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Palimpsest of collective identities in the lower Valais

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Introduction: Origin of the research

“I shall remind you here of my own warning:
‘Societies are never what they seem to be, nor
what they say they are’.”¹
(Balandier, 2004, p. 23)

- 1 It was while I was undertaking a study on another issue, which I have conducted for several years in the Val d’Anniviers (Amrein, 2013), a valley in the canton of the Valais whose characteristics are similar to those of the valleys in which this present study was conducted, that I came to observe that even if the influence of migrants on the local societies was obviously significant, it was not given much study, nor has it received much attention in discourses, be they scientific, secular, or covered by the media. It seemed, in fact, that the ever-increasing number of “strangers” that have arrived in the valley over three or four decades – whether they were “non-locals” in the sense commonly used in the Valais, that is to say anyone not originally from there, or migrants from a country other than Switzerland – had played an important part both in the economic sphere and in everything concerning the evolution of the representations. Owing to a phenomenon of blindness or because of a strategy of identity, a political interest or the promotion of tourism, this phenomenon was rarely highlighted.
- 2 This observation led to the project of investigating in a neighbouring territory the path taken by a number of people who were migrants, from the moment of their initial decision to leave their country of origin until their arrival in Switzerland and their progressive integration in a number of Alpine villages. Our research field, located

around the crossroads-town of Martigny, includes the valleys of Bagnes, Entremont and Trient, as well as Fully, a large commune in the Rhône plain².

- 3 This region was chosen because of the socio-economic diversity of the communes constituting it, but also because our study was partly financed by the “Regional Centre for Study of Alpine Populations” (CREPA),³ which sets up and co-finances⁴ numerous scientific research studies aimed at attaining inside knowledge of the area circumscribing the aforementioned communes.
- 4 Regarding the subject proposed by this number of the *Revue de Géographie Alpine*, we must state that we came to deal with a large number of cases of migrants who were “mountain-dwellers by choice” (Corrado, 2013; Dematteis, 2010), even what one might call “amenity” migration (Moss, 1996, Perlik, 2011), but these “new inhabitants” (Zanini, 2013) or “neo-Valaisans” do not settle in zones that could be qualified as “depopulated” (*ibid.*), peripheral, or even marginal. Moreover, the phenomenon leading to this recomposing of local populations is of a more continuous nature and spread over the past few decades than recent, massive or provoked by public policy incentives.

Aim(s) of research

- 5 The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai pointed out a few years ago that “This is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks of kinship, friendship, work, and leisure, as well as of birth, residence, and other filial forms. But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move” (Appadurai, 2000, p. 33-34). My colleague Viviane Cretton and I conducted a multi-disciplinary study in the Alpine region of the lower Valais in 2011 and 2012, with the goal of accounting for the immigration and integration mechanisms at a very local level and as close as possible to the experience of the acting participants, namely the immigrants with whom we worked (Cretton, Amrein and Fellay, 2012).
- 6 This research comprised an anthropological section, which forms the content of this article, and a historical part that makes visible the continuities and disruptions of migratory movements in the particular region.
- 7 Our anthropological field is essentially qualitative and comprises two inseparable aspects. On the one hand, and this is the core of our research, we sought to understand the sense of the paths taken by a certain number of people who were migrants. We have analysed how these ex-migrants have managed to become “social actors” in the communities concerned, how they have put down roots there, what their various strategies of integration and of attachment were, and what the main obstacles were that they confronted. On the other hand, our study raises the issue of the perpetual recomposing of mountain societies that are still perceived – or promoted⁵ – as homogeneous, authentic and specific entities. We have analysed to what extent the migrants have spread throughout the local economic fabric and fit into the real or imaginary collective identities (Anderson, 2006) of their new place of habitation. We have also looked at how the norms, practices and rules of a host society they themselves have contributed to moulding shape them. It seems almost self-evident, as the anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2006, p.129) pointed out by invoking the interface between *structure* and *agency*, that if the culture fashions individuals into specific social

actors, the latter, by their daily practices and discourses, reproduce and transform the culture that moulds them.

- 8 It is from the singular life-stories and migratory paths of our actors and actresses that we comprehend the phenomena linked to immigration. We don't seek to minimise the conflicting aspects of immigration and the administrative difficulties that have undoubtedly left indelible traces in their minds. These hard times, however, no longer seem to present the urgency or intensity that they did at the time of their arrival in Switzerland. Our insight is above all orientated towards the phenomena linked to the process of socio-cultural integration, a term for which we would retain Dominique Schnapper's definition: "The notion of integration designates [...] the processes by which individuals participate in society at large by means of their occupational activity, their apprenticeship of the norms of material consumption, their adoption of family and cultural behaviour, exchanges with others, participation in communal institutions." (2007, p. 69).
- 9 The orientation taken for this research obviously excludes certain elements and implies, as is always the case, partiality: We do not deal with the macro level of the migratory fluxes, the transnational movements of populations or diasporas – at least, not unless the stories of the actors and actresses of our study prompt us to do so. We also have not analysed the difficulties and renunciation of the men and women who have tried to live their lives in the Valais without success or who have not been accepted there. We have focused on individuals who *have* settled in the region and say they wish to stay there. What really interested us was the case of migrations that have led to something positive – more or less, of course, and sometimes at a great cost – but "succeeded" all the same, from the actors' point of view. It is rather a question of observing migration, since, as Poncet and Lussault have put it: "Does migration, even if one must not omit whatever traumatism it so often comprises, consist in a discovery, does it not open up for its actors a new field of possibilities, does it not permit fruitful hybridisations?" (2003, p. 617).

The actors and actresses of the research

- 10 For the purpose of our ethnographical discussions, we interviewed 25 people, all immigrants, who were socialised in their country of origin and have been living in the Valais for at least 10 years. Thus, these are foreigners and not inland migrants, as is the case in certain recent studies on mobility in the Alpine region (Corrado, 2013; Camenisch and Debarbieux, 2011; Perlik, 2011). The privileged age bracket mainly comprises people in their forties and fifties, nearly all of them parents of children attending local schools.
- 11 Far from comprising the totality of the origins in our field of research, our 25 protagonists do constitute a useful spread: Canada (1), Australia (1), France (4), the Netherlands (1), Russia (1), India (1), Germany (1), Portugal (5), Mauritius (2), Chad (1), England (2), Nepal (1), Belgium (1), Algeria (1), Senegal (1) and Serbia (1).
- 12 The distribution of these persons takes into account the different villages in which they reside, the variety of their origins, their professions and social status. We had as many discussions with wine-waitresses, stockkeepers, doctors and restaurant owners as with physiotherapists, cleaners, migrants who have come to fill a lack of manpower or formerly illegal immigrants whose situation has been legalised. It must also be noted

that at the time of the field research, about 20 of our interlocutors were naturalised Swiss, most of them through marriage with a partner from the Valais, whereas the five others hold long-term residence permits (C permits). Thirteen are married women (of whom 10 have married a Swiss citizen, and three have married a compatriot), all of them work part-time, with the exception of one who is a housewife. All the women we met have children. Twelve are married men (eight have married a Swiss woman), have children and work full-time.

- 13 The objective of the selection of these individuals who are the products of migration is to present a sufficiently heterogeneous overview of people who, while not being representative of the totality of the local migratory field, seem to us to be useful to illustrate different aspects of this field and susceptible to make sense in a more extensive framework than this study, i.e., in other valleys of the same type, in the Valais or beyond.

Excerpts from the results of the research

- 14 It is clearly not possible here to enter into the full details of the results of our research. Below, I present a few of the key elements.
- 15 Firstly – and this is immediately noticeable upon consideration of the sample of interlocutors presented above – our study reveals an important acceleration in migration, a great diversity in the places of origin, the occupations and even the ages of these migrants (both men and women), who, up until 40 or 50 years ago, primarily came to the Valais from the neighbouring countries (Italy and France) for employment that was mainly lower-grade. The current state of affairs is one that Steven Vertovec would qualify as “super-diversity”: “...a notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything the country has previously experienced” (2007, p. 1024). It is also evident that the balance between individuals of both sexes is more respected today than it was in the past, when the principal need was a labour force that could work on construction sites of dams and tunnels.
- 16 Another notable change is that the paths taken by both the male and female migrants at the beginning of the 21st century in the particular region are mainly those of individuals (or of families), and only very rarely form part of greater movements, as was the case in the past, for example, when large numbers of men from the same market town in Piedmont came to work in a mine in the Entremont valley or, more recently, on the construction site of an Alpine dam. The fact that numerous migrants cannot – or can no longer – rely on a diaspora or a group of compatriots already on the ground might complicate their first steps in the society, but in fact this situation makes their subsequent integration into society all the more easy. Portuguese Clubs or Spanish Associations still exist in the Valais, but many people originating from these countries avoid them instead of becoming members.
- 17 Contrary to the clichés of “profiting” foreigners that are still firmly entrenched among certain levels of the population, settlement is often not the initial objective of the migrants that arrive in Switzerland. A current example is that of persons – most frequently young women – who come to work for a few months in winter sports resorts and ultimately, being free from other attachments, settle permanently in the canton because they have met a partner there. The same is true of long-distance globetrotters who stop in the Rhône plain for a season of grape-harvesting and, with temporary jobs

leading to encounters, are still to be found there 20 years later with a wife, children and better qualifications than when they arrived. Of course, the favourable context of the Helvetian economy and the opportunities relating to jobs are significant, but they only come into play in a second period and therefore constitute for a good number of our interlocutors more a reason to stay than a reason to come to the Valais. Marie-Christine Fourny affirmed this point with reference to migration in the French mountain region of Beaufortin: “For employment is not solely sufficient to motivate the journey: It permits the concretisation of a desire to settle down rather than a motivation.” (1994, p. 88).

- 18 The male and female migrants stand out much more in a village than in an urban environment, and social control is probably much more difficult to endure; consequently, the initial period of settling in is often very taxing. But many of our interlocutors insisted that, despite the obstacles, if the migrant manages to pass this first stage, get hired and find new points of reference – which takes between three to five years, according to our sources who were fairly unanimous on this point – the quality of integration becomes better.
- 19 At the beginning of our study we advanced a “cosmopolitan” hypothesis (Calhoun, 2003) about the possibility and choice of living “on the outskirts” of local society, of entering into it structurally without sharing its culture(s), by favouring involvement with other networks that are not as local and consistent as the host society – a choice facilitated by the ever-increasing development of the new information and communication technologies. This hypothesis has by no means been confirmed. For our actors and actresses to be members of a group that is situated spatially is still as important at the beginning of the third millennium as it was in the past, and they seem, on the contrary, to consider it indispensable to become deeply involved in the local community. Other than the contact with their country of origin, their sphere of existence is above all limited to the nearby territory, and it is interesting to notice that after a few years, a great number of these neo-Valaisans possess knowledge about the surrounding territory for which many of the historical inhabitants of those places might envy them.

Principal factors of integration identified

- 20 Each of these migrants, when they arrive in the Valais, can situate themselves on a continuum going from a rather radical otherness – those for whom both the natural environment and the types of society and lifestyle are extremely different – to the exact opposite, namely those foreigners coming from similar regions in terms of both the local population’s norms and behaviour, and the surrounding countryside. Thus, they do not all have to make the same effort to adapt to their new socio-cultural context, but it is interesting to observe that a person originally from a remote region of Nepal – a brother country for many inhabitants of the Valais – might more easily find his place in the community than a migrant arriving from nearby Serbia, who is saddled with a negative image. However, it must be stated that the progressive, more or less conscious learning of the new codes, behaviour and attitudes that facilitate entry into the local social surroundings is relatively rapid.
- 21 Among the principal integration factors for our voluntary mountain-dwellers, we find the same three that Fourny (1994, p. 88) identified in neighbouring France, namely

employment, marriage with a member of the local community and “the particular character of the locality” (landscape, culture, lifestyle). However, these factors appear in a different order and in different proportions, no doubt because of our decision to base the study only on persons of foreign origin. Marriages between members of the indigenous population and migrants clearly constitute the first of these factors. Eighteen of the 25 people questioned have married a Swiss partner – in most cases, someone from the Valais. All our protagonists of our inquiry are parents, and both the children attending the schools and the local partner’s family network – an element of prime importance for the daily family organisation in these valleys – are deciding factors of “insertion by marriage” (ibid., p. 88). But even if marriage is an incontestable accelerator for integration, divorce becomes statistically more likely after several years, and it certainly poses serious problems, as the migrants may see themselves returned to their former status as outsider.

- 22 Next comes work. All the people that we interviewed are employed, and this is an important observation, *a fortiori* in a canton in which working hard is a key value for recognition by the other members of one’s circle. All the men practise their profession full-time, and the majority of women do so part-time. Far from presenting a particularity in the world of migrants, this fact reflects the allocation of gender roles and the sexual division in the workplace in Swiss society in general. Almost all of our interlocutors earn their living in the communes in which they have settled and consequently contribute to the development of the area. From being employees upon their arrival, some of them are now employers and in their turn employ foreign personnel, or people indigenous to the Valais.
- 23 When it comes to integration, participation in the activities of the local society plays a significant role, and the migrants quickly realise its importance, be it through sporting societies, musical associations (fanfares, etc.), or involvement in various festivities or other community events. However, what must be noted is that none of our interlocutors, even those who have acquired Swiss nationality, have become involved in politics. This sphere still seems to be reserved for the “historical” families of the region. It is all very well to have become a member of society or even a citizen, for some to have acquired the right to vote and to make use of it, but one would be advised to keep a low profile in this regard. Here, too, Fourny made the same observation some 20 years ago: “...the new inhabitants of the regions we are concerned with stay in the background when it comes to political power.” (1994, p. 91).
- 24 Apart from the objective elements quoted previously, the characters of all individuals obviously play a role, by leading them to form a relationship with their neighbours – of whom more than a quarter are former migrants – or on a wider scale, with the population of their place of residence. All our protagonists emphasise that the inhabitants of these mountain valleys start off being cold and mistrustful, but they finally welcome someone if he or she takes the first steps to find a way to communicate with them.
- 25 Among the other tendencies worth taking into account, we have observed the ubiquitous criticism coming from those people, themselves originally migrants, who have settled for a significant period of time, show towards the newcomers, including those who have the same geographical background. This is a well-known phenomenon in migration sociology and one that we confronted time and again in the field. We also frequently observed a net swing in the feeling of belonging, rather than a possible

stabilization of dual identity in belonging to two origins, as well as the progressive diminution of the attachment to the country of origin. The latter, in my opinion, leads to a denial of these “roots”, whose importance for an individual’s identity equilibrium has practically become an injunction.

- 26 Finally, the analysis of these discussions has led us to question certain stereotypical views on migrants that are common in our regions: planned arrival in Switzerland for economic reasons; foreigners earning their living here but reinvesting the money in their homeland with a view to their future return; tendency to live in a closed circle within the community of migrants from the same country of origin, and finally, male and female migrants attempting above all to take advantage somehow of the Swiss social system (through unemployment benefits or other types of social aid) rather than contributing to its proper functioning.

Integration, yes, but into what?

“Articulation is the political connecting and disconnecting, the hooking and unhooking of elements – the sense that any socio-cultural ensemble that presents itself to us as a whole is actually a set of historical connections and disconnections. [...] Articulations and disarticulations are constant processes in the making and remaking of cultures.”
(Clifford, 2003, p. 45).

- 27 As I have already pointed out, the men and women we examined during our study have been living in the Valais between one and three decades. For the majority of them, their priority upon arrival was not to settle down in Switzerland, but all of them “have put down roots” here for different reasons: economical, sentimental, or linked to a certain quality of life. After an initial period that was difficult at times, they seized the opportunities to carve out a place for themselves in the local communities. Today they are well-integrated in what they consider to be the country’s culture, and their remarks sometimes indicate they are at the edge of identification. This is a phenomenon that Irène Safi highlights when she speaks of an “...individual process of convergence of the characteristics of immigrants with the average characteristics of the reception society” (Safi, 2011, p. 150).
- 28 Apart from their accent, these ex-migrants have often reached a state of “cultural intimacy” (Hertzfeld, 2007) with the lifestyle of those they mix with, and they undeniably play an important role in the local economic fabric whilst at the same time frequently adding their personal touch. They embody both a noticeable increase in migration to the particular villages and an unbelievable diversification of the society of the Valais today, a point that is rarely underlined in *storytelling* about this canton. They are, however, perfectly conscious of not being members of the group of the native families and do not easily qualify themselves as being Bagnards, Fulliérains or Valaisans, although they are sometimes obliged to do so. Even those who seem to be completely integrated into the collective continue to be identified – immediately and irremediably – as “foreigners”. Their lack of a local patronymic is one ostensible sign among others – including the colour of their skin, for example – and every inhabitant

of the village, also those who themselves are the result of migration, can spot right away whether a person is “from here” or “from elsewhere”, is “one of us” or not.

- 29 In her study, which we have mentioned already, Marie-Christine Fourny tells us that one inhabitant in four in the Beaufortin region “is a recent migrant”, and she mentions people, from France and elsewhere, who do not originate from that region (1994, p. 87). In the case of the villages concerned by our study, the percentage of people solely of foreign origin approaches this figure, and there would be no doubt that if we were to add the native Swiss who have chosen to settle there, the proportion would be much higher. She also writes that “The new inhabitants have thus interiorised the image of a local society. They try to integrate it, to become actors in it rather than to dominate it, and are thus led to adopt an existing system of values” (1994, p. 94). I could easily ascribe this observation to our field. From the reading of my article one might have the impression that the process of integration frequently results in what is known as “assimilation”, i.e., the surrendering of one’s own culture in favour of perfect conformity to the rules, norms and usages of the host society. It is often difficult to make allowances for the symbolic violence in this phenomenon of assimilation. If the actresses and actors of our enquiry adopt local practices little by little, it is certainly partly because of strategy, constraint and necessity. In reality, the arrangement is more subtle, and each of our protagonists is learning with experience to manage the balance (the articulation) between the elements of their old frame of life that they want to retain and those of their new environment they are obliged to assimilate in order to live in the Valais without problems and to be accepted there.
- 30 Having met them over a long period of time, I have the feeling that certain migrants sometimes subscribe to a way of functioning they would have privileged in their homeland, even if the context did not necessarily fit. After all, if we advocate a critical attitude to the supposed isomorphism between individuals, territory and our local culture here⁶, we have difficulty seeing why one should refer to the culturalist prism in order to systematically other persons who come from elsewhere: “However the indolent references to the ‘cultural factors’ more often forget the existence of subcultures, inner cultural diversities linked to the same social group, the weight of social divides (age, sex, social classes, among others) on norms and behaviour” (Olivier de Sardan, 1995, p. 11).
- 31 Common sense often leads one to distinguish two categories, *the* migrants and *the* historical inhabitants, as if these two groups were homogeneous, and we scientists do not always avoid the trap. But this vision holds more of the fable than of the empirical, as Roger Brubaker maintains with his criticism of “groupism”: “...The tendency to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis (and basic constituents of the social world)” (Brubaker, 2006, p. 8). This is a particularly robust tendency, anchored in what Pierre Bourdieu calls “our primary inclination to think the social world in a substantive manner” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 228).
- 32 It would be tempting, in order to describe the integration of the migrants as we have studied it in several valleys in the Valais, to take the “path of syncretism” that Fourny mentions (1994, p. 94), but the term seems to me inappropriate in this case, because it is a question of interactions not between two clearly definable social groups but rather between a local population whose supposed homogeneity of culture derives more and more from the performative effort, as well as from men and women of various origins and life experience. When all is said and done, it is more the concept of “articulation”,

as expressed by James Clifford at the beginning of this section, that seems to reflect the reality of migration today in our field of enquiry. We have observed a progressive but effective incorporation into Alpine societies of the female and male migrants we met. Their characteristics and outlines are more and more difficult to identify but continue to define them at the edge of authenticity and to distinguish the stranger “from outside” or “from inside” from the territory’s legitimate natives. Everything happens as if the idea of the reality of an easily recognizable collective identity for the natives of the Valais existed in people’s minds, whereas what stands out in our enquiry is the observation of a growing social and cultural mix.

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NOTES

1. « Je rappellerai ici ma propre mise en garde : “Les sociétés ne sont jamais ce qu’elles paraissent être, ni ce qu’elles disent être”. » (Balandier, 2004, p. 23)
2. The following figures briefly summarise the issue of migration in Switzerland and in the canton of Valais:
Switzerland: (2012): Inhabitants ≈ 8 million // Foreign residents = 1.8 million ≈ 23%
Canton of Valais (2012): Inhabitants 321,732 // Foreign residents = 69,000 ≈ 21,5%
For reference, at the end of 2012, the commune of Bagnes counted 7,834 inhabitants, of whom 29% were foreigners from nearly 55 different countries. The percentages of foreigners mentioned above merely represent an administrative reality, as the first generation of migrants no longer appear in the statistics after marriage or naturalisation. The number of persons *present as a result of migration* is therefore distinctly greater than those shown in the figures available.
3. <http://www.crepa.ch/>
4. The other institutions to have supported this research are the *Centre d'Etude de la Diversité Culturelle* (CEDIC) and the *Haute-Ecole Supérieure de Suisse orientale* (HES-SO).
5. “And with all that, today, like yesterday, the city-dweller ceaselessly seeks authentic man, member of the true race, the true mountain, the true... Mountain-dwellers have understood this” (Crettaz, 1979: 13).

6. “The tourists in particular, and touristic production that goes along with them (travel guides, documentaries, etc.), vie with one another to convey the idea that the communities they visit are closely associated with their surrounding and social milieu. In fact, tourism in itself, seen as research or experience of otherness, is only justified by this idea of a common singularity of groups and surroundings” (Debarbieux, 2012, p. 3).

ABSTRACTS

In 2011 and 2012, we carried out a multi-disciplinary field study in the lower Valais region. The goal of this study was to account for the immigration and integration mechanisms at a very local level, as close as possible to the experience of our acting participants, who were immigrants. The project comprised an anthropological section, which led to the content of this article, and a historical part that makes visible the continuities and disruptions of migratory movements.

This anthropological research, which essentially has a qualitative nature, comprised two inseparable aspects. On the one hand, we questioned the motivations behind the ever-increasing number of migrants settling over the past two or three decades in 14 villages situated in the Bagnes and Entremont valleys, as well as a commune in the Rhône plain, and the way in which they have managed to become “social actors” and put down roots in their respective communities. On the other hand, our study raises the issue of the perpetual recomposing of mountain societies, still often perceived – or promoted – as entities that are rather homogeneous, authentic and specific. In other words, our survey is situated at the intersection between individual and collective identities.

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Keywords: Valais, migrant trajectories, integration, Alpine societies, collective identities

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