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Giacomo Pettenati

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Maira Valley (Piedmont): a territorial laboratory of a new mountain population

Giacomo Pettenati

- ¹ The words of historian Luigi Zanzi, from Lombardy, effectively show how important it is to re-evaluate the relationship between mountain areas and people living there. The superficial idea according to which alpine societies and economies are marginal and underdeveloped compared to those of urban areas, lowlands and tourist centers is to be put aside. Just like what happened in French valleys a couple of decades ago, the new mountain peoples – those who Zanzi refers to – play an increasingly important role in Italian mountain areas. Their active approach towards the territory and its resources minimizes the effects of the decline in population. This is made possible through a new process of population (in terms of quality) of the mountain which is reterritorialized with new networks and projects that restore the dignity of local territories. This way, mountain areas can reduce disparities as compared to urban areas. The purpose of the present article is to provide an in-depth look on the role of the new inhabitants of the Maira Valley – a symbolic example of repopulation in the Italian side of western Alps (Bartaletti, 2004; Dematteis, 2011) – by showing the results of the interviews made to 36 new inhabitants of the valley. The sample of the 36 people interviewed is composed of adults who deliberately chose to move to one of the villages of the valley and settle there. Despite the interviews were made within different research projects¹, they all focus on the reasons why people chose to move to Maira Valley and on their relationships with their new territory. Interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2013 in the municipalities of Canosio, Stroppio, Acceglio and San Damiano Macra.

Depopulation and new population of the western sector of Italian Alps

- 2 Since the beginning of the XIX century, western Alps have gone through an unprecedented demographic revolution that disrupted the fragile equilibrium between population, resources and environment. This fragile equilibrium had characterized the area since the Middle Age (Bätzing, 2005). It only took a couple of decades for the majority of Italian and French² mountain municipalities to lose a large part of the population. The youngest and most active segments of the population left their hometowns and moved to the valley bottoms, industrialized towns, lowlands or abroad. Seasonal emigration of some groups of the population, has always been a way, for alpine communities, of compensating the excessive population density of winter months, when the harsh climate conditions and the consequent decrease in resources and job opportunities determined a situation of forced unemployment that some have called *chômage hivernal* (Viazzo, 1989). But in this period seasonal immigration established itself as a definite trend. It was no longer a matter of temporary compensation between population and resources but it became the key factor of an imminent social and economic decline (Salsa, 2007). This emigration process has a threefold consequence: firstly it caused the end of the traditional alpine civilization (Camanni, 2002), secondly it led to the progressive marginalization of mountain areas and thirdly it transformed many valleys in what the writer Nuto Revelli (1977) has called *il mondo dei vinti* – the world of losers. Amongst the main causes of this trend are the heavy industrialization of the lowlands and the development of intensive farming that pushed mountain economies to background (Bätzing, 2005). Also, not to forget is the attraction exerted by the new cultural model of urban lifestyle that played a major role in the emigration wave of the early 1900s (Salsa, 2007).
- 3 However, since the '70s of the last century, despite the main reasons that pushed people to leave the most isolated mountain areas were still there, some rural mountain areas of French Alps – Beaufortain (Fourny, 1994) and Diois (Cognard, 2006)³ – saw the first signs of a reverse in trend. As for Italy, the repopulation of mountain areas was first observed during the mid '80s. In the western part of the Alps, the trend was more pronounced in the Cuneo Valleys: Maira Valley, Varaita Valley and Po Valley; the very same valleys that were mostly affected by the emigration process during the past decades (Bartaletti, 2004; Dematteis, 2011).
- 4 Compared to tourist valleys and the nearby lowland areas, the mountain regions which are experiencing repopulation are still marginalized from a social and economic point of view and they offer less job opportunities (Crescimanno *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, people who choose to move there belong to the category of *amenity migrants* (Moss, 2006; Perlik, 2006) which is to say those migrants who decide to move to a non-urban context (a mountain area in this particular case) because of the high environmental value they attach to it and the presumed better quality of life.⁴ Other categories of new mountain inhabitants, with different relationships with their new area of settlement, are *economic migrants* (Chipeniuk, 2004) or *necessitati* (Dematteis, 2011), which move to mountain areas driven by economic reasons, and *third-age migrants* (Perlik, 2006), which move there once retired.
- 5 The new inhabitants object of this study have an active approach towards the territory, theirs is an *active territoriality*. This can be explained by the fact that they deliberately

chose to live on the mountains. As a consequence, their attitude and their projects significantly differ from the ones of the people born and bred in the area, who tend to have a passive attitude towards the disadvantages presented by the area itself (Salsa, 2007). Their choice to move to a mountain area is part of a personal and professional project whose key component is the new place of residence (Cognard, 2006).

- 6 For all the above reasons, many observers believe that the protagonists of this new alpine population play a pivotal role in countering the “spiral of marginalization” (Buran *et al.*, 1998) affecting many valleys. From this perspective, the future of mountain areas largely depends on these new mountain people who are taking responsibility for the safeguard of alpine environment and culture. They display an *existential resistance* against the difficulties of living on the mountains (Zanzi, 2004) and they use local resources in an innovative way, while they were previously used in a traditional way (Corrado, 2011). As Magnaghi (2000) points out, local development is determined by the fact that new cultures, new inhabitants and new producers take care of the environment, acquire new expertise and transform the territory thanks to the influence of different cultures.

The territory: Maira Valley

- 7 Maira Valley belongs to Cottian Alps and it stretches approximately 60 km in an east-west direction from the bottom of the valley – where the town of Dronero serves as a functional center – to the French-Italian watershed of Mount Chambeyron and Mount Sautron. The two mountains separate Maira Valley from French Valleys Ubaye and Ubayette to which, historically, it had been connected by Col Maurin. Most part of the valley presents a particularly narrow morphology, to the point that the first carriage road was only built in the XVII century. The road drove from the lower part of the valley and lowlands of Piedmont to the higher part of the valley which was previously more closely connected to transalpine valleys.
- 8 From an administrative point of view, the territory of Maira Valley has fourteen municipalities, all except Busca, are classified as mountain municipalities, according to Italian legislative definitions⁵. The placement of the villages follows the irregular morphology of the valley and seven administrative centers are above 1,000 m. asl. (Prazzo, Stroppa, Acceglio, Canosio, Marmora and Elva).
- 9 As the table 1 shows, the distribution of Maira Valley population is uneven. 80% of the overall population of the valley is concentrated in the four big municipalities at the bottom of the valley, also as a result of the recent immigration wave that privileged Roccabruna, Busca, Villar San Costanzo and Dronero. All others municipalities have less than 200 residents, with the sole exception of San Damiano Macra, which counts slightly more than 400 inhabitants (Istat data, 2011).

Table 1. Demographic evolution of Maira Valley municipalities

Municipality	Altitude asl (administrative centers)	1931	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Acceglio	1200 m	1254	911	658	509	355	238	197	174

Prazzo	1030 m	1275	1029	787	516	360	282	218	175
Canosio	1323 m	399	270	241	162	136	106	93	82
Marmora	1223 m	645	446	353	211	173	140	99	74
Stroppo	1087 m	982	635	462	262	186	124	108	107
Macra	875 m	861	582	349	155	107	81	61	52
Celle di Macra	1270 m	1194	758	528	216	193	147	105	93
San Damiano Macra	743 m	3208	2149	1524	1017	690	548	477	439
Cartignano	704 m	817	440	357	241	204	177	170	178
Elva	1637 m	801	556	396	252	199	154	114	94
Dronero	622 m	7950	6615	6670	7107	7124	6969	7012	7205
Roccabruna	640 m	2370	1865	1506	1208	1177	1308	1460	1589
Busca	500 m	8895	8458	7787	7851	8182	8913	9469	10049
Villar San Costanzo	605 m	2152	1910	1641	1451	1223	1207	1396	1502

Source: Istat

- 10 The population decline of Maira Valley that started in the XX century and firstly affected the municipalities of the higher part of the valley has continued up until a few years ago. As a consequence of the depopulation, all municipalities of the middle and high valley lost between 80% (Canosio) and 94% (Macra) of the population, whereas the municipalities of the low valley maintained their population level (figure 1).

Figure 1. The demographic evolution of the municipalities of the Maira Valley compared to 1931 population. (=100%)

SOURCE: ISTAT DATA

- 11 The *malessere demografico* (“demographic sickness”) (Golini *et al.*, 2000) affecting the valley had a significant economic impact, to the point that the main socio-economic studies on Italian mountain areas, consider the valley to be very marginal (Crescimanno *et al.*, 2010). What is left of the local economy is mostly based on agriculture, livestock (bovines, sheeps and goats), winter and summer tourism – not mass tourism – (hicking, skiing) and construction industry (Piedmont Region, 2012). The scarce anthropic intervention and the scarce accessibility of the last decades led to and increased state of wilderness and to an improved quality of the environment, defining it as an “*area eco sistemica di elevata integrità e bellezza*” – ecosystem of high integrity and beauty (Crescimanno *et al.*, 2010).
- 12 From a cultural point of view, during the ‘70s of the XX century, the Maira Valley and the majority of Alpine Piedmont valleys rediscovered (or discovered for the first time, as some claim) the value of the Occitan language and culture. Since then, Occitan culture has been a key component of the local identity and it has also played an important role at political level and for the development of the territory (Pla-Lang 2008).

Research: new inhabitants of Maira Valley

- 13 As it has already been stated, the factors which caused the isolation of the valley (low tourism, high environmental quality, rural society) are the very same elements of attractions that over time have led to a slow but constant repopulation of the area. Over a few decade time, the population process has influenced the development of the valley, which is today a case in point, among Italian alpine valleys, of the new

population trend which has already been discussed in the first paragraph (Camanni, 2002; Bartaletti, 2004; Dematteis, 2011).

- 14 The first signs of this new trend appeared at the beginning of the '80s. Young people mostly from Piedmont lowland cities (Turin and Cuneo) moved to Maira Valley and other valleys nearby: Grana, Varaita, Po and Stura. Their decision was driven by different factors: family links with the area, the rediscovery of Occitan identity – whose importance was increasing during those years in Piedmont – and the political will to pursue an alternative lifestyle to that of industrial cities. Dozens of households followed the first *pioneers* steadily. They mostly came from Piedmont, but also from other regions such as Lombardy and Liguria and from other European countries: Germany, Austria and Switzerland. As a consequence, in some municipalities of the valley, today, most of adults of working age are not native. The rate of new inhabitants on the total population makes of Maira Valley a “territorial laboratory”⁶ where the characteristics and the impact of the population process in marginal alpine areas can be observed.
- 15 It is important to stress that the repopulation of the valley it is not to be considered from a quantity point of view but rather from a quality one. In terms of quantity, the high average age of the population does not allow to see the reversal of the trend but speaking of quality, almost all interviewees have personal or professional projects (Cognard, 2006) of which the mountain area, and its resources, are essential components.
- 16 Table 2 shows the profiles of the 36 people interviewed between 2008 and 2013 within the research project that lead to the considerations discussed in the present article. Next paragraph provides an in-depth look on some of the aspects of the relationship between the new inhabitants and the Maira Valley, with a focus on their roles on the social, economic and cultural development of the valley.

Table 2. Results of the interviews to 36 “new inhabitants” of the Maira Valley

People interviewed: 36		
Age	20-30	4
	30-40	4
	40-50	18
	50-60	8
	60-70	2
Origin	Piedmont	24
	Other parts of Italy	6
	Abroad	6
Professional sector ⁷	Service sector (education, health, etc.)	7

	Handicraft	5
	Agriculture/livestock	8
	Construction industry	5
	Tourism (facilities, food and beverage etc.)	16
<i>Elements of active territoriality/innovation</i>	Local associations with a focus on territory	6
	Politics	4
	Innovative agriculture (organic and multifunctional agriculture, equestrian tourism etc.)	6
	Teleworking	2

The territorial impact of the new population in the Maira Valley

Active territoriality of new inhabitants

- 17 The territoriality⁸ of many of the new inhabitants of the valley can be defined as *active*. Subjects involved show a proactive attitude, play important roles and take innovative actions to implement resistance strategies instead of being subjected to control strategies (Governa, 2005). This way, they ignite change and innovation. Their active commitment in the life of the community is demonstrated by their participation in two fundamental spheres: politics and economy. At the 2009 local elections, the two candidates for mayors of Stroppio, for example, were both new inhabitants, and so were the majority of town councillors (9 in 12) elected in that same elections. Besides their political commitment at an official level, they also play a proactive role at an unofficial political level (Painter and Jeffrey, 2009): they are the founders of local associations aimed at promoting the area (e.g. tourist associations), they carry out projects for the development of the territory, they hold debates about living on the mountains. Many of them are the protagonists of a *territorial projectuality* that combines familiar and professional perspectives with projects on a supralocal scale with the aim of enhancing the territory where they live⁹.
- 18 A further demonstration of the active attitude of the new inhabitants towards the territory is their professional choices. The business they run are characterized by a high technological level, compared to the socio and economic context where they operate. This is true for both the people who moved to the area during the first phase of the migration process and for those who have moved there recently. The former undertook tourism activities such as equestrian tourism or embraced multifunctional agriculture – very unusual activities at that time – the latter are committed in organic farming, use new technologies as teleworking and run tourism facilities that are part of supralocal and international networks.

- 19 Also, the territoriality of the new inhabitants is multi-local and multi-scalar because they belong to wide territorial networks which link the Maira Valley to their hometowns (in Italy and abroad) and to other places interested by the same trend of mountain new population.

The reterritorialization of villages

- 20 The new inhabitants often move to abandoned or very isolated places from a social and territorial point of view. They establish a presence in the territory and create a new territory by reshaping the previous one which was about to get lost. In geography this trend can be interpreted through the territorialization – deterritorialization – reterritorialization cycle proposed by Raffestin (1984). When a place loses its ability to function, then it also loses the elements of its territoriality. At this point, a reterritorialization process can begin. New functions can emerge, a new value is given to the place which becomes a new territory. San Martino Inferiore (Stroppo) in the Maira Valley is a case in point. Until the '50s, the rural village was well populated, just like many other villages of the valley. Over the following decades a great depopulation process left the village abandoned and in ruins. In the early '90s a German couple found out about San Martino Inferiore and bought a house there. They renewed the house and turned it into an accommodation facility. Since then, San Martino has attracted new inhabitants and has been the most popular village with German tourists of the Maira Valley. The village has now a new territoriality; the alpine rural village territoriality has disappeared because of the depopulation and San Martino has become the hub of a tourist and cultural network (figure 2).

Figure 2. The reterritorialization process of the village of San Martino Inferiore (Stroppo)

The slow-down of the marginalization process

- 21 One of the main factors that causes the marginalization of a low populated rural area is that the size of the population does not justify the presence of services and economic activities (Buran *et al.*, 1998). The new wage of inhabitants of working age resulted in an increase in local service users and economic activities in the valley. According to the information gathered, local shops and schools mostly benefited from it. The interviewees are well aware of the major active role they play in their community life, as shown by their explicit choice of shopping in the few shops of the valley whose presence on the territory is very important.
- 22 Data seem to support this theory. At the end of the '90s (Buran *et al.*, 1998), Stroppo ranked fifteen in the list of the most marginal municipalities of Piedmont from a socio-economic point of view, while, in a more recent list, it is not in the last twenty positions (Crescimanno *et al.*, 2010). According to the information obtained from the interviews, the arrival of the new inhabitants significantly (but not exclusively) contributed to the formation of a socio-economic fabric which is seen by young people (aged 20-35) as a sufficient condition to stay and live in the valley. The percentage of young people who shared the same opinion a couple of decades ago was much lower, according to the outmigration trends. The 2012 population census confirms this data, all villages of the high Maira Valley have a positive migratory balance.

The importance of localizing factors

- 23 The interviews to the new inhabitants of Maira Valley suggest that some characteristics of the territory serve as localizing factors of attractions (*pull factors*). One of the main factor is the amenities offered by their new place of residence. The villages which experienced the highest level of reterritorialization are those located in the sunny side of the valley, in a high quality environment and not too close to the main road that runs through the valley (although car access is an important element when it comes to choose where to live).
- 24 Another important element that influences the choice of the inhabitants is the availability of residential buildings which is higher in the villages further away from the road and less popular among tourists. Moreover, the choice of the new residence is also highly influenced by the availability of relatively close services, namely primary and secondary schools, grocery stores and internet access.

Conclusions

- 25 The research on the territorial impact of the presence of new inhabitants in a marginal mountain area such as the Maira Valley would need further exploration. A structured comparison with other areas¹⁰ and the involvement of natives would help analyze in a more detailed way the relationships between new inhabitants and the territory and those between natives and the territory.
- 26 However, given the size of the research sample in relation to the amount of population living in the valley, several conclusions can be drawn. As already stated at the beginning of the article, the Maira Valley can be considered as a "territorial

laboratory” where the population process can be studied. The arrival of new inhabitants determined an important change in the evolution of the territory in terms of local dynamics and its relationship with other mountain (or non-mountain) areas.

Repopulation is a spontaneous process which takes place even without targeted policies.

- 27 The first aspect to be considered is immigration policies and policies that promote the settlement of new inhabitants in mountain municipalities. At present time, Italy has no structural policies to attract new inhabitants in marginal mountain areas, except for a few and scarcely efficient cases. Despite that, for almost 20 years, thousands of people have moved to and settled in several alpine valleys. In many cases migrants also work there because they believe that the mountain area offers better personal and professional perspectives than urban areas or lowlands. The population process also took place thanks to a sort of “ripple effect”. The reterritorialization of certain areas countered what seemed an irreversible marginalization trend and served as an example to other territories and people. Following the example of the good practices already in place, the new inhabitants launched similar projects and contributed to the formation of the new social and cultural fabric which is considered by the most recent migrants an important element of attraction.

There cannot be a new, solid and widespread repopulation, without basic services.

- 28 A second element that needs to be taken into account is the availability of services for the population. Almost all interviewees agreed that having access to a set of basic services – schools for children being one of them – is a fundamental element to support their future projects. In a time of economic restriction, services are affected by general cuts, but without the guarantee of basic services it is impossible not only to implement sustainable policies, that promotes territorial cohesion and reduce the socio-economic isolation of these marginal areas, but also to support the spontaneous ongoing trends that increase the attractiveness of mountain areas.

The new inhabitants establish a new relationship between mountain and urban areas.

- 29 The relationship which the new inhabitants have established with the territory, greatly contributed to overcome the position of inferiority – especially on a cultural level – as compared to the city, which over the past century has characterized many mountain areas. Today many of the inhabitants of Maira Valley come from the city. They chose to live in a mountain area because they believe it offers better resources to fulfill their personal and professional goals. These former residents of cities, do not see the mountain as a marginal area or a leisure destination, but more as a place where to develop their projects. This new idea of the mountain, overturns the traditional – and perhaps stereotyped – relationship between mountain and urban areas, as shown by the numerous events organized by the new inhabitants – often gathered in associations

– whose purpose is to discuss about the future of the mountain and where the city and its experts are always welcomed guests but without a leading role.

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NOTES

1. The beginning of my research work on the population of the Maira Valley matched with the realization of a dissertation in Geography (Prof. Egidio Dansero). More dissertations on the same topic followed (Novalp research is still ongoing) and they were supported by *Associazione Dislivelli* (Turin) and the *Coordinamento Donne di Montagna*, headquartered in the Maira Valley.
2. In France, the population decline of the Alps started around 1860, while in Italy the trend was first observed during the '30s of the XX century (Bätzing, 2005).
3. The present article won't deal with the repopulation of peri-urban alpine municipalities which underwent what Bätzing (2005) calls the "metropolization" of mountain areas, a trend that affects both French (Barthes 2006) and Italian Alps (Turri 2004, for an in-depth look on the whole Alp chain, Perlik *et al.*, 2001).
4. See in this respect the final report of Interreg IVC PADIMA project (Policies Against Depopulation in Mountain Areas) titled "Strategies to increase the attractiveness of mountain areas: how to approach depopulation in an integrated manner?"
5. The Italian Legislation does not provide a clear and official definition of "mountain area". The present article refers to the classification used by Ires Piemonte (Crescimanno *et al.* 2010) that matched legislative definitions with altitude zones of the Istat census.
6. The idea of the Alps as the most qualified laboratory where to experiment an alternative development was introduced by, among others, Camanni (2002).
7. The figure in this section is higher than 36 because a number of interviewees have professions that belong to more than one category e.g. agriculture and tourism.
8. The topic of "territoriality" – much debated in geography – won't be examined in depth in the present article. Territoriality is here to be intended as concrete ways of shaping the territory, as opposed to the ways in which people relate to the territory (Dansero *et al.*, 2003).
9. The most interesting examples are the *Coordinamento Donne di Montagna* and the *Associazione Alte Terre*.
10. This is what the research project of *Associazione Dislivelli* focuses on (NOVALP research).

ABSTRACTS

The western sector of Italian Alps, since the '80s, has been experiencing a re-population process after a long period of social, cultural and economic isolation due to a long emigration process. An increasing number of households and individual citizens are moving from urban areas and lowlands to mountain areas where they set up innovative businesses and develop personal projects. The present article seeks to investigate the roles that the new inhabitants play at a social and economic level in the Maira Valley. For the importance and the scale of the phenomenon, the Maira Valley is considered a particularly interesting “territorial laboratory”, as confirmed by the results of two researches conducted between 2008 and 2013. The interviews to 36 new inhabitants of the area showed that they have a particularly strong relationships with the territory because the territory itself is at the core of their life projects. As a consequence, many areas of the valley – previously affected by depopulation and no longer able to serve their functions – repopulated thus countering the process of social and economic marginalization. At the same time, the research shows the need for targeted policies to support the trend, make it sustainable over time and able to reshape local dynamics.

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Keywords: Italian Alps, Piedmont, new inhabitants, marginalization, local development

AUTHOR

GIACOMO PETTENATI

Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning, Politecnico of Turin,
giacomo.pettenati@polito.it