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Mountain communities between isolation and contamination

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According with the Alps and Carpathian Conventions, the European Landscape Convention, and the Birds, and Habitats Directives the research project “Access2Mountain”, illustrated in this book, aims to promote the improvement of the accessibility in mountain areas, as a crucial factor for their social, economic and cultural sustainable development, with particular regard for tourism. In the meanwhile, it aims to enlight methods, models and tools for the containment and the reduction of negative impacts of traffic, infrastructures and tourist flows on the environment, landscape and natural-cultural heritage, particularly in the most sensitive areas of South-East Europe. The landscape vision becomes the way to approach the analysis, interpretation and design. It requires a trans-scaled dimension, moving from the local level, to the environmental component, the interested context and the model region. The final output is a “system of thinking” for the decision making processes in sensitive mountain landscapes.

MOUNTAIN LANDSCAPES
A DECISION SUPPORT SYSTEM FOR THE ACCESSIBILITY

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Roberto Gambino

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Massimo Sargolini, Roberto Gambino

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Mountain communities between isolation and contamination

Federica Corrado, Giuseppe Dematteis

Stereotypes against Reality

As we know, the modern Western world learned to appreciate the mountain when romantic travellers contributed to change the old vision of *locus horribilis*, first through adopting the view that the horrible is sublime, then with Heidi's idyllic world. Since then, the mountain scenery that city people look for is one that combines the wildest face of nature with a more picturesque and idyllic one. The stark contrast between a dynamic environment represented by the city and the apparently static one of the mountain creates the *cliché* about the existence of many "small solidified worlds" (Debarbieux, 2006): small and different because they are all isolated; solidified because they are tightly connected to the unvarying laws of Nature. This is why in people's imagination, a trip to the mountains is like going back in time, to explore ancient landscapes and lifestyles in harmony with an idealised natural environment. Any kind of contrast to this nostalgic view bothers the visitor, even though streets, car parks, second homes, ski lifts and so on, are what allows them to access the mountains, spend their holiday there and cross it when they are in a hurry.

If the predominant collective imaginary of the mountain continues to be generated by an urban-industrial society it is also because in recent years mountain populations have not had voice in how to define and describe the places they belonged to (Mathieu, Boscani Leoni, 2005). This process started after economic marginalisation and the subsequent depopulation trend, which made this territory appear different only because it was at a disadvantage. For this reason, most mountain people accepted and enforced the view of the mountain as an unspoiled landscape rooted in traditions destined to become the playground for city people (Salsa, 2007).

As a consequence of this, for about a century, the image of the mountain as a romantic and idyllic escape has been the predominant general criteria to evaluate the mountain area, as opposed to the non-value deriving from the "original sin" of modern development (Batzing 2005). On one hand this has resulted in the protection of the natural environment and landscapes, on the other hand it has also favoured a conservative attitude based on "culture-territory-identity magic triangle" (Debarbieux, 2006) and the stagnant consequences it brings. Protecting means to foster meritorious initiatives such as parks, protected areas, eco-museums; while refusing change turns the mountain into a giant museum, impeding the normal evolutionary process of its territories in the contemporary world. To live in the illusion that it is possible to freeze the mountain landscape and its communities at one stage of their millenary evolution - a sort of imaginary Golden Age former to the depopulation trend started in the last century - would mean to deprive them of any development prospect. As it is obviously impossible to go back in time, it is necessary to accept that the mountain presents permanent natural handicaps that need to be addressed if we want it to survive.

In addition to this negative vision of the mountain as a disadvantaged territory, in the most recent documents of the European Union (e.g. the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, 2008), there is also the concept of a "different" territory, strategic in the view of a more sustainable development, due to its economic, environmental, energy and cultural potential. This has helped to change the orientation policies regarding the mountain territories, usually focused on assistance of these areas. Studies conducted on socio-economic and human sciences have highlighted an array of distinctive features of the mountains, deriving both from co-evolutionary relations between local communities and the natural environment, and from the relationship with the rest of the world. The differences with other geographical areas are that life spaces are all developed vertically (Messeri e Ives, 1997; Salsa, 2007), associated to the shape of the mountain, to climate, to waters and biocoenosis. In general it could be said that verticality - certainly not isolation - is the main factor favouring the two settling trends that have shaped and characterised the modern mountain environment, especially the alpine one. The first and most ancient one

was the seasonal exploitation of the vegetation areas and pedological features typical of the various altitudes as a result of transhumance and seasonal migration. Over the history they have influenced the territory in the use of the soil, agricultural and farming practices, settlements, landscapes, culture, social organisations and as a consequence also the legal and institutional organisation. The second trend, more recent, is that of mountain sports (usually taking place above 1000m), especially winter sports. In the last ten years, while old mountain trends were undergoing a gradual decline, this new trend has gradually become the main factor of economic growth in the internal mountain areas, under the point of view of settlements, employment, demography and infrastructures. If on one hand the first trend was largely diffused, the second was quite limited to a restricted number of areas, the ones with large ski resorts.

There are also aspects in common with non-mountainous areas, that in mountain areas, for better or for worse, have a stronger impact. For better, because of the large allocation of water, hydro-electric resources and forest biomass, biodiversity, the provision of "eco-systemic services", typical local products, cultural diversity with its rich material and symbolic heritage, the know-how connected to the numerous activities and multi-functionality of the territory, cooperative practices and community organisations for the management of collective properties, the simplification of cross-border relations. For worse, for hydro-geological risks, the higher vulnerability to climatic change, the reduction of agricultural production due to altitude, the obstacles represented by morphology and climate, to circulation and therefore the tendency towards isolation, the weak institutional structure and the subsequent lack of political autonomy of many territories, mere appendices of stronger external areas.

With these features, and not with the obsolete stereotypes created by the collective imaginary, mountain policies need to be confronted. For many mountain areas that have been left at the margins of modernity over the years, this means to restart the interrupted evolutionary path, through the contamination of the tangible and intangible heritage of tradition with innovative solutions appropriate to the natural, social and cultural environment, that need to keep its peculiarity also in the change.

Isolation and marginality

The Alps are an extremely complex and diversified territory, not only under the geographical point of view, but also for the territorial dynamic and the aspects that result from this development. Beside these polarising situations, seen in the framework of global development, that look at the mountain as an innovative and increasingly urban area, there are some areas characterised by great marginality, depopulation trends and lack of future projects. In this way, the alpine landscape assumes very different features: extreme wilderness at high altitudes to well looked-after alpine grazing, to fruit cultivations and vineyards. The entire alpine system is characterised by a variable territorial tension, due to the territorial discontinuity typical of the alpine territory: on one hand, a developed urban-mountain core able to redefine in different ways and according to the contexts, its alpine features; on the other hand, there are many territories that, like islands inside the Alps, remain outside the big development trends, scarcely involved in modernisation processes and too weak to rebuild innovative territorial dynamics. Bayliss-Smith (1977, p. 12) call them island ecosystem: "every small human community operating within well defined boundaries is relatively isolated". These territories have peculiar and well delimited geographical features, they are distant from urban centres, have poor infrastructures, they are not involved with what happens in other places, including the development processes taking place in their region. These peculiar characteristics also define social behaviours, demographical balance, cultural processes based on a strong community identity. This isolation strictly connected to space and time has brought the following consequences:

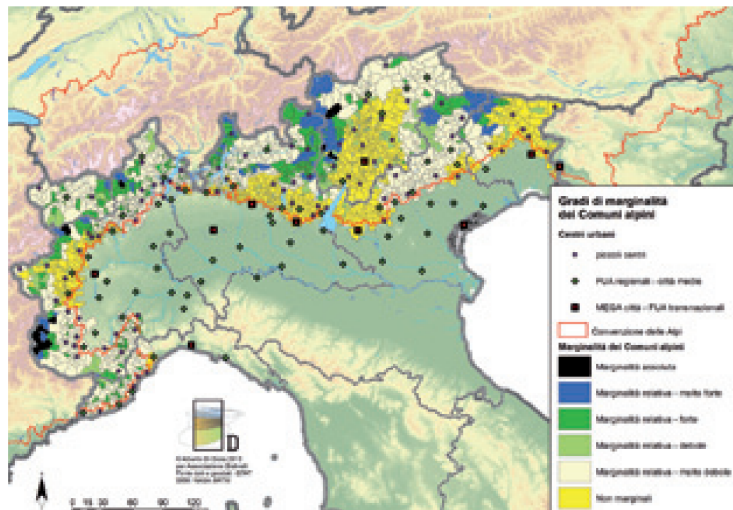
- the formation of alpine enclaves, generally at a high altitude, which have different insularity features. On the assumption that "no society is really isolated and self-sufficient", Netting (1981, 42), these territories-communities are characterised by a sort of closeness toward neighbouring communities and are generally open towards distant places, due to their ability/necessity to build long-distance networks, especially those connected to migratory phenomena from the past and present. As Viazzo (2005, p. 23) affirms: "After taking for granted that mountain populations were imprisoned in villages that could scarcely communicate between each other and with the plane areas due to geographical isolation, today they are insisting on the economical and cultural openness of alpine populations and on their mobility, well before recent transformations. Reflecting on isolation helps people against the danger of trivialising the outcomes of an interesting debate. The

only problem is that this debate, in my opinion, tends to conceive openness and closeness as two “packages” with characteristics that need to be either totally adopted or rejected. (...) The studies carried out in the last two years have stressed the importance of going beyond the open-closed dichotomy, because a variety of models of community have emerged, from very closed ones economically and structurally (such as Törrbel) and significantly open ones, due to migratory and commercial flows, such as Alagna, the walsler community in upper Valsesia, on which I have carried out long anthropological and historical and demographical research”;

- weak territories – in the words of Batzing (2005) – are not just physically disconnected from the alpine territory, but also disconnected culturally, socially, internally and above all economically. This is the result of the weakening of community bonds. In other words, these are areas that “collapse and slide towards the valley” (Morandini, Reolon, 2010), toward the nearest plane area, deprived of those necessary processes that help to revive and make the territory more liveable. They suffer from the gradual abandonment of cultivation land and forests, the population is prevalently old, production and services are in constant decline, and all of this brings to territorial implosion, making it incredibly difficult to remerge.

This profile of the alpine islands shows how isolation can develop into territorial marginalisation, because it triggers some tensions connected to the degree of accessibility/inaccessibility or openness/closeness on a single territorial system. As the figure 1 shows, in the Italian context the territories characterized by high level of marginality are located in the inner alpine area, far from the most important infrastructures and urban centres. Referring to the entire mountain global system, as emerges from a recent document of the FAO (2011), mountain populations are the most disadvantaged in the world, due to their climatic and environmental conditions, difficult access to services, business and decision-making centres, the time and cost of transport. In other words, this “remoteness” they are faced with, makes people living on these territories more flexible and able to find innovative solutions and it has earned them the fame to be “problem solvers”. The changing situations therefore turn marginality into a resource: “marginality could represent an advantage for competition. For some it could be an attraction factor: tourists looking for unspoiled landscapes or, even better, wild. (...) They would never go in a village aimed at mass tourism, on the contrary they prefer to repopulate the abandoned village, live in the houses that others have left. Inaccessibility is an added value, because what is accessible is also depersonalised (Calvaresi, Ridenti, 2010, p. 231)”. The gaps in these territories are certainly very large, especially in what concerns economic revival, however they have at the same time a hidden potential, that if exploited, could generate new alternative forms of development. That is to say, if marginality is positively exploited, it could use the idea of “slow places”, as Lancerini puts it (2005), and create a differ-

Figure 1: Levels of marginality in the Italian Alpine territories



ent type of development, more suitable, and in some ways even more original, for many alpine areas. In other words, as also Remotti affirms (2011), these territories live in a paradox, because the very places where territorial networks are scarce, there is a significant creativity potential strictly connected to local conditions. This slowness is therefore the bearer of new projects, alternative to the traditional forms of mountain development.

Contamination processes

This new vision of marginality, as a propelling force for new future projects, is perfect for the alpine areas, where resilience could be put to the test (FAO, 2011). As stated by Bonomi (2013, p. 67) “resilience is the opposite of rigidity, you endure to move forward, not to withdraw into sadness and desperation again. You do it to open up to hope, as a conscious aspiration to a new future”. An example of this are the recent experiences in the field of tourism, such as those in the Sauris and Maira valleys, where the initial social, cultural, economic and geographical isolation due to the difficult accessibility over the years has created a sort of “territorial preservation” rooted in the local community, that has now become the trigger for development when combined with long-distance external networks.

This is a paradox in the development path: thanks to poverty, abandonment, lack of interest towards these places in comparison to the winter sport paradises, it has now been possible to start some interesting innovative experiences: from the creation of the “albergo diffuso” (literally, scattered hotels) in Sauris to the experimentation of a series of integrated economic activities partly connected to soft tourism, partly to craftsmanship and local know-how; the existence of tours and Occitane inns in the Maira valley, a symbol of unique culture and identity, a more refined way of perceiving accommodation and catering for tourism, in close contact with the local nature. These initiatives are catering for a specific touristic niche market, interested in nature, agri-tourism and so on. They are also interested in having authentic mountain experiences and therefore, they avoid those paradises where everything is easily accessible with any means of transport.

As these examples demonstrate, the possibility to avoid marginalisation by enhancing the underestimated local potential is based on two factors: the objective presence of specific territorial resources (natural and cultural) and the subjective perception of the potential customers. The latter is the one that has changed the most in recent years, generating a new demand for new forms of tourism (eco-tourism, culinary tourism, etc), housing, typical products, with positive consequences in the setting up of new activities in the field of accommodation and catering, the recovery of building, bio-architecture, environmental engineering, cultivations (fruit, grapevines, etc), farming, industrial and craftsmanship production in different sectors: building, agri-food, wood, home furnishings, etc. A new demand has also developed, concerned about the environmental sustainability which has induced changes also in the use of traditional resources in favour of renewable ones, with the set up of small hydropower stations, biomasses for cogeneration power plants. In the agricultural field the use of biotechnologies for the pure breeding and animal breeds is improving, together with the development of biodynamic and bio-agriculture.

These hybridisation processes, generated by a virtuous process which blends what it is internally (in local culture, landscape, environment, etc.) and what it is externally (financial and cultural resources, new infrastructures, also virtual ones), the past represents the roots for the future while modernity and tradition are used in an innovative way: dialogue with others is a necessary component to stimulate cultural creativity and the “native renaissance” (Viazzo 2012, p. 192).

Conclusions

The view of mountain communities as lonely islands, relegated in their fossilised traditional identity and condemned to marginalisation comes from an old vision, typically urban, that has only recently started to crumble, thanks to new studies and policies. First of all, it is important to consider that in mountain areas there are small and medium size centres working as development and regeneration engines, also for the surrounding territories. Other development centres have developed around large winter sports resorts. Nevertheless, there are still vast fragmented areas living in isolation, suffering from demographic decline and abandonment of territorial capital. Their local communities are objectively marginalised economically and socially. Although these communities keep their very strong identity, they do not seem able to enhance it and use it to evolve and develop, as happens for the stronger

plane and coastal areas. Examples of good practices demonstrate how the same conditions that have led to marginalisation could be turned into potential, enhancing competitiveness. The main reason being that the mountain is marginal and less transformed by recent urbanisation, for this reason it offers plenty of resources lacking elsewhere, such as water, forests, biodiversity and eco-systemic services connected to it, historical, architectural and landscape heritage, diversified know-how and social and cultural capital. Such resources were once the basis of traditional economy, as opposed to what it is today. Nevertheless, if we wish to exploit them in a sustainable way, we cannot ignore the heritage and know-how of which the local communities are custodians. This concerns agriculture, qualitative local production, eco-friendly building techniques and all the practices and community organisations built up over the centuries, the result of an obstinate adaptation to change to specific environmental conditions. The main obstacle to the exploitation of this potential is the socio-demographical weakening of local communities, which need young well-educated people with technical and entrepreneurial capabilities. It is becoming necessary to employ people from other places, as they bring knowledge and abilities which are different to the traditional ones and are able to take the legacy. This means to give way to innovative projects based on cultural hybridisation, different from those typical of colonisations - cultural and economical - of mountains in the past by stake holders, interested in exploiting mountain resources to the advantage of external areas. The positive innovative use of the mountain today is mainly connected to its new inhabitants (Corrado, Dematteis e Di Gioia 2014), who can start new collective processes in which economic development creates employment, and as a consequence more inhabitants, services and infrastructures, less isolation and marginalisation.

**“Stereotypes against Reality” and “Conclusion” written by Giuseppe Dematteis;
“Isolation and Marginality” and “Contamination processes” written by Federica Corrado.**

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9.2

Mountain Identities and Accessibility

Massimo Sargolini

In writing this essay, I realise that many of these ideas emerge from my past, from growing up in a valley, spending my adolescence in mostly natural mountainous areas that were little changed by processes of anthropisation, from my unbounded passion for mountain climbing and skiing as well as walking, which then grew ever closer to travel. These are passions that I have never lost sight of, not even when I established contacts with the city so I could study at university. Even today, when I return home (in the heart of the Apennines) I feel a sense of peace, of detachment from the tumult and chaos of modernity, but at the same time, I recognise that the relationship with the city is necessary and I feel a need to measure appropriately the different forms of accessibility that modern day has made available. I feel that people living in the mountains need the city at least as much as city dwellers need the mountain, for reasons that run much deeper than scholastic education or touristic recreation. What is natural and what is artificial are contrasted, juxtaposed, run after each other, look for each other. New horizons, new territorial balances, new economies can originate from this reciprocal need and in this way accessibility becomes the first theme of investigation.

Different Scenarios

Studying the accessibility of a mountain area, verifying that unstable and continuously changing balance between the preservation of identity and improving the area's use is a central challenge for anyone occupied with governing fragile areas and areas of landscape interest. In rather different terms, this deals both with those areas that are marginal and secondary to the large displacement fluxes and mass tourist attractions, where the minimum vital infrastructure for essential services is still not guaranteed (such as many regions in the Carpathians), and with those areas that are now consolidated destinations for a large number of users from important nearby inhabited centres, as is the case for many regions in the Eastern Alps, where there are already numerous technologically advanced solutions for approach and access that have already been reinterpreted under the model of sustainability.

When observing the Alps, two visions emerge, which present themselves as strong alternatives:

- a flattening of the characteristics of recognisability due to an uncritical and strict hardening to the prevalent encroachment of global civilisation. A “celebration of everything generic as the conclusive definition of the modern city” (Martin Blas, 2011), which “finally feels free of the local identity” (Koolhaas, 1995) prevails in the settlement fabric;
- a preservation of residual traces of the old civilisation, supported by a nostalgia for times past; a sort of romantic idealism contrasting with the degeneration of globalisation (Bonesio, 2002). The differences and distinctive characteristics of a city or a site prevail. The morphological specifics and their topography, the characteristics of the fabric, cultures, and traditions that have produced it are highlighted (Morales-de Solà, 1996).

Observing the Carpathians in parallel, two opposing trends are seen, which are capable of evolving and contaminating each other:

- the progressive expansion of urban, physical, and cultural pressures from the valley floor and plain towards the mountain, which tends to conform behaviours and homogenise territories to mitigate differences;
- the formation of some islands local uniqueness to be protected and enhanced, while the modern context moves towards completely different horizons and perspectives that tend to ignore any local identifying value.

In both case studies, the objective difficulty emerges of defining a specific mountain culture (Tylor, 1871), which cannot be identified by governance processes, users' behaviour, or the expectations of