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Longing for the mountains?

Mobilising geographic categories in the biographic narratives of inhabitants of Switzerland's rural municipalities

Mathieu Petite

- 1 Jean-Didier Urbain (2002) has spoken of “longing for the countryside” in an attempt to understand why city dwellers acquire second homes far from cities. By analogy, could the term “longing for the mountains” apply to these new inhabitants who choose to live in Switzerland's mountains? The present article focuses on the residential mobility of these individuals, proposing a dual methodological perspective. On the one hand, the article analyses these migrations from the point of view of residential trajectories and the paths that individuals' lives have taken; on the other, it looks at the biographical narratives the inhabitants themselves produce. A residential trajectory can be defined as the series of places that each of us inhabit in succession or even occasionally at the same time. Yet if one is tempted to objectively reconstruct a trajectory—that series of places—and eventually come to understand the events or conditions that cause it to change direction, it should also be possible to explore the interpretation produced by those who experience the trajectory (Bailleul, Feildel 2011; Dubar 1998). In other words, the series of moves from one place to another, instances of settling down, and setting off for a new place are all looked at from the point of view of their narrativisation.
- 2 The particular situation that is the research interview leads these inhabitants to talk about their personal trajectory and in doing so arrange spatial configurations (Petite, Debarbieux 2013). These biographical narratives are indeed articulated as much around specific places (“I lived at this or that place, I didn't like living in this other place”) as around geographic categories such as “mountains”, the “city”, or the “village”. The way inhabitants categorise their environment thus permeates the narrative of their trajectory.
- 3 Adopting the inhabitants' perspective vis-à-vis their own trajectory enables us to bring out the singularity of that personal path. On the one hand, a residential trajectory is, for each individual, an often original combination of succeeding or simultaneous places; on the other, the subjective interpretation of these trajectories is peculiar to the individual. That said, the narratives refer to socially shared discourses, that is, the

dream of a home in the country, or the desire to rear one's children far from the city, for example. The biographical narrative, the story of an individual's life, is made up of these "meta-narratives" that individuals make their own (Gutting 1996; Somers 1994).

- 4 The geographic categorisation indeed partakes of this common knowledge, on which the individual biographical narrative draws. Our research suggests that geographical categories, such as they are mobilised by inhabitants in the interview situation in which they talk about their trajectory, are limited in number, with the city, countryside, village, and mountains, as well as nature and the neighbourhood, figuring among the principal ones.
- 5 This article explores the mobilisation of one of these categories, mountains, in the narrative that inhabitants devise regarding their trajectory. On the one hand, it questions the definition and characterisation of mountains in the common, ordinary understanding of the term. On the other, it aims to show that individuals always put the categorisation to use in their interpretation of the path their lives have taken. In this respect then, mountains play a structuring role in the biographical narrative of certain individuals. They make it possible thereby to justify residential mobility or, conversely, immobility. It must be stressed that this reference to mountains, while quite significant for some, isn't imbued with an inescapable character for all that, even in places that are usually considered mountainous. Moreover, while my analysis indeed focuses on this category, it does not neglect the others, notably the city. Indeed, they are often articulated first in biographical narratives.
- 6 These thoughts draw on a research project entitled "Habiter (un temps) la montagne. Trajectoires résidentielles, identités et catégories géographiques".¹ That research carried out a qualitative analysis of the motivations that led people to settle in or leave so-called mountain municipalities, according to a federal administrative definition; the research areas involve three municipalities that differ in terms of accessibility, size and demographic dynamics (Soulce, Bagnes and Saint-Cergue). Over sixty semi-directed interviews were conducted with the inhabitants of these municipalities.
- 7 The present article begins by examining a few of the general trends in the demographic changes of Switzerland's mountainous regions. The article then proceeds to shift the reflection, placing it squarely in the different studies dealing with residential mobility, notably those analysing the new forms of migration that are not directly economic in nature. Following a clarification of methodology with respect to the biographical narratives, the fields of study are then briefly presented. Finally, I propose an analysis of the empirical materials according to the problematic dual entry of residential trajectories and geographical categories.

Demographic dynamics of mountain areas in Switzerland

- 8 Recent studies have shown the migration flows distinguished by different types of regions in Switzerland (Schuler *et al.* 2007) and mountainous regions in particular (Camenisch, Debarbieux 2011; Perlik 2010). It appears that the Alps on the whole are no longer areas that are emptying out demographically, as they were between the late nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century. Admittedly, certain regions and municipalities, notably in central Switzerland, which are occasionally characterised as

“fallow alpine land”, continue to suffer from a demographic decline and an ageing population. Nevertheless, the demographic behaviour of alpine municipalities over the last twenty years is extremely diverse. Thus, the municipalities with the highest immigration rate are often the very same ones with the highest emigration rate. Those municipalities, some of which are the site of intense tourist activity (resorts in the cantons of Valais—Zermatt or Verbier—and Graubünden, notably the upper Engadin), or are close to urban areas (certain municipalities of the so-called Lemanic Arc, i.e., the region abutting the northern shore of Lake Geneva; or the highlands around Zurich, the Zurich Oberland), have seen their population significantly renewed (Camenisch, Debarbieux 2011). Some mountain municipalities in Switzerland have acquired a residential attraction thanks to two processes, peri-urbanisation and amenity migrations (Perlik 2011). These renewed demographic dynamics are most certainly grounded in the attraction exercised by mountains in and of themselves, which have enjoyed a positive connotation in Switzerland since the eighteenth century (Crettaz 1993).

Approaches to residential mobility: residential choices in the narrativised life trajectory

- 9 To explain residential mobility, one might be tempted to look to the qualities of places likely to attract individuals and couples. And when they talk about the path their lives have taken, our interview subjects are perfectly able to detail the advantages of the places where they have elected to live. Moreover, these advantages are not limited to the criteria of proximity to one's place of work or accessibility in general. A number of authors have shown that certain, mostly rural regions experienced a population influx motivated above all by the quality of the landscape and environment, the possibilities of outdoor leisure activities, or generally a better quality of life (Benson, O'Reilly 2009; Marcouiller, Clendenning 2005). With regard to mountainous regions, scholars speak of so-called amenity migration to describe the new migrants who are interested in the tourist and landscape features of the places where they settle (Martin, Bourdeau, Daller 2012; Moss *et al.* 2009). At the same time, many studies have taken into account the biography of individuals to explain their residential choices (Geist, McManus 2008; Halfacree, Boyle 1993).
- 10 The point of view adopted here is not first and foremost directed at the objective recreation of a trajectory, as are the studies presented above, but rather at the inhabitants' interpretation of it. By talking about their trajectory, inhabitants attempt to lend a continuity and coherence to the path their lives have taken. The role of the narrative in this process would be to both link and lend continuity to a recreated past, a perceived present, and an anticipated future (Mason 2004; Somers 1994). The narrativisation is a subjectively located selection of events affecting the life of an individual (Lawler 2008). In this regard, the places where individuals have lived or are currently living are resources at their disposal for arranging the narrative. But they are also the collection of places which individuals can dream of or, on the contrary, the places they reject (Morel-Brochet 2007). Environmental psychologists have coined the concept of place attachment to account for the emotional ties an individual forges with places; on the other hand, they have rarely looked into the attachment to “types of places” (Feldman 1990; Hummon 1986), what we can call geographical categories. This

handful of studies allows us to explain in particular why individuals who move from one place to another often sought the same residential environment in which they had previously lived (Fortin, Després 2010).

- 11 By taking off from these well-established theories, the present article seeks to question the role mountains play in the way in which inhabitants talk about themselves. It explores first the pertinence of such a reference, as they see it. Then it tries to size up the role of the “mountain” geographical category in the structure of each individual narrative. Finally, the article shows that each individual interprets her or his biography and that this interpretation enlists geographical categories, including mountains.

Methodology and case study

- 12 Biographical narratives were formulated during interviews of an average length of forty minutes. The selected sample was not intended to be representative of each municipality’s population. On the contrary, it aimed for a diversity of the interviewees in terms of their background, age, marital status, or length of their residency. In all, sixty-seven interviews were conducted in three study sites between 2010 and 2013.
- 13 The chosen method was inspired by life narratives as they are practiced by sociologists (Bertaux, 2010). It differs nonetheless from those approaches thanks to its emphasis on the places of residence, along with the practices and preferences connected with them. The researcher drew on an interview guide while taking care not to systematically introduce his own mental categories. The interview guide left it up to the interviewees to construct the narrative of their trajectories. A few times it was necessary to prompt the interviewees to specify the places where they had lived, the memories associated with them, and the reasons that had led them to move. The guide was then designed to elicit a description and a qualification of the places mentioned (this is where the interviewer’s prompts were deployed, getting the subjects to consider categories like the countryside, the city, and mountains when these were not spontaneously brought up). The guide also stressed the comparisons the interviewees were able to draw between the different places. Finally, if the interviewees had not already done so previously, at the end of the interview they were asked to reflect on the path their lives had taken. Despite this final request, the systematic search for some coherence in their trajectory was not the rule for all of the interviewees.
- 14 The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees and later transcribed. With the help of qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti), the significant passages of the corpus were coded. First, the coding process sought to identify the categories and attributes mobilised by the interviewee. Second, it served to locate references to the life trajectory and significant events in the narrative of the trajectory.
- 15 The three study municipalities in which these interviews were conducted are so-called mountain municipalities. The only official definition of mountains that obtains in Switzerland is currently the one used by the Federal Office of Agriculture, which refers to such lands with natural handicaps that render them difficult to cultivate because of their topography and climate. Administrative categorisation and the way inhabitants categorise their surroundings are not totally disconnected from one another. Knowledge circulates between different spheres, of experts, ordinary persons, and administrators (Mondada 2005). The municipalities studied are indeed located in

mountain regions and summer pastoring regions according to the agricultural production registry (figure 1).

- 16 The resort of Verbier (figure 2) is part of the Bagnes municipality in the Canton of Valais. This ski resort has 30,000 tourist beds, holiday homes for the most part. The resort is the economic engine of the municipality and provides employment on a still larger scale. Between 1990 and 2008, the municipality of Bagnes had a largely positive net migration (table 1). It is quite characteristic of these tourist municipalities, which experience a significant turnover in population, with tourist activity favouring fixed-term employment. The resort of Verbier alone had nearly 3000 year-round inhabitants in 2012; it also experienced a significant increase in population (1850 inhabitants in 1990). The increase attests to a recent trend, i.e., the growing number of transformations of secondary homes into main residences. Verbier's specificity within the municipality of Bagnes led us to recruit interviewees solely in the resort's perimeter and its immediate surroundings.

Figure 1. Location of the study municipalities, mountain regions, and summer pasturing regions according to the agricultural production registry

Figure 2. Views of the resort of Verbier

Photos: the author, 2010

- 17 The municipality of Saint-Cergue (figure 3) is located in the Vaudois Jura and is included within the limits of the “Grand Genève” urban development project. Its proximity to Geneva and to a lesser extent Lausanne makes it an especially attractive zone for couples and families looking for real-estate prices that are slightly lower than in Geneva or along the lake shore. Demographic growth has been quite strong since 1990. Saint-Cergue is one of the top twenty most dynamic municipalities in Switzerland, with very high rates of emigration and immigration (table 1). The development of the village and its nearby hamlets has occurred through massive densification and the conversion of secondary homes into main residences.

Figure 3. Views of the municipality of Saint-Cergue

Photos: the author, Maria Luisa Giordano and Alberto Campi, 2010 and 2011

- 18 The municipality of Soulce (figure 4) is far smaller than the two others in terms of population. Soulce has just over 240 inhabitants. Located in the south of the Canton of Jura in a small and relatively isolated valley, although close to the administrative centre of the canton in Delémont, the district is also much less dynamic in terms of arrivals and departures by comparison with Saint-Cergue and Verbier (table 1). It has likewise remained very much an agricultural area, with a greater number of farm-related jobs than the other sites. I should point out that this municipality merged with four other neighbouring municipalities in early 2013.

Figure 4. The village of Soulce

Photo: the author, 2010

Table 1. Evolution of population in the three municipalities studied

Municipality	Population 1990	Population 2010	Population growth 1990-2010 (%)	Median annual rate of immigration 1990-2008 (%)	Median annual rate of emigration 1990-2008 (%)	Balance of migration 1990-2008 (%)
Soulce JU	200	256	21.9	6.35	5.73	0.61
St-Cergue VD	1332	1973	32.5	17.55	15.55	2.01
Bagnes VS	5107	7617	33	9.34	6.95	2.39
<i>Switzerland</i>	<i>6'751'000</i>	<i>7'870'000</i>	<i>14.2</i>	<i>8.6</i>	<i>7.9</i>	<i>0.8</i>

Source: the Federal Office of Statistics, 2010

Categorisations of mountains

- 19 The interviewees speak objectively of mountains. That is, they attempt to list their attributes and thus define them. In this regard then, categorisation proceeds in the same way that administrative classification, like that of agricultural production, for example, does. Yet categorisation is never disconnected from the totalising narrative that the inhabitants produce; the use of categories in general is always referred back to the personal trajectory as it has been put into words. The way inhabitants speak of this category is therefore both objective—they look to mention attributes that define the category—and subjective—they bring these same attributes back to their own experiences or practices. It has been shown, moreover, that the mobilisation of

categories has always been contextual and that their definition could vary within the same narrative (Mondada, 1997).

- 20 When the interviewees refer to mountains as a category, because they take up the subject spontaneously or are responding to a request by the interviewer, most often they categorise them through biophysical attributes, i.e., the climate and altitude. This reference is first of all classificatory, that is, it serves to put a place (in this case, Saint-Cergue or Verbier) in an inclusive category. Thus, the mountainous character of Soulce, even though it is asserted by the Federal Agricultural Production Registry, is disqualified on the grounds of its altitude:

“No. No, I don’t feel I’m in the mountains at all. No, because, well, we’re at... I don’t know how many meters it is here, 500, 600?” (SOU15)²

- 21 All of the interviewees in Soulce express the same negation of the mountainous character of the site. On the other hand, in Verbier, for all of the interviewees we met with, the mountainous nature of the place is an obvious fact, as it is for this British woman, who was asked to describe the resort:

“Obviously, it’s a ski town, on top of the mountain.” (BA11)

- 22 Beyond this kind of discourse, which is rather detached from the subjectivity of the speaker, there are responses that display to a greater degree the emotional and personal involvement in these kinds of sites. For example, this forty-seven-year-old man living in Saint-Cergue enlists a description of mountains—starting with the climate and altitude—in order to talk about his own experience:

“At first, we were looking for something in the country. Well, we found ourselves in the mountains, it’s not... I mean, it’s the mountains, but we’re at 1200 meters... It’s true that in the winter, you feel it. In the morning you feel it. It’s 10° out, in the morning. I go out in shorts and a T-shirt in the morning to have a smoke outside... and I’m fine.” (STC13)

- 23 For him, mountains are not an end in and of themselves. Prompted by his wife, who “could no longer stand the city”, he says he looked into Saint-Cergue “really by chance”. He now readily includes the concept of mountains in his life narrative.

- 24 Furthermore, several interviewees summon up the depiction of mountains as having health benefits, an idea that has its roots in late-nineteenth-century tourism. In this way, mountains are frequently defined in opposition to the city, which is thought of in terms of its disadvantages. This fifty-year-old female inhabitant of Saint-Cergue, who earlier had lived in the centre of Geneva, is a good example:

“In any case, with that respiration [you get] when you go back to the mountains. Respiration, I’d say, with respect to cars, but also the air. You notice it just the same.” (STC15)

- 25 What we see emerging here is the counterpoint to mountains that is quite regularly mentioned by the inhabitants, i.e., the city in its negative sense. The other biophysical attribute that is frequently associated with mountains is naturally snow. For this thirty-eight-year-old woman originally from Geneva who settled in Verbier over ten years ago, snow is the symbol of mountains, which she gradually learned to like:

“I still hated snow, at the time. Now I love it. I got used to it. I hated snow... I’m not at all a mountain person deep down.” (BA1)

- 26 For the interviewees who left Saint-Cergue, the presence of snow, which they also take as a defining attribute of mountains, contributed to their decision to move to a place of

residence they deem to be more favourable. This thirty-year-old woman who lived in Saint-Cergue for less than a year decided to relocate in the region around Geneva:

“You know that winter will return so... I was worried sick, I was pregnant, I told myself, if anything happens, I’m pregnant, even in terms of going into labour what happens if... I was still pretty worried... It’s this mountain, the fact of going up and coming down the mountain... You tell yourself, if anything should happen, it will take me fifteen, twenty minutes to get down. For me, working in Geneva at the time... the traffic jams in the morning, that was hell. Really hell.” (STC29)

27 In her narrative, mountains are a category that serves as a foil, forged by her negative memories of a specific site, Saint-Cergue. These examples show that the geographical category structures narratives in a way that is quite specific to each individual (mountains are sought out by certain interviewees, whereas for others, they are not at all *a priori*).

28 Mountains are also viewed in a complementary way as being associated with leisure activities. Functional attributes are added to the biophysical ones in qualifying mountains (Petite, Debarbieux 2013). One fifty-three-year-old inhabitant of Saint-Cergue enlists this type of functional attribute. He had lived in small towns of French-speaking Switzerland. With his wife, he decided to buy a flat some twenty years before and looked in Saint-Cergue, where real-estate prices were lower and which they knew for having “often walked” there.

“We do indeed like it all the same. I wouldn’t like being in the city.

—And for you, does it make sense to say that you are in the mountains here?

—Well, you’ve got to like the mountains a little all the same. Okay, I don’t like the high Alps, I like everything that is mid-altitude, walking. What I don’t like is mountaineering, things like that.” (STC6)

29 The excerpt here shows the prompt by the interviewer touching on the “mountain” category, which the interviewee seems to take on as his own and, as with other individuals, connect to his personal experience. The contrast with the city is emphasised, as if to speak of a desirable category (be it mountains or the country), one had to mention the city as an undesirable category.

30 Much more than the preceding excerpt, the narrative developed by the following person displays the major role mountains play in his existence. The individual speaking is a thirty-three-year-old ski instructor in Verbier. He grew up in a village near Lausanne. Following trade school, he wanted to “spend a winter season in the mountains” and admits that it was a “stroke of luck” that led him to Verbier. He is then asked where he could see himself living in the future. This is his answer:

“If I move, I’d like to remain in the mountains in any case. It’s my drug. What’s more, I noticed, thinking about that, each time I go off on holiday, it’s always for the mountains. I’m in the mountains year round, but if I’m by the sea for two weeks, I’m bored shitless. It’s true, most of my holidays are spent in the mountains. It’s also why I was drawn to spend a season in Verbier, the fact of coming to the mountains. I think that that comes from when I was a kid, my parents already liked the mountains... When I was a kid, we often went walking weekends, or skiing, or went on hikes in the mountains. They dragged me along to the mountains a lot when I was little. I think it comes from that, the attraction to mountains. I don’t know, but in any case, I’m at home in the mountains.” (BA4)

31 It is no longer merely the possible leisure activities that count in this narrative, but much more the category as such. Mountains, to which interviewees given to this kind of discourse claim a real attachment, often inherited from their childhood, are seen as

changing the direction of their path in life. These interviewees feel a genuine fascination with mountains, which is combined with a passion for skiing. This forty-three-year-old Englishman speaks about the call of the mountain, which he has felt throughout the course of his life:

“But I love mountains... When I’m not working, I’m skiing for myself, I’m here. I love skiing here... Yeah, in London, not really in the centre of the city but... A year there and every day I was looking out the window, I’d say, oh, the mountains...”
(BA10)

32 These interviewees illustrate a very widespread profile of residents in Verbier, i.e., young women and men who come for one or more seasons to devote themselves completely to skiing, then settle in the town for good after a few years.

33 For this type of person, the importance of having a playground like the mountains within reach is coupled with the desire for those surroundings, which is reinforced in turn. The specific place matters little for these individuals, be it Verbier or other resorts in the Alps or elsewhere, just so long as it is in the mountains. This interviewee, a forty-two-year-old English woman, puts it quite clearly while going back over the path her life has taken:

“I went skiing with a friend, on a ski holiday. And I loved it so much, I wanted to go skiing again... And we met the people that were working there, and we were like, Oh, you do this! We wanna do this. So we just started ringing and writing to every company to say, Do you have some work? We want to work in the mountains.”
(BA11)

34 This “longing for the mountains” led her to several tourist resorts in both the Alps and the United States. She eventually returned to Verbier some ten years ago, where she had spent a few winter seasons a number of years before that.

35 There are, however, interviewees who, while not looking to avoid qualifying mountains, do not make them their main motivation for moving. Such is the example of this forty-two-year-old man who justifies his arrival in Saint-Cergue in these terms:

“It’s not the altitude or the snow that are the reasons why we came here. Simply [it’s] because we loved the village. I think we would have stumbled on this village, appreciating it in the same way, if it had been on the plain. I think for as long as financially we could have afforded to buy something there, we would have gone there.” (STC 24)

36 This excerpt, among others, allows us to qualify the idea according to which all the inhabitants of these places are driven by a “longing for the mountains”. Even so, they do use other referential frameworks in terms of justifications, trying again to construct a kind of determining logic to their residential mobility.

Conclusion

37 We have seen that mountains form a significant category in the eyes of certain inhabitants who make them a leitmotif that repeatedly surfaces in their lives. For others, though, they seem less central to their story. But whatever role they grant them in their narratives, these inhabitants are by rights qualified to characterise the “mountains” category and include specific places in it. In this the village of Soulce is clearly excluded from the category, which is not the case for Verbier and Saint-Cergue. But well beyond the classificatory competence shown by the interviewees, it seems that the categorisation they carry out aims to render the biographical narrative of their

residential trajectory significant. The use of characterisation, whether it targets the functions or the forms of the category, is always brought back to the inhabitants' subjectivity. And even when one says that mountains are not especially sought out, they end up playing a role in the interpretation of one's path in life and daily practices (mobility or leisure activities, for example). All the inhabitants thus have a way that is very much their own of combining different geographical categories to account for the path of their lives; mountains loom important for some, are less important for others, even if they are in mountain contexts.

- 38 More generally, the approach founded on geographical category makes it possible to shed new light on the question of residential choices. First, it places the inhabitants' words and their way of understanding their surroundings front and centre. This perspective usefully complements the concepts usually chosen by the expert, such as that of the town planner or the political decision maker. Secondly, it allows one to go beyond simply identifying the factors of attraction and facility underlying migration. Naturally, rational and economic motivations play an important role in migration, but the approach defended in the present article locates at the heart of the question the ability of individuals to project themselves in a certain life space, according to the values they hold and a residential history that is theirs alone.

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NOTES

1. This project, directed by Bernard Debarbieux, was financed by the Swiss national fund for research, the Fonds national suisse de la recherche (FNS), grant n°100013-122384. It has been extended with a second study that treats a similar problem although in this case it addresses outer-urban zones in Switzerland. The author would like to thank the members of the research team for their contribution to the discussion.
 2. The interviews are anonymised. That is, they are listed by the initials of the municipality studied (BA: Bagnes-Verbier; SOU: Soulce; STC: St-Cergue) and by a number.
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ABSTRACTS

Residential migration in the mountainous regions of Switzerland has changed over the past twenty years. Such changes of residence now concern in part individuals and families drawn by a living environment that is deemed superior to that of cities. This article focuses on the residential trajectories of these inhabitants which led them to settle in mountainous regions. These inhabitants view the path that brought them to their current address through the prism of geographic categories like city, countryside, and mountains. The article analyses the mobilisation and characterisation of the latter category, mountains, in the biographic narratives of inhabitants of three small so-called mountain municipalities in Switzerland. The approach both complements and deepens the question of residential choices by also bringing in the inhabitant's perspective in all its complexity.

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Mots-clés: geographic categories, narrative, residential trajectories, Switzerland

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