right).



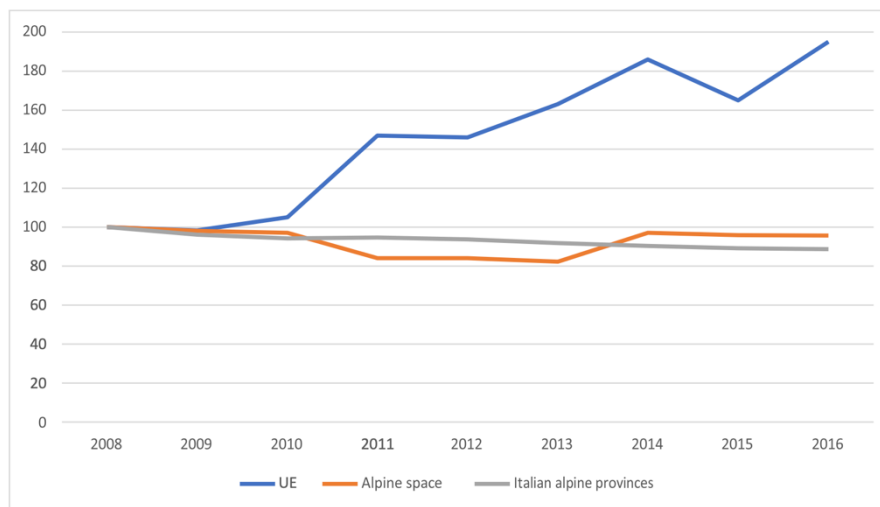
Adapted from the *Rapporto Montagne Italia* (Italian Mountains Report) 2016 – Fondazione Montagne Italia.

Of course, all that glitters is not gold. Over the last thirty years, the Italian alpine regions have undergone serious impoverishment and diminution in the amount of wealth produced. Figure 1 shows the distribution of disposable income by geographical area compared with the European average, as recorded in 1987 and 2012. While thirty years ago the number of Italian municipalities in alpine areas which enjoyed an income either superior to or in line with the European average was fairly high – over half of the alpine municipalities, accounting for around two-thirds of the alpine population –, in 2012 we can see that the situation was radically different. In fact, today only a quarter of alpine municipalities (accounting for just over half of the alpine population) ranks in the high-income band (represented by the colours ranging from yellow to red).

Looking at the figures, ‘what is striking is [...] the relative decline being displayed in a fairly widespread fashion in the central and northern areas of the country, the same areas which displayed the greatest positive differentials with respect to the European averages in the earlier period’ (FMI, 2016, p. 78).

Let us take a brief look at another figure. If we examine the graph showing the active enterprises in the industry sector⁴ in Europe (graph 1), we can note some clear discrepancies.

GRAPH 1. Number of active enterprises 2008-2016 (%).



Source: Eurostat.

While the number of active enterprises has grown in Europe as a whole between 2008 and 2016 – almost doubling the absolute figures (from more than three and a half million to more than seven million) –, the alpine space⁵ has suffered a decrease of approximately 6,500 units. Although this is a small decrease in terms of percentage (4.4%), nonetheless it is in strong contrast to

⁴ Figures from Eurostat ‘Population of active enterprises in t-number’, NAGE R2 Industry (except construction), NUTS 2-3.

⁵ For the purposes of this article, we mean the group of regions eligible for the EU Interreg Alpine Space 2014-2020 programme, which considers the following regions as forming part of the Alpine space: Austria (whole country), Slovenia (whole country), the districts of Oberbayern and Schwaben (Bavaria), Tübingen and Freiburg (Baden Württemberg), Rhône-Alpes, Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, Franche-Comté Alsace, Liguria, Piemonte, Valle d’Aosta, Lombardy, Veneto, Trentino-Alto Adige, Friuli Venezia Giulia.

the rest of the continent. If we look more closely at the alpine areas of Italy, this contraction is more marked, with 11% less active industrial enterprises in the last decade (from approximately 86,000 to 77,000 businesses).

Of the effects of these dynamics, one in particular interests us: what is left behind in these mountain regions, chiefly the abandoned industrial sites, the brownfield sites of the mountains, the alpine industrial landscapes dotted around the mountains which are highly interesting not only from an architectural, environmental and landscape perspective, but also in cultural terms. It has been calculated that across the whole mountain range, there are around 300 industrial sites which have been completely or partially shut down – counting only those with a surface area of 50,000m² or more⁶ and comprising mostly construction-material, metalworking, papermaking and textile industries (Modica, 2019).

In the following sections, we will concentrate our investigation on one of these brownfields, attempting to view it through the lens of a social analysis concerning the consequences it has had for the community it is part of. What happened? What consequences have been produced by the fleeting passage of modern industrialisation in that land, chiefly from social, cultural and symbolic points of view? What is the community's current state of 'social' health? How are the space and time of the industrial past and of the present crisis represented? How is memory heritagised and routinised? What images accompany the future plans of the townspeople?

3. Eisenerz: an alpine community affected by a demographic crisis

The case study of our research is the Austrian municipality of Eisenerz, a small town in the *Bundesland* of Styria located along the *Steirische Eisenstrasse* (Styrian Iron Road).

In recent years, the area has been subject to an intense deindustrialisation process which has left a large industrial site abandoned. The Münichtal facility housed furnaces for smelting the iron extracted from the nearby Erzberg mine, one of the largest reserves of ferrous minerals in central Europe. For centuries, it provided significant wealth to the town and strongly influenced its culture. Following the crisis in the mineral industry (which goes back as far as the 1980s), iron mining and processing activities diminished notably, leaving clear signs of this deep-rooted crisis on the territory.

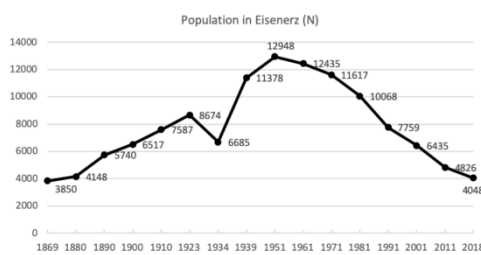
⁶ To give an idea of the size, the minimum is equivalent to approximately seven soccer pitches.

One of the most evident is the drop in population: from a fairly sizeable alpine town of 12,948 inhabitants in 1951, by 2018 Eisenerz counted only 4,048 residents (graph 2). This depopulation trend is stronger in the municipality of Eisenerz than elsewhere; in fact, the demographic decline in the Leoben province as a whole is less dramatic (9% between 2002 and 2018), while the national population statistics show a 9% increase in population figures (graph 3).

FIGURE 2. View of Eisenerz and the Erzberg mine. Bottom right, the Münichthal facility with the mountain of detritus (Schlackenberg) and former workers' houses transformed into alpine resorts.

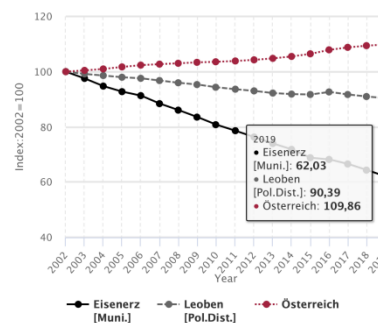


GRAPH 2. Population since 1968.



Source: Statistics Austria.

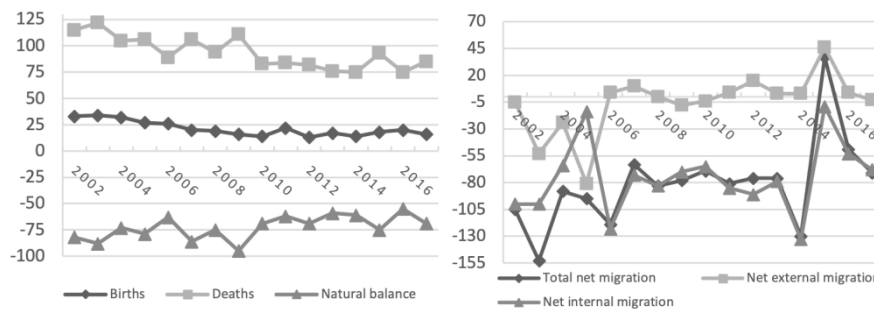
GRAPH 3. Population since 2002, index: 2002=100.



Source: Statistics Austria.

The decline in population can be traced to two phenomena: the natural balance and the net migration rate (both within Austria and outside it), which have been constantly negative since 2002. In the past sixteen years there have been more deaths than live births and a greater number of people have left the town than those who have moved to it (graph 4 and graph 5). Within this last framework, it is unsurprising the scarce presence of foreign (non-Austrian) citizens living in Eisenerz that constitute 5.1% of the total population – a lower percentage value compared to the one of the Leoben province (10.1%) and of the country as a whole (15.8%). The demographic situation is aggravated by an aging resident population: in 2018, the average age of the inhabitants of Eisenerz was 55 years old, notably higher than the figure for the Leoben province (47 years old) and the national figure (42.6 years old). Only 16.8% of Eisenerz residents is under 29 years of age, while 47.3% are over the age of 60 (graph 6 and graph 7).

GRAPH 4. Births, deaths, natural balance (N). GRAPH 5. Net migration rate – internal and external migration.



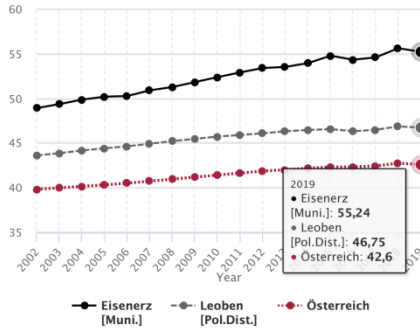
Source: Statistics Austria.

Source: Statistics Austria.

It needs to be pointed out that this is not a condition common to all alpine regions; for example, the French Alps in particular, and the Italian Alps in part, are undergoing a very different form of demographic evolution, with many municipalities in the mountains registering an increase in population. These figures suggest that in the Alps, more than in other parts of Europe, the decline in total population and the increase in the aged population are due more to the negative net migration rate rather than to the natural decrease. It is hard to believe that the recent inversion in the trend for the French and Italian Alps is due to an upturn in birth rates lifting them higher than the mortality rates, therefore we must put it down to population migration. It is predicted that immigration will ensure population growth, leading to a change in the

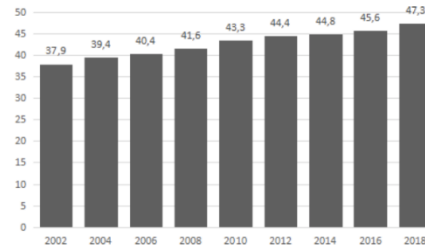
composition of local communities which could, according to Viazzo (2012), translate as potential cultural change.

GRAPH 6. Average age of the inhabitants of Eisenerz.



Source: Statistics Austria.

GRAPH 7. Eisenerz residents over the age of 60.



Source: Statistics Austria.

At this point, we need to ask ourselves why Eisenerz is so unattractive. Here there is no influx of people who, for various reasons⁷, decide to move to alpine communities. In their recent study on the eastern Austrian Alps, Čede et al. (2018) highlight (for how could they not) the effects of the crisis in the mining sector and the consequent lack of job opportunities in the area. The whole area needs to reorient itself from an economic perspective following the loss of iron as the driving force of the local economy, but so far the services sector is under-represented, while creative industries and enterprises involved in the digital world are almost totally lacking. Furthermore, not even the economic innovation of the big landowners (for example, in terms of forest management) seems to have had a positive effect on the local job market. Following the closure of industrial sites, processes of renaturalisation of the industrial infrastructures and deterioration have been taking place; the result is that even the surrounding landscape currently seems in a state of decay. The world of iron is all but lost – there is not even much interest in iron-related craft jobs, which could constitute a strong identity-creating element for the area. The authors of the study also point out that access to the area is difficult, much of the surrounding area (75%) is occupied by forests, there is little activity on the cultural front, services for citizens have been reduced, there are very few tourist structures and property ownership on various levels with a very strong tendency

⁷ The categories of people who choose to move to alpine communities are the so-called amenity migrants, remigrants, relationship migrants and counter-urban citizens (Čede et al., 2018).

to continuity within families makes it very difficult for new arrivals to purchase property (Čede et al., 2018).

4. A deindustrialized alpine community under the lens of social cohesion: benefits and threats

Up to now, how has Eisenerz reacted to the changes which the closure of industries has brought about? How can we characterise the social fabric of the community today? Through the lens of the concept of social cohesion we will attempt to answer these questions and measure the level of social wellbeing the citizens of Eisenerz enjoy. At the same time, we will try to identify the social resources the community could bring into play in the event of a phase of brownfield regeneration in the area.

In recent years, the concept of social cohesion has attracted political attention on a local, national and supranational level, for at least three reasons. Firstly, social cohesion is considered to be a vital condition for social and political stability; inequalities, fragmentation and tensions within a community increase the risk of collapse and erosion of the social and political system. Secondly, social cohesion is seen to be a source of economic growth (there are many studies linking social cohesion with economic performance). Thirdly and lastly, a good degree of social cohesion in terms of inclusive labour markets, civic participation and active association membership, strong social bonds and solidarity between networks of citizens have the effect of reducing the amount of public expenditure needed to provide social services and benefits, as these are substituted by the resources circulated by the community itself (Berger-Schmitt, 2002).

In response to the intense interest the concept has generated on a political level, many empirical and theoretical studies have been conducted in the academic world. Nevertheless, we have yet to arrive at a single, widely shared definition of social cohesion, although there is consensus on the fact that it is multidimensional in nature. In other words, there is agreement on the fact that social cohesion is a complex concept that cannot be pared down to a single factor but rather is composed of a set of different dimensions. Bernard labels social cohesion as a 'quasi-concept', a 'concept of convenience' maintaining a vagueness which makes it 'adaptable to various situations, flexible enough to follow the meanderings and necessities of political action [and academic research] from day to day' (Bernard, 1999: 3).

The various different definitions of social cohesion depend mostly on the analytical approach adopted. Here we consider the *macro* approach according to which social cohesion is an attribute of a society and, specifically, it is a static

condition (Lockwood 1999, Chiesi 2004, Chan, To, and Chan, 2006, to cite a few)⁸. In line with this perspective, we will focus on the definition provided by Chan, To and Chan who define social cohesion as ‘a societal attribute [...] a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of the society as characterised by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations’ (Chan, To, and Chan, 2006, p. 290). Subjects in a given society are considered to be ‘cohesive’ only when the following three criteria are met simultaneously: individuals trust, help and cooperate with the other members of the society; they share a common identity and common sense of belonging to their community; the subjective feelings listed above are manifested through objective behaviours (Chan, To, and Chan, 2006). From this definition we obtain a clearer, more rigorous concept, with clear distinctions from existing constructs which are often compared with social cohesion (such as solidarity, social integration, etc.) and an analysis which we can not only place on the level of conceptualisation but also use as a working definition; in fact, for each theorised dimension, indications are given concerning the set of indicators to consider when one intends to actually measure social cohesion (chart 1).

The study on social cohesion we conducted at Eisenerz involved administering a structured questionnaire (using the CATI modality⁹) to a randomised representative sample of the population of Eisenerz, stratified by sex and age. In total, 71 individuals responded to and completed the questionnaire¹⁰.

⁸ Social cohesion can also be analysed according to a micro and a meso approach. The micro approach sees social cohesion as the contribution made by an individual to the group, which becomes the object towards which the member is positively or negatively oriented and is linked to psychological identification of the members of the group. It is an attribute of an individual within a group which reflects their assessment of the relationships with the other members of the group and of their own personal feelings about their level of inclusion in that group (Bollen and Hoyle, 1990). The meso approach takes social relations as the unit of analysis, inasmuch as they are a constituent part and *conditio sine qua non* of a cohesive community, ‘since it is the social relations of its members which hold them together [...] a group is cohesive when multiple independent social relations between multiple group members hold the group together’ (Moody and White, 2003).

⁹ Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing.

¹⁰ In this section, some descriptive statistics are presented. Relationships between two or more variables were verified using variance analysis, bivariate correlations and double-entry tables; here we present the relationships which emerged as statistically significant.

CHART 1. Indicators of social cohesion.

Trust, understood as ‘an expectation of positive experiences for the actor, developed in a condition of uncertainty’ (Mutti, 1998, p. 42), here divided into *interpersonal* trust – among citizens of the same municipality – and *institutional* trust afforded to local and national political institutions.

Civic involvement, understood as participation in activities aimed at improving the collective life of the community, which also involves adopting pro-social behaviours and attitudes.

Association membership, that is the involvement – whether simple membership or active participation – in different kinds of associations which encourage universalistic attitudes and behaviours.

Feeling of belonging to the place and the community; this comprises relationships with the ecological side of the territorial location, with the psychological side of the local identity (or in other words with the definition of oneself based on one’s belonging to the local community) and with the social side of solidarity, inclusion and sharing of the norms and values that characterise the community as a whole (Pollini, 2012).

Support networks, or in other words the presence of people who can be counted on in times of need to provide some form of social capital.

Social tensions and safety, understood as the perception that there are social fractures and disorders in the community, and the perception that there are risks which can threaten personal safety.

4.1 Eisenerz as a cohesive alpine community. Main results of the survey.

In keeping with the demographic statistics on the overall population of Eisenerz, the sample is made up of a balanced proportion of women (53.2%) and men (46.8%), and a small number of young people under 39 years of age (17.3%) countered by a high percentage of individuals over 65 years of age (42.7%). As a result, a rather impressive figure emerges regarding employment status, as half of the sample are pensioners (50.7%). One third of respondents are couples without children (34%) and one in four live alone (25.9%); couples with children account for 20.1% of the sample, while those who state that they are single parents amount to 10.7%. The overwhelming majority of the respondents has Austrian citizenship (96.2%) and, on average, the interviewees have lived in Eisenerz for 49 years (tab. 1).

People responding to the questionnaire declare that, on average, they agree with the statement that most people living in their community are worthy of trust; on a scale of 1-4 where 1 stands for ‘totally disagree’ and 4 stands for

‘totally agree’, the mean value is 3.59¹¹. There are significant differences between the different age groups: the mature adults (aged 40-64) and elderly (over 65) trust their fellow citizens more than the younger age group (under 39) ($F=3,998$, $p<0.05$). In particular, a closer analysis of the youngest age group shows that it is the youngest people (under 24 years old, with an average value of 2.5) who show least trust in the other residents of Eisenerz.

TABLE 1. Profile of respondents.

	%		%
<i>Sex</i>	<i>(n=71)</i>	<i>Composition of family unit</i>	<i>(n=70)</i>
Men	46.8	Single-person family	25.9
Women	53.2	Couple with no children	34
<i>Age</i>	<i>(n=71)</i>	Couple with children	20.1
< 39 years	17.3	Single parent with children	10.7
40-64 years	40	With other relatives	9.3
> 65 years	42.7	<i>Academic qualifications</i>	<i>(n=68)</i>
<i>Employment status</i>	<i>(n=69)</i>	ISCED 1	1.1
Housewife	3.4	ISCED 2	13.9
Unemployed, not seeking employment	1.4	ISCED 3	63.1
Employed (employee)	36.3	ISCED 5	1.4
Employed (self-employed)	8.3	ISCED 6	2.5
Pensioner	50.7	ISCED 7	18.0
<i>Nationality</i>	<i>(n=71)</i>		
Austrian	96.2		
Non-Austrian	3.8		

The level of trust expressed in local and national institutions (average values of 2.5 and 2.55 respectively) indicates that trust more strongly characterises the horizontal interpersonal relationships between people who find themselves in a similar position to the interviewee – such as neighbours and residents of the same town – than the vertical relationships, regardless of the level of territorial representation. In this case, there are no statistically relevant differences related to sex, age, employment status or academic qualifications.

¹¹ The interviewees were asked: On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 means ‘totally disagree’ and 4 means ‘totally agree’, how far do you agree or disagree with the following statements? a) Most people living in Eisenerz are trustworthy; b) I trust the national political institutions; c) I trust the political institutions of this municipality.

The people interviewed feel close to the other people living near them and feel they shared norms and values with them¹² (average value=3.38). This figure shows a positive correlation with trust – both that expressed towards fellow townspeople (Pearson’s $r=0.41, p=0.000$) and towards local political institutions (Pearson’s $r=0.24, p=0.05$) and national political institutions (Pearson’s $r=0.28, p<0.05$): the stronger the feeling of sharing the value and normative system, the stronger the feeling of being able to trust others, whether personal acquaintances or not.

Those who state that they share common norms and values with the others also show a reduced perception of tensions between the different social groups in Eisenerz (Pearson’s $r= -0.37, p<0.005$); the average value for this item is 1.89. In general, there is a low perception of social tensions and people feel quite safe in their community – they feel they can walk or otherwise move around their local area without fear (average value=3.75)¹³. Again, there were no statistically significant differences relating to the socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

TABLE 2. *Social cohesion indicators, descriptive statistics.*

	N	Min	Max	Average	Std. dev.
Trust in the people of Eisenerz	71	1.00	4.00	3.59	.621
Trust in the local political institutions	70	1.00	4.00	2.50	.936
Trust in the national political institutions	65	1.00	4.00	2.55	1.079
Shared values and norms	69	1.00	4.00	3.38	.775
Presence of social tensions	70	1.00	4.00	1.89	1.008
Feeling of social exclusion	71	1.00	4.00	1.20	.570
I feel safe when walking alone at night	70	1.00	4.00	3.75	.594
Valid N (listwise)	62				

The perception of being socially excluded by the community is not a common feeling (mean value=1.20) and interviewees perceive themselves as an

¹² The interviewees were asked: On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 means ‘totally disagree’ and 4 means ‘totally agree’, how far do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘I feel close to the people who live in my area and share norms and values with them’.

¹³ The question put to the interviewees was: On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 means ‘totally disagree’ and 4 means ‘totally agree’, how far do you agree or disagree with the following statements? a) In my municipality, I perceive tensions between different social groups (ethnic/religious groups, etc.); b) I feel safe when walking alone in this municipality at night.

integral part of a group¹⁴. In the case of Eisenerz, its inhabitants' feeling of social inclusion increases in accordance with the number of associations each one is a member of (Pearson's $r=0.31$; $p<0.01$). This figure is certainly not surprising: as the literature abundantly demonstrates, associations act as a social adhesive, bringing people together and creating social networks along with a spirit of cooperation, reciprocity and trust; they also foster communal values and facilitate the integration of individuals in order to produce collective worth (Putnam 1993, 2000; Stanzani in Di Nicola, Stanzani, Tronca 2010).

From the questionnaire, it emerges that the population of Eisenerz can count on a wealth of social resources in terms of social relations¹⁵: the interviewees state that, in times of need, they can count, on average, on more than 6 people (std. dev.=5.46), with the mode value being 5. However, there are significant differences according to age, as the younger adults (aged 18-39 years old) on average have more than twice the number of contacts as the over-65 group – to be precise, 9 and 4 people respectively whom they can contact in the event of need ($F=4.98$, $p=0.01$).

Neighbours count for fully half of the people listed; this means that, on average, every inhabitant feel they can rely on 3 people living in the vicinity of their home, within their local community. The absence of any statistically significant differences according to age suggests that the network of the younger citizens is not only more extensive, but it is also made up of more mixed contacts rather than being limited to a circle of neighbouring homes. Their network is delocalised and decontextualised, therefore can be considered as a possible measure of the changes which could renew and refresh the traditional communities they live in. The elderly population's support network, on the other hand, is almost totally limited to neighbours; their relationships are based on proximity and rooted in their hometown. These networks 'are potentially homogeneous in terms of social composition and therefore more specialised concerning the resources – generally scarce – which can be brought into play and circulated, although support and aid can be intense and circulate very swiftly' (Di Nicola, 2008: 30). Collected data confirm this: contacts with neighbours take place with notable frequency, considered that more than half

¹⁴ The question the interviewees were asked to respond to was: On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 means 'totally disagree' and 4 means 'totally agree', how far do you agree or disagree with the following statement? 'I feel excluded from the community'.

¹⁵ The interviewees were asked: How many people can you count on in times of need (emotional support, help with the children, loans of property or money, etc.)?

To gauge the frequency of social relations: On average, how often do you have contact (in person, over the phone or via web) with your neighbours? Every day or almost / At least once a week / Once or twice a month / A few times a year / Never or almost never.

of the respondents (53.4%) state that they have daily contacts with them; this percentage rises to 66% if we look only at the over-65s group ($\chi^2=18.856$, $df=8$, $p<0.05$).

In Eisenerz, the inhabitants show a reasonable level of participation in the civic and political life of the local community: on average, the interviewees are members of two associations (std. dev.=2.71). Over the previous year, more than a third (35.1%) has taken part in at least one event organised in Eisenerz concerning issues or difficulties relating to the area and the local community, while 75.8% has voted at the most recent local elections. Regarding these elections, the elderly are those who display the highest rate of participation (89.2%), notably higher than the 40-to-64-year-old group (72.7%) and in particular the under-40 group (50%), who seem rather disillusioned with local politics ($\chi^2=7.888$, $df=2$, $p<0.05$).

Conversely, when it comes to a feeling of belonging to the local area, age has no influence: almost half of the respondents state that they define themselves first and foremost as citizens of Eisenerz (42.7%). The percentage of those who identify themselves as Styrian is lower (23.6%) and the percentage of those who identify themselves as Austrians (14.5%) or Europeans (19.2%) is lower still. It is surprising to find that a relatively large proportion – one in five – consider themselves as being citizens of Europe first and foremost.

From our analysis, Eisenerz emerges as a cohesive community without any evident social fractures: there is a widespread feeling of trust on the horizontal plane, and a reasonable level of trust on the vertical plane; the townspeople share a common value and normative system and they exchange social resources, they feel part of the community – which is characterised by contextualised and localised social relations – and they mainly have a sense of belonging to the local area, within which they feel safe. From this we can say that, from a social point of view, Eisenerz seems to have borne well the transformations which the deindustrialisation process unleashed. Nevertheless, the strength of the social fabric does leave room for one doubt, which is whether the social cohesion displayed in Eisenerz is a sign that its inhabitants have mostly closed ranks and fallen in on themselves, probably to defend and protect themselves from the recent crisis, and that the condition for their social unity is mainly related to the homogeneity of the population. It is pertinent to observe that – at least in principle – strong cohesion within a community could be accompanied by a tendency to discriminate against and exclude anyone not belonging to the same community; this leads us to wonder whether social cohesion can actually constitute a threat to social cohesion itself (Berger-Schmitt, 2002) and whether inclusion can also mean exclusion (Jenson in Berger-Schmitt 2002). As far as Eisenerz is concerned, we should not

underestimate these issues, since, as the demographic statistics reveal, this alpine town has a great need for new people to move to it in order to keep it alive and to be able to face future challenges, including the regeneration of the currently abandoned industrial sites.

5. Representations of the past, visions for the future

A second set of symbolic dimensions we studied concerned the relationships between the Eisenerz community, the representations of its industrial past and what its citizens envisaged for the future. By conducting a series of in-depth interviews with a number of key informants¹⁶ and coupling this information with the ethnographic observations made during our visits to the town, we investigated a number of symbolic dimensions. The basic objective of this stage of the study was to understand the deep-rooted relationship tying the community to the mountain which looms over it: Erzberg (alt. 1,466m), the great open iron mine where these ‘odd alpine folk’¹⁷ have been digging since the Middle Ages, drawing from it their sustenance and, over the centuries, wealth. The relationship is visceral, to our mind a metaphor for the bowels of the earth laid bare by the digging, an enormous maze constantly and forever before the eyes of the citizens of Eisenerz. Effectively, it dominates and dwarfs the whole landscape (fig. 3).

As an introduction to this section of the study, I would like to propose an extract from the ethnographic diary kept during our first visit to the town.

“Driving. Been driving since this morning at daybreak. It was a freezing dawn: January, 4 in the morning. I’m in the car with the young guys in the troupe who are going to help conduct the video interviews with the key informants from Eisenerz. The Austria we’ve driven through up to now is just the way you would imagine it: we crossed the border at Tarvis, under a flurry of snow, and we entered Carinthia. If I’m honest, the cleanliness and order of these places have the same kind of effect on me as a stay in hospital: can these guys really be so perfect? On the southern motorway, traffic trudges along in the thick snow. As we go deeper into Austria, the landscape changes imperceptibly: you feel like the sheen of the tourist areas is behind you; you start seeing cracks in buildings and the hardwood balconies of Carinthia give

¹⁶ An extract of the fruits of this phase of the study can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1jfR5binGo>.

¹⁷ According to this confidential definition coined by Gerfried, charmain of Verein Eisenstrasse (<http://www.eisenstrasse.co.at>), an association based in Eisenerz whose purpose is to promote local development and encourage visitors to the area, representative of the project partner.

way to brown iron railings. The brightness of freshly repainted house-fronts morphs into pastel shades ravaged by time. I think I can see rust everywhere, but maybe it's just an illusion. I'm here to look for rust, to see the brownfield sites in this part of the world. I have a picture-postcard image of it, what I managed to find on the web before embarking on this journey. And I'm expecting to see lots of rust red. But it's all just white snow. Disappointed. Yet it doesn't feel like a poor area; rather a place that focuses on the practical rather than the fancy, that sees hard labour as one of its signature elements. I find it surprising to reflect that we're closer to Hungary than Italy, to the post-Soviet Eastern Europe than to the Western bloc. I'm intrigued to think that the Iron Curtain was only about a hundred kilometres from here. I hold on to twentieth-century divisions.

Leoben. We leave the motorway and I realise that I'm starting to look around me a little agitatedly in search of the great mountain: we should be able to see it by now. But it's just another impression of mine. From here we've got another thirty kilometres of climbing up a strange mountain road before arriving at the valley. From the 500m of altitude in Leoben, we go up towards the twists and turns of Prädlich, passing by Trofaiach and the old iron-smelting furnaces of Vondernberg. Then the road begins a crazy plunge down to the valley floor. This steeply sloping, straight, four-lane road is leading us to our destination. And it's here that through the car window I get my first glimpse of the terraced rock of Erzberg – the south-east face. It's impressive, but not as I expected: it looks more like an enormous quarry than a mountain. We finally 'land' in Eisenerz, altitude 750 metres. We're at the furthest tip of the northern Styrian Alps, on the very edge of the range. At the foot of these mountains, the great Carpathian Basin begins. [...]

Eisenerz is laid out along a main street and has a pretty central area, pretty much deserted at this time of day. It's 5pm. We can see the glories of the past that have vanished. We keep seeing the image of two hammers with crossing handles, symbol of the mining activities marking this land: on doors, along the fences of workers' homes, painted on certain historic buildings. I try to approach passers-by but I realise that the linguistic barrier is practically impossible to overcome. We get some shots outside the town; Erzberg is always looming in the background. Now, from this viewpoint, it really is impressive: a mountain standing too close to the town, totally gutted by centuries of mining. Yet at the same time, it's a discreet presence – you soon get used to seeing it [...]. Cold, -8°, I suggest going into a warm *gasthaus* for a beer. To get to it, we have to cross a private garden, pass through somebody's store room and choose whichever of the several doors opening onto a corridor is the only one that won't take us into someone's home. We go in. The background music is surprising, ranging from Dire Straits to Pink Floyd at their peak. We meet the landlord. He must take us for aliens, with our cameras and camcorders – too much equipment to be mere tourists. We've clearly come here for some other reason. He asks us and we explain to him that we're researchers, that we're studying the deindustrialisation of

alpine valleys and that Eisenerz makes an excellent case study. He doesn't look very surprised; on the contrary, he goes to get a basket overflowing with booklets, photos, various adverts and postcards of the town that was: an industrious hive of activity. To break the ice, I tell him that Eisenerz is a lovely place. He replies that, more than anything, it's a quiet place; then he goes on to say that until the seventies there were two thousand people working here on the mountain, but now there are just over two hundred; that depopulation is a big problem – only pensioners stay while all the young people leave. He also tells us that iron has been mined here for centuries, that the town is iron and mining and has always been an important industrial hub. Then, with one thing and another, the industries started closing, the blast furnaces were moved elsewhere and this town, which reached a peak of nearly twenty thousand inhabitants in the thirties and forties¹⁸, has dwindled to just over four thousand [...].

We take our leave as time has got on and we have to be back in Leoben in time for dinner (i.e. before 7pm). Plus, we've got a busy day ahead of us tomorrow¹⁹.

From our first contact with the town, the main impressions are: the mountain, first and foremost, but also the mines, a population exodus, rather disenchanting hope for relaunching the area – especially as far as tourism is concerned – and a general feeling of resignation. These are also the main subject areas we investigated through the in-depth interviews²⁰. The basic idea was to understand the level of validity of certain symbolic structures relating to the Eisenerz community and the progressive process of deindustrialisation, in themselves and in relation to other trAILS pilot sites²¹. The founding hypothesis (the verification of which will have to wait for the conclusion of the project in 2021, therefore the present study should be viewed as interlocutory) is that it is possible to trace a number of lines of continuity between various communities

¹⁸ While gathering information before my first trip to Eisenerz, I discovered that, between 1943 and 1945, there was a sub-camp of the Mauthausen Lager around 100 kilometres from the town. Around 400 prisoners were held there, mostly put to work in the Erzberg mine or the connected activities. Today there is practically no trace of it (except for a stone in Präßlich commemorating the march of the Hungarian Jews who passed through there on their way to Mauthausen), or at least I was unable to find any. In any case, nobody spoke to me about it during my stay in Eisenerz and I did not ask.

¹⁹ From my field notes, 23/01/2019.

²⁰ The key informants we involved in the interviews included the town mayor, a local historian (formerly a schoolteacher but now retired), the parish priest, a worker from the Erzberg mining company and an 18-year-old student living in Eisenerz.

²¹ The case studies chosen for the trAILS project are Eisenerz (A), Borgo San Dalmazzo/Valdieri (I), L'Argentière-la-Bessée/La-Roche-de-Rame (F) and Tržič (SLO). For further information, see <https://Alpine-space.eu/projects/trails/en/home>.

on a transnational level, lines which industrial transformation sheds a bright light on. What we conjecture is that the idea that the passing of the meteor of industrial modernity in alpine areas (a process which, we remind you, lasted more or less for a century) unites the communities affected by it more than it is commonly believed. In other words, we pose the question whether the alpine space can be conceived (and therefore look to the future) as not only a single geographical but also cultural space, more homogeneous than one would believe by looking at the national borders criss-crossing it, a belief that, in a certain sense, the rise of the modern state has helped fuel (Poggi, 1988).

Starting from this hypothesis, we delved into some symbolic dimensions through the interviews and participation in community life: 1) *alpine identity* in internal and external representations; 2) *territorial integration*, in other words the way in which the “world” of iron (in the case of Eisenerz) fits into people’s lives and shape their work and life experiences, and the collective *heritagisation* and *memorialisation* of both industrial spaces and stories; 3) the *visions* and *predictions for the future*, both regarding the specific industrial site we asked them to think about and the community as a whole.

Let us now examine the results in detail.

5.1 The alpine identity

We asked our interviewees to describe how they would characterise the people of Eisenerz. The dominant representation which emerged gave us a rather *ambivalent picture*: one the one hand, the tough character of mountain folk – which they wear with pride – and on the other hand good-naturedness, reliability and strong bonds. ‘I think the people of Eisenerz are kind-of typical mountain folk [...] but we’ve also got a very loyal, reliable nature’ (int. 1); ‘we’re fairly reserved and hard to get to know, maybe because of our history of mining, but if you manage to get us to open up, we’re also open, reactive and close-knit’ (int. 2).

An interesting aspect to consider is the fact that, in some way, *the prevalence of mining has shaped the identity of this community over time*; this also affects the level of contamination with other peoples:

nowadays it’s almost impossible to find a pure ‘Eisenerzer’, because there’s always been a sort of colonisation of people from outside: before the First World War, then lots during the Nazi period when there was also a lot of construction work done, then again in the post-second-world-war period. People have always come from outside to live in Eisenerz [...]. There were hostleries for the ones from Burgerländ, others for the ones from Upper Austria. People arrived here from Bohemia, from Moravia ... (int. 3).

Lastly, *the aging population and a certain conservatism*: ‘they’re close types, especially the elderly; their lifestyle, how they behave, their ideas. I’d say they’re pretty conservative’ (int. 4). Moreover, ‘there are open people and closed people in Eisenerz. The former are very open and friendly, while the others are pretty stuck in their ways, for example they don’t want to have anything to do with tourism’ (int. 5).

In this writer’s opinion, the following interviewee best describes the defining characteristic:

Eisenerz has been strongly influenced by the monoculture of the mountain. For example, after the Second World War, there was only one employer (*Brotgeber*)²²: the mountain. Practically everyone here worked on the mountain and it paid for bringing up babies, setting up homes, every aspect of life (int. 3).

As can be seen, here the practical and symbolic theme of the unbreakable bond tying the population to the mine and its history emerges in high relief. It is interesting to observe how this interviewee described this bond with half-hidden ambivalence: on one side, the mountain as overlord; on the other, the mountain providing care to the people. We believe that this is one of the most significant issues to underline in our description of the social identity of this place, especially if we consider that ‘the uniqueness of a place cannot fail to arise from the merging of the social characteristics of the population and those of the context they act in’ (Mela, 2016: 83). The land, shaped and transformed by the people, shapes them in turn. Thus, the bond becomes truly unbreakable and visceral, which fact allows us to intuit how the decline in activities connected with the exploitation of minerals has generated consequences not only in terms of the local economy or landscape (with reference in particular to the abandoned sites) but also – and above all – regarding the social fabric, identities and quality of life; in a word, the very soul of the community. As we mentioned above (par. 4), we expected to find a certain amount of fraying of the social fabric, a new laxity in the form and structure of social bonds, but in Eisenerz this does not seem to be the case. On the contrary, we seem to have uncovered a strengthening of bonds and internal solidarity, a kind of closure of the ranks which could be put down to structural conditions (an aging population and depopulation) but also to the disorientation and culture shock these dynamics

²² This term has been the subject of lengthy discussions due to its ambivalence. Literally, the *brotgeber* is the ‘bread-giver’, but it is also the ruler which people submit to in order to get the bread. I feel that this is an important nuance.

may have unleashed, especially in a community which has based its reason for existence on mining since time immemorial.

In this light, it appears to be no accident that the most cohesive prediction for the future was stressed by the town's mayor, when saying – with great emotion – that 'Eisenerz will make it. It'll survive; maybe the population will dwindle, but whoever takes the reins in this town in future will do so because it'll still be a Styrian and Austrian town' (int. 2). We cannot fail to go back to the feeling of belonging described above, where we reported that the majority of the citizens of Eisenerz felt their identity on a local level (42.7% of respondents to the questionnaire), followed by those on a national level (23.6%), with those who felt European a minority (19.2%). We cannot and do not want to go further than the information we have shared strictly allows us to, but it is intriguing to note how, in this age of globalisation and real-time communication around the world, such a local-centric representation of the self has emerged. In this light, we re-used the category of 'deep Europe' to summarise the general meaning of the aspects we uncovered through our study.

Moreover, Eisenerz is faced with a concrete problem: depopulation. As we mentioned above, from 1951 to the present day, the population of the municipality has decreased from around 13,000 to 4,200, which in percentage terms is around 300%. The Eisenerz of today has basically the same number of inhabitants as it had in the mid-1800s (3,850 in 1869), before the demographic explosion brought about by the golden century of industrialisation. From our interviewees' perspective, this glaring problem is related to the decline of industry in the area, both regarding mining activities in general and – perhaps above all – regarding the Münichtal industrial site on which the trAILS project has been focussing its attention. As one interviewee said, 'just one figure: in 1962, there were 4,500 people working on Erzberg; now there are just 200. It's obvious that the mountain is one of the factors' (int. 3). If we look more closely, the Münichtal area seems to have a rather ambivalent effect on the causes of depopulation. For example, one interviewee stated that

Pilkington²³ played a central role in Eisenerz. In the golden age, it employed 160 people [...] then of course we fell into the trap of globalisation. We were restructured even though we were an excellent company with good sales figures, and so 160 people lost their jobs (int. 1)

while another added that this event led to 'quite a loss of trust in entrepreneurial abilities' (int. 3). However, another interviewee believed on the

²³ The name of the leading business in the automotive sector, which closed down in Eisenerz in 2008, leaving around 70 workers jobless.

contrary that ‘the closure of the industrial sites [...] isn’t the main problem. It would be truer to say that here we don’t have enough qualified workers.’ (int. 4). Once again we have the mountain playing a central role, this time viewed as a kind of Moira deciding the fate of the area. The town mayor sums it up well when he says that ‘many things have happened to bring about significant changes in Eisenerz: there’s a lot less work in the mines, and we’ve lost a lot. But Erzberg is still our biggest employer and it still stands here, like a monument for us’ (int. 2).

This last statement introducing the theme of the monumentalisation of the mountain and nature allows us to move on to the second dimension for study: the heritagisation of the industrial past.

5.2 The heritagisation of brownfields

As we mentioned at the beginning of this article, a certain type of collective imagery sees the mountains as a bucolic idyll. One of the dimensions we wanted to investigate was the relationship the interviewees have with the place they live in: the aspects and elements they feel are most important and defining, in a sense, the visiting cards they offer to visitors. We felt it was a rather interesting facet to study in order to understand some of the components of this community’s identity which have been inscribed on material culture (Secondulfo, 2012).

We believe it is safe to say that two major trends emerged: on the one hand, the heritagisation – let us call it mainstream – of the things and places one would expect to find, such as nature and the uncontaminated areas of this land, while on the other – more significant for our purposes – we also have the heritagisation of less clichéd things and material cultures, revolving around the world of industry and iron.

For example, when asked what would be the perfect excursion in Eisenerz, one of the interviewees replied, ‘for me, the point of access is the top of Erzberg. You just have to go up there...’ (int. 1). The mayor was on a similar wavelength: ‘of course, one of the most distinctive spots is our Styrian Erzberg’ (int. 2). The theme of the culture of industry and iron crops up in other places, for example:

I’d take you first of all to the fortified church of St. Oswald [...] it’s also a fortified castle that reminds us of the times when our whole Western world was threatened by the Ottomans, and it also bears witness to a piece of the industrial history of Eisenerz, as it was already an important place for iron 500-1,000 years ago [...]. Then, a visit to Erzberg, which has provided a living for people for thousands of years (int. 4).

FIGURE 3. View of Erzberg and of the Schlackenberg.



Some interviewees even suggested the *Schlackenberg*, an enormous pile of detritus and waste products from iron smelting which accumulated over decades behind the old power station (the only historical building still standing) on the Münichtal site (figures. 3 and 4). One of the interviewees told us this story: ‘when I came to Eisenerz I saw the mountain of detritus. A pile of waste like a kind of monument to twentieth-century industry [...]. It’s always been scary because animals sank into it, but even a child could have been lost in all that heap of tar’ (int. 3). In these testimonies, the theme of the mountain as an entity at one with the community and with the long history of industry it gave birth to returns yet again. Moreover, in the wake of the industrial transition, it has also been in a certain sense reinvented as a material component for the creation of an alpine identity. As has been observed, ‘à l’origine d’une attitude favorable à l’égard de la patrimonialisation des phénomènes et des signes industriels il y a la désignation de l’industrie en tant que ressource et vecteur de valeur économiques, sociales et culturelles partagées par un territoire’ (Lorenzetti and Valsangiacomo, 2016: 12-13). From this perspective, the Eisenerz case emerges as truly emblematic. Indeed, while when it comes to industrial sites (such as Münichtal), this selection process characterising every process constructing collective memory (Halbwachs, 1925) can theoretically be

implemented, when it comes to the mountain it cannot, as it is an irremovable part of the landscape. Its only destiny seems to be to undergo transformation (apart from the mining, which may continue to have an effect) into a kind of identity card for this place, or an unavoidable heirloom, a permanent brand. It is no accident that this mountain appears in every presentation, brochure or advertisement about the area. Whether stylised or reproduced faithfully, Erzberg is the undisputed lord of this land.

FIGURE 4. *View of Erzberg and of the Schlackenbergr.*



It will be interesting to compare the significance of these dynamics with the other pilot cases studied by the trAILS project and it could be even more so to attempt to describe how the Eisenerz community imagines itself and its relationship with these landmarks as it looks towards the future.

5.3 Vision for the future

This is precisely what we did, by investigating a third symbolic dimension through our interviews with key informants. We asked them how they imagined Eisenerz in fifty years' time. The answers we received oscillated between realist disenchantment and the occasional dream. 'Erzberg will still be there in fifty years' time and they'll find ways to encourage people to come here. And maybe

some will stay' (int. 4). 'I don't think Eisenerz has hit rock bottom yet as far as depopulation is concerned [...]. Life is slow-paced here and people only come here if they're looking for peace' (int. 1). 'I imagine a lovely place, well kept, with about 2,500-3,000 inhabitants [...]. We've got beautiful, untouched nature here [...]. We've got the most beautiful place in the world' (int. 3). 'Once you've been here once, it's a place you are happy to go back to' (int. 2).

Here we can once again see the same themes as above: work, depopulation, the mountain and nature, accompanied by a vague reference to an upturn related to tourism. Nevertheless, these replies and all that I have gleaned from my visits to Eisenerz have left a different impression on my mind. I feel I can say that this community struggles to imagine a future for itself, not so much in the sense that it does not want to, but rather that it feels difficult to release the destiny of this place from the millennia of history shaping it and from the grip of the globalisation processes it has fallen victim to. Below is another short extract from my ethnographic diary:

I decide to go for a walk around the town centre. It's Saturday morning: there are a few people in the main square. It's a gorgeous day – this late-winter day feels more like late spring. My meanderings take me upwards, towards the church of St. Oswald and then to the Shift Tower. The parish priest talked at length about these sites in his interview, so I decide to go and see them for myself. To his credit, the view is absolutely breathtaking [see fig. 4]. The town lies sleepily below, with a wreath of snow-capped mountains all around it. Then there's Erzberg, the ubiquitous Erzberg, always there with its terraces, its antennae, all the belts for transporting the iron ore at its foot. I'm invaded by a feeling of ambivalence: enchantment and disenchantment. These mountains are spectacular (and I feel at home here), but the marks of industry are incredibly powerful. How can this community manage to reinvent itself without help? And will it really have to? Does there have to be a new path, and does it have to be a choice between industry and tourism? [...]

Alone, it'll be really hard for them. They don't deserve to be abandoned to make plans for a future that, as far as outsiders are concerned, will never take shape. I think again about the old decaying industrial blocks dotted along the main road to Hieflau, about the old Münichtal power station, about the disappointed words of one of the owners of the site, who feels like he owns nothing, and about the piercing words of the co-worker who, in January, gave voice to what probably many people think but not many actually say:

'The fact of the matter is, all that needs done is to raze the place to the ground and be done with it.' I stay with the feeling of being suspended for a little longer as I continue to contemplate the nature around me, so powerful

when seen from above. And the contrast with the deserted town grows stronger²⁴.

I believe that the frankness of the young woman we interviewed in January is very revealing: 'I think that if nothing is done to improve the employment situation and the population continues to diminish, there'll be nothing to keep young people in Eisenerz' (int. 5).

6. Conclusions

Eisenerz seems to be responding to the process of deindustrialisation and industrial transformation with clearly defined characteristics and attitudes. It appears to be a compact unit which declares its readiness to take on the challenges thrown at it. It presents itself as a cohesive alpine community strongly distinguished by localised bonds of solidarity, a feeling of belonging, widespread trust in fellow citizens and a high level of participation in civic and political life. Here, the centrality of the mountain as a symbolic structure upon which and around which the inhabitants' identity is founded is beyond doubt; it is an entity which merges with the community, a community whose self-image is based on localism, despite the globalisation dynamics happening to and around it.

At this stage of the study – which will comprise several years of work and the involvement of three further pilot sites located around the Alps –, this article has been an attempt to identify and describe some of the dimensions which emerged as pertinent and significant to our investigation of the social context of a specific alpine community facing a time of industrial transformation.

In order to move from a descriptive level regarding an individual case study – the intrinsic limits of which we are well aware of – to an analysis which will allow us to confirm the solidity of the dimensions identified up to this point, trace lines of continuity between different alpine communities and draw up lists of the categories and elements characterising the whole mountain range in relation to the changes it is undergoing, we will have to wait for the next phase of the trAILS project. Only then will we be able to assess whether the Alps as a whole can be considered as a social and cultural – more than geographical – space characterised by homogeneous features and distinctive processes beyond national borders.

²⁴ From my field notes, 23/03/2019.

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