

Culture, Creativity, Identity – Concept and Issues
Michela Zucca

ABSTRACT

In the Alps, in peripheral communities, but almost everywhere in rural Europe, people feel the need to initiate processes of development compatible with the revitalization and appreciation of their cultural heritage. The latter is clearly an important element in the establishment of new forms of local entrepreneurship. The promotion of culture tourism, where culture is “translated” so as to become intelligible to outsiders, who should feel involved and relish the opportunity to encounter authenticity and spontaneity – as there is nothing more artificial than tourism promotion built around immaterial goods – may well be the best solution for those areas that have no other resources. To do this, it is indispensable that specialists should carry out a preliminary cultural, historical and anthropological survey. There is nothing worse than a tourist who feels that he has been deceived. It is also better to avoid criticisms from the local cultural institutions and associations set on defending the integrity of their culture and prevent it from going into a process of change. Specialists can wed the historical-anthropological research with handicraft, gastronomy, hospitality, tours, and entertainment in general, as well as to the objectives of public and private investors. It takes hard work, clear goals, diplomatic skills, and the ability to involve the local population.

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Culture is a complex entity, which includes knowledge, faith, art, tradition, law, costume, and any other technique, or use, from the human-being in society.

* *Definition of Tylor, 1871* The main objective of this article is the anthropological definition and assessment of a development plan building an economic strategy, increasing the quality of life in remote mountain and rural communities and reducing the discomfort of their inhabitants. This will provide important indications concerning the way reforms and changes in the social, economic and environmental fields should be effected in order to allow these communities to survive. The fieldwork research have illustrated a number of recurring themes that could be used for this purpose: one of the biggest importance is culture combined with identity and creativity.

It is true that, especially in recent years, many conceptual definitions of “culture” exist and almost everything seem to go as culture, identity and creativity. But the proposal contained in this article is not abstract: culture can and must be used as a tool of development in deprived communities in marginal regions, usually situated in rural areas (but not only. This research methodology, if applied to marginal urban surroundings, such as metropolitan hinterlands, could deserve more than a surprise). Through recovery of a group culture and history, you can build a strong sense of identity. This, with the help of professional and researchers, can lead, by mean of a process of re acquiring self esteem, to construction of that kind of “business” creativity that can lead to development.

The advantage of the “cultural” approach lies in the method employed to ascertain the conditions of marginalization of alpine and rural communities at the intersection of their social, environmental, anthropological, and geographic dimensions, with a view to the possible benefits that can be reaped from the added value of local opportunities and practices.

Central to this study is the notion of sustainable development, that is to say, an approach responsive to the needs of the present generation, including economic and profit growth and distribution, working opportunities, social and cultural services, better housing and education (viz. Brundtland Report).

The concept of sustainability and of quality of life stresses the importance of the social and anthropological elements that make up a community and the strong but flexible bonds between a community and the surrounding region. The research/action method used to build development projects in rural communities combines quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (ethnographic) data. Both provide benchmarks for each issue that we explore. The definition of the opportunities for sustainable growth will not only consider structural factors, but also the living conditions of the community, marked by cultural distinctiveness, by traditional ways of doing things, as well as by its vulnerability and deficiencies, vis-à-vis the ubiquitous market economy.

The development of targeted methods and strategies of implementation will involve a plurality of variables and will have a special regard for the fragility of the environmental, economic and social context in which they are deployed.

These concepts are important, because they can be used in proposals for tendering to EU, and/or as a part of economic policy programs by nations, regions, public administrations, municipalities working on the territory.

Peasant culture and rural-mixed economy in Europe and in the Alps

Europe, and especially Northern Italy, from the river Po to the Riviera and to the Alps, has been densely populated since ancient times and its inhabitants had to learn how to functionally adapt to the

environment. Over time, they have developed a lifestyle that was instrumental to the harnessing of natural resources without depleting them: this highly sophisticated “technological environment” has brought about important environmental changes across the Alps, barring glaciers and peaks.

In Europe, wilderness is long gone. Even seemingly untouched landscapes are the outcome of human action, like grazing and timber cropping. Prior to the advent of mass tourism and industrialization, that is, until the second post-war period, the most common land management model in rural Europe was still subsistence farming in small holdings. It was parsimonious and provident because the unrestrained exploitation of the land could force people to migration. Peasants possessed a distinct sense of history: changes in the ecosystems were made with an eye to their immediate and lasting consequences and bearing in mind the experience of the predecessors.

Interventions were tailored to address specific needs and attempts were made to anticipate future needs on the basis of the historical record and to coordinate present and future activities. Until a century ago, the European rural civilisation would manage the ecosystem regardless of demographic fluctuations. Human interventions shaped the land over and over again with a different intensity depending on the community and its needs.

The Alps are a case in point. Until the early seventeenth century, the Alps were one of the most densely populated region of Europe²; so much so, that most mercenaries for the European wars came from there. In spite of this human concentration - which was greater than, for instance, that of the fertile Pianura Padana, and even at higher altitudes, where the ecological equilibrium is more precarious -, the Alps were less seriously affected by the effects of the cycles of bad harvest, famine, and pandemics, which were normally devastating in a world where resources were limited. The main reason for this greater adaptability, which was shared in common with the Pyrenees, the Apennines and the Massif Central, but, in general, in all the European rural areas (including the Northern areas) that had not undergone a process of industrial extended agriculture, was the broader distribution of settlements, which were located at different altitudes and in different ecological settings, which encouraged synergies and a more rational management of resources. In this “environmental mosaic,” in the Alps the economic base ranged from sub-Mediterranean cultivation (lemon and olive trees), near the lakes, to high-mountain grazing near the glaciers. This allowed the full and differentiated harnessing of resources, so that a large amount of them would be obtained directly from nature (viz. timber, fish, game and herbs), from farming (cereals, potatoes, fruit and vegetables), and from herding. Seldom was there shortage of them all at the same time. The Alps were an area of intensive farming, as opposed to the plain, where, as a rule, only one crop was harvested each year (monoculture) and if the harvest failed, many would starve and social and economic dislocation would ensue (unattended irrigation systems and river embankments, murrains, etc.).

In fact, crop production in the plains was comparatively remunerative in a market economy, but this did not prevent most peasants from living through recurring periods of hunger. A small-scale, family-oriented economy was less likely to produce a marketable surplus, but could sustain the entire population in disadvantaged areas.

Moreover, Alpine economy was not based only on agriculture: it was a mixed form with craftsmanship, short and long distance commerce, transformation and production of primary goods drawn from the woods (for instance, medicine from herbs, distillation of spirits, and so on), elaboration of specialised professions typical of certain valleys and villages (for instance, chimney sweepers, haberdashers, repairers of pots, knife sharpener, wigs manufacturers ...), who travelled all over Europe: English Lords wigs were made in a small village in Piedmont: for centuries men from Elva cut the hairs of women and girls during Summer, took the precious material home and, during Winter, manufactured wigs that were sold in the whole world!

It was an highly creative, modern way of life, a puzzle and nomadic form of economy, based on innovation, adaptation to the market, long distance travelling and satisfaction of demands coming from

¹ Werner Batzing, *L'ambiente alpino. Trasformazione, distruzione, conservazione*, Melograno, Milano, 1987 (*Die Alpen. Naturbearbeitung und Umwelzerstörung*, 1984), p.36

² Paul Guichonnet (edited by), *Storia e civiltà delle Alpi. Destino storico*, Jaca Book, Milano, 1986 (*Histoire et civilisation des Alpes*, Edition Privat Toulouse et Payot, Lausanne, 1980).

the most different cultures and social environments: from a small valley in Trentino artistic printings were sold to the Czar family in Saint Petersburg.

It is of signal importance that the capitalist system is a fairly recent development in Southern Europe (but also in the marginal areas of Europe, like Lapland for instance) and one of the consequences of the diffusion of the market economy in rural area has been economic, social, demographic and ecological imbalance. A vicious circle took shape, in which economic growth was concentrated in regions with high production standards. Rising living standards in those same regions led to demographic growth and intensive cropping. Simultaneously, less favoured areas experienced recession or stagnation, emigration, and abandonment and turn into sources of cheap, unqualified labour for the fastest-growing industrial districts of the United States, France and Germany. Traditional and highly creative professions practiced in Alpine valley were forgotten and abandoned because the mountains became marginal areas, who could produce only non specialised workforce who could earn only very low salaries, whose families were always too big and whose children were forced to emigrate if they wanted to avoid starvation. Between the end of XIX century, and the sixth decades of XX, the rural and mountain way of life had to face the most important crisis its people could remember. Sense of identity and affiliation to territory, culture, heritage collapse; and so did the traditional creativity that was based on a peculiar, archaic culture and ecological environment. People were left hopeless, they could not see a future in the place where they were born; so part of the population (the most learned and the entrepreneur minded part of it) left. Old persons and low qualified workers remained on the territory. A vicious circle began: the villages were left impoverished of human resources more and more; and, as years went by, creativity (and entrepreneurial spirit and mentality, that characterised Alpine and mountain way of life) just disappeared. If you see your region of origin as marginal and deprived, you will never be able to imagine to build something there, to invest your money, to make your children grow there, to develop schools and training systems, to ask for a better quality of life. All you will try is to leave to search for better opportunities.

The capitalist economy has caused the demise of small-scale rural-mixed economy and the objective of production is no longer survival for the family and the community, but market profitability. In agriculture, the imperative was to cut down on costs and design economies of scale; farming was mechanized and, where necessary, the whole enterprise would be relocated in the Third World. As a consequence of this transformation, more land is needed to support a family, farmers are encouraged to expand and incorporate smaller farms and more and more large land holdings are devoted to monoculture, more efficient in terms of profitability but considerably detrimental in terms of biodiversity and traditional habits and customs.

The Alps: mountains of problems

The focus of this research is on the Alps, a region that is still not very well known: the common perception of Italy is that of a country of sea and sun. In reality, Italy is covered by mountains for more than three quarters of the territory: municipalities in flat land are only 4.2% in Central Italy, 17.7% in the South, 15.6%, in the islands. By contrast, in the North-West and in the in the North-East they are 33.6% and 41.9%, respectively.³ While it is certainly true that the Apennines reach lower altitudes and the climate is warmer, infrastructures and emergency services are less effective and damages are often greater in scale.

The fact remains that, in spite of the relative ignorance of the Italian public, the 13,000,000 inhabitants of the mountains, scattered across 190,919 square kilometres, share a common heritage and identity.⁴ What's more, about 100 million visitors, mostly from the plains and the coast, annually choose the Alps as they holiday destination, making it the most popular international tourist destination in the world⁵. Many of them, especially retired citizens, spend several weeks a year in the Alps, and can be considered part-time residents.

³ Italian National Census 1951-2001

⁴ See the reports at www.cipra.org

⁵ EU report, *Alpine Space Programme, Interreg III B, Community Initiative*, Bruxelles, November 2001

The Italian Alps extend for a thousand-odd kilometres from east to west, over an area that is 42 percent of the total mountain area of the Peninsula. In 2001, 4.5 million people lived in the Italian Alps. 1,851 municipalities, 22.8% of the total number of Italian municipalities and 44% of the Northern municipalities, are located in the Alps.

The alpine habitat is highly heterogeneous and outsiders looking at the Alps feel a sense of inaccessibility and environmental fragility; or they look at them as the garden and playground of Europe; or else they may be altogether indifferent to them. Lack of knowledge is an important component of the various perceptions: when students are asked how many people they think live in the Alps, the usual answer ranges from 300,000 to a couple million inhabitants.

On the other hand, the Alps are far from homogenous: it is fair to say that the western portion does not seem to be able to overcome modernity and its demographic trend is negative. The eastern part seems to be able to better cope with it. Still, even within the same district there large social and income disparities are likely.

People in the Alps gradually move to the nearest cities, which are becoming densely populated, polluted, stuck in traffic jams, and are losing their identity. Unlike cities in the plains, which have developed homogeneously, cities in the mountains are physically constrained and had to grow longitudinally, absorbing several rural settlements along the way. As a result, the farthest neighbourhoods find themselves too distant from downtown and, because of their low-income housing estates, they witness the emergence of latent or actual interethnic rows between the original residents, who feel they should be in charge, and the newcomers, who end up even more alienated.

With the economic growth and the increasing European integration, national boundaries are less and less a barrier and, since the Nineties, new forms of EU-sponsored interaction and interdependence between alpine regions are taking shape. Yet this has also led to a growing divide between advantaged and disadvantaged districts and the intensification of traffic movements. Gradually, the economic heart of Germany has shifted towards the subalpine regions of Bavaria and Baden. Hi-tech research institutes in beautiful locations are reminiscent of the Silicon Valley⁶, and the major axes of economic growth and trade between Baden-Württemberg and Lombardy run through Switzerland. Additionally, this entire area lies at the crossroads of East-West and North-South trade. Similarly, the most developed economic districts of France, after Paris, are Lyon and Marseille, and then Alsace and Strasbourg, Nice, Cannes and the Côte d'Azur. They are all near the Alps. Grenoble and Sophia Antipolis, with its environmentally friendly and culturally sustainable Science Park, are emerging as foremost hi-tech players.

Even so, economic disparities between alpine villages and urban centres are still remarkable: in real terms, the gross product of the alpine area is about 30-40% lower than the metropolitan gross product (e.g. if the figure for Milan is 130, the one for Sondrio is 75)⁷. The southern slope of the Alps has been confronted with harsher competition and more severe climatic changes.

Cultural ecology and the effort to make the brain work

For the experts of cultural ecology⁸ change comes from the process of adaptation to the environment.

This outlook focuses on the relationship between society and nature, on the conditions of a community in its environment, on resource management and on the harnessing technologies, on herding and domestication, on demography, food habits, biological and technical adjustment to extreme climates, on the "techniques of the body," on health and healthcare practices. It involves

⁶ Institutes like Fraunhofer, Max Planck, and so forth.

⁷ EU report, *Alpine Space* cit., p. 26

⁸ For an extensive analysis of cultural ecology, determinism and possibilism, see John Cole and Eric Wolf, *The Hidden Frontier. Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley*, New York & London, Academic Press, 1974, and the article of Cesare Poppi in the Italian edition (Carocci, Roma, 1993) of this text, *Frontiere culturali e metodo antropologico nell'opera di John Cole ed Eric Wolf*.

studies of primatology, prehistory, archaeology, ethnology, environmental sciences, linguistics, and biological anthropology.

In cultural ecology, the element of technology has a special importance. André Leroi-Gourham⁹ and André Haudricourt have pointed out the close relatedness of science, technology, and society, breaking away from traditional divisions between hard sciences and social sciences, and demonstrating that tools, any sort of tools, from a plough to a spaceship, are inventions that can only exist in a specific social and economic context.

This implies that there will be a constant interplay between a technological environment, namely the technologies, techniques, actions and modes of work available in a certain historical period to a human group, and the surrounding ecological system. This substratum consist in the technological background of the culture under study, and in the technological background, which includes the technologies employed by those neighbouring peoples with which there is an ongoing exchange of products and ideas.⁹ Innovation occurs only when a society is ripe for it: then, it is either devised inside a community, or it is imported and reworked: the difference between the two scenarios is, for all intents and purposes, negligible.

On the other hand, if a social group is not ready for innovation (and, in other words, we can call innovation creativity) there will be no possibility for evolution and development of new skills and ideas. We have to build the cultural and anthropological possibility to elaborate new visions of life in a cultural context to raise the sense of self esteem: this is the condition *sine qua non* for people to change their way of life, to see a better future, to attempt to make the brain work. And it is a big effort for human being!

The ecology of abandonment and the identity crisis

The ecology of abandonment is one branch of human ecology that focuses on how human beings decide to move out of an occupation and of a given ecosystem and the disappearance of traditional ways to graze and to manage forests. It documents the short- and long-term consequences of these phenomena, such as the interrelation between depopulation¹⁰ and ecological transformation, and their social, economic and cultural causes. Needless to say, "abandonment" has anthropocentric connotations, for the same phenomenon could also be described as nature' final vindication.

This discipline is concerned with those regions that have been transformed by stable human presence and, all of a sudden, within the space of a few decades, have been deserted. They have experienced the deterioration of their biodiversity, hydrogeological characteristics and landscape. Take the terracing of the Ligurian slopes, for instance, the Southerner part of Alpine chain. Massive urbanization along the coast meant that only retired old people, deeply attached to the land, would continue to manage terrace-cultivation. After their death, things will get certainly worse for the stability of the ecosystem.

The disappearance of cultivations and the return of the forest on the pastures cause the extinction of various valuable and fragile vegetable species, especially herbs, and the impoverishment of the soil. One of the results of this process is that essences and products that were once derived from agriculture and plants are now chemically mass produced, without attaining the quality standards of the natural ones, viz. lavender essential oils.

A vegetative analysis carried out by the Centre of Alpine Ecology¹¹ on some crop patches in Monte Bondone (Trento) shows that, compared to mowing patches, low density larch forests and beech forests, open meadows and swards that have not been used for cattle-grazing and mowing for 30 years exhibit a greater biodiversity. Analysis of the variety of species in these different habitats shows

⁹ André Leroi-Gourham, *L'uomo e la materia*, Milano, Jaca Book, 1993 (original edition 1943)

¹⁰ The notion of "place" in depopulated areas has been investigated by the Italian anthropologist Vito Teti, who has sought to elucidate how places, even when deserted, affects emigrants' thoughts and behaviour. Vito Teti, *Il senso dei luoghi. Memoria e storia dei paesi abbandonati*, Donzelli, Roma, 2004.

¹¹ Paolo Talamucci et al., *Utilizzo razionale dei prati di montagna a fini terapeutici mediante i "bagni di fieno"*, Report n° 1, Centro di ecologia alpina, Trento, 1995

restrictions in the range of species, from 97 species in the sward, to 70 in the meadow, 48 in the larches' undergrowth and 46 in the beech forest.

The management of pastures affects the ecological dynamics of vast stretches of land. Alexander Cernusca and Ulrike Tappeiner¹² in the Hohe Tauern national park, Austria, point out that after only one year of abandonment, pastures display quantitative and structural changes of vegetation as well as microclimatic variations. These alterations may influence the run-off of rainwater, and therefore erosion patterns and streamflows, in mountain ecosystems. The two researchers argue that this research provides some important criteria to assess the environmental impact of mountain farming. This, in turn, will affect the amount of subsidies that will be allotted to mountain farmers. Such criteria should also include the positive effects of alpine agriculture for the entire population, like recreational benefits, the protection from avalanches and landslides, the preservation of a vital source of potable water and hydropower. Data analysis has revealed that because of the management of high pastures in the Hohe Tauern national park, the owner of the hydro-electric power stations within the limits of the park should contribute 90 Euros per hectare to local farmers to compensate them for the additional 3 percent of water run-off that reaches its stations due to their activities. Such estimates should be extended to other areas. The beneficial effects of the work of mountain farmers and of their culture have been far too often neglected. So much so that today mountain ecosystems are threatened by the dramatic identity crisis of this category of workers and mountain dwellers. The young generations and some middle-aged people often come to the conclusion that rural economy and agricultural work are doomed. At first, they are kept going by women and the elderly, then, when women manage to find another job, they leave the land behind and, with it, their native culture and traditions, now deemed worthless and passé. The young mountain-dweller easily forswears his identity, he is ashamed of himself and feels isolated, with no public support.

Conservation and the transmission of memory, within different generations, is the basic characteristic of culture. Without communication, transmission of memories, culture can not exist.

Older generations normally don't think in terms of profit alone and are more willing to stay and cultivate the land and perpetuate their ways of life. So long as they can support themselves and are physically capable, older people continue to live in their households and, if they are forced to leave, they lose their zest for life. Otherwise, they retain a sense of stewardship (and ownership) towards the place where they were born and raised.

For a farmer "home" includes the whole region where he lives: "his" mountain, "his" valley, etc. He feels guilty when a dry stone wall falls apart, when terraces are eroded, when a pasture reverses to scrub, as though he were personally responsible for the survival of the cultural landscape: traditional agriculture has become a second nature for him! Mass tourism has revolutionised the traditional socio-economic model, premised on an all-sufficient and decentralised mode of harnessing natural resources. The new, centralized model of total exploitation of one resource over the others, is entirely removed from the control and management of ordinary people, in that it depends on large investments of capital. The ecological balance of the farmed land can only be ensured by a sufficient amount of human labour devoted to its restoration. This process stalls when human beings no longer feel such a vocation. In the Alps, shared toil perpetuates the culture and gives meaning to the notion of nature and landscape stewardship. Nevertheless, over the last thirty years, national policies have produced enormous structural changes in both agriculture and apiculture causing a dramatic reduction of cropland and grazing land. Vegetation has reversed to typologies that existed before the establishment of human settlements.

Such a process may take decades and entails several successive stages, each defined by specific and unstable combinations of flora and fauna. Mountain communities knew full well that there are thresholds that should not be crossed when it comes to balance social needs and concerns about natural resources. They were aware that what is taken away from nature must be given back, at some point (e.g. manure), and in the same proportion. To the extent that these communities remained independent and free, they retained their environmental conscience and a degree of functional interdependence with nature. Then,

¹² Ulrike Tappeiner, Alexander Cernusca, Auswirkungen des Auflassens einer Almweide auf die Bestandsstruktur und das Lichtklima, in *Belatung und Belastbarkeit alpiner Ökosysteme*, Universitätsverlag Wagner, Innsbruck, 1989, pp. 531-548.

pressures from the outside (nationalism, wars, housing speculation, capitalism, mass tourism, and so forth) tipped the balance against nature.

History, anthropology, advocacy and the struggle for identity

Looking into the possibility for small alpine communities to develop by their own efforts and to elaborate new forms of creativity, means re writing history rooting the narration on how a human group pursue its own identity struggle, that is, how its history has been manipulated and neutered.¹⁹ Without a strong identity economic growth will not be as robust as one would hope for, and nurturing a group identity without investing in collective memories, that is, in a common and unique history, is futile. Yet, rural populations in the Alps have been labelled “peoples without history” for centuries¹³.

Until the 1960s Italy (and most of Europe...) was essentially a rural country; those who lived in the cities were a minority. Even today, we only study the history of a 10 percent of the population that lived in the cities; or, better said, of a 10 percent of that 10 percent, that is the members of the ruling classes. Still more precisely, we are talking about half of the latter, i.e. the men. In other words, our history is the monopoly of 0.5% of the entire population. This may well be of historical significance, but it is statistically irrelevant. A major shift towards social history in historiography occurred in the 1930s and 1940s, when Marc Bloch and Lucien Fèvre founded the “École des Annales”¹⁴ and began to focus their attention on the history of the people who lived at the bottom of society. This school made history and anthropology come together to counterbalance the earlier overwhelming focus on events and historical figures.

Through the study of ordinary people and their concerns, the historian detects the fundamental mechanisms of a society¹⁵. This theory has yet to make headway in mainstream historiography: today the history taught at school is still the same as it has always been.

Furthermore, we tend to “forget” that most of the cultural, social and economic thinking in the Middle Age was going on in cloisters and castles: illuminated manuscripts were drawn in places that could be called “eagle’s nests.” Epoch-making technological and scientific discoveries such as watermills, oil mills, the forge hammer, the sawmill, and the wine barrel have not been made in universities but in egalitarian, autonomous, mostly self-sufficient rural communities, that did not shy away from innovation and creativity.

The question of which history and which identity suit a community is not an easy one to answer because, for all intents and purposes, the past is what historiography defines as such, and the rules of historiography are determined to no small degree by historical and ideological contingencies. History is culturally and anthropologically mediated. Proof of that: the transition from the history of the great figures and great events to social history, where ethnographic data and information on the mentality of ordinary people proves decisive. The masses become protagonist of their history, even though the rationale and the forces of change sometimes are blurred, or even overlap. This is really difficult to grasp, let alone accept, from within a linear, cause-effect perspective on historical trends, one in which the centrepiece is the individual, within a timeframe close to zero, made of quick, uneven and short oscillations, that is, what we call “events.” These events form the baseline of history, seen as an historical account of the way things really happened, as though human life were entirely prey to the whims of exceptional men whose actions and discoveries determine the fate of the common people. This is a kind of history that is seen from above and not in the *long-durée* (long lasting periods). Yet, major social transformations do not originate from the decisions of charismatic figures: the thoughts and actions of historical figures themselves are the result of streams of events and processes unfolding over extended time-periods and these are non-linear, non teleological; they are the ideal subject for an anthropological study.

¹³ Michela Zucca, *Donne delinquenti*, Simone, Napoli, pp. 11-20

¹⁴ On the Annales, see *Le problème dell’incroyance au XVI siècle*, Paris, 1942; Marc Bloch, *La société féodale*, Paris, 1939

¹⁵ Mondher Kilani, *Introduction a l’anthropologie*, Editino Payot, Lausanne, 1992

An anthropological outlook takes into account the inventions born out of collective wisdom that are generally neglected by the official historiography. See the Middle Age, for instance. It was a period of major technological advance, viz. watermills. But those accomplishments were the outcome of the practical skills and reasoning of nameless people; it took hundreds of years to develop and perfect them. But while less arresting innovations are studied by heart, watermills are confined to textbooks dealing with the history of agriculture. It is not a coincidence that most of the techniques that sensibly improved our life, starting from the Middle Age, were introduced in the Alps, and have been developed and tested by those people that for centuries have been regarded as uncivilized. Among them, watermills, sophisticated irrigation techniques, sawmills, forges, oil mills, grindstones, furnaces, presses, felt cloth, etc. Social history, like anthropology and psychoanalysis study not only the conscious and clearly identifiable activities of human beings but also, and with a special emphasis, what is left unsaid, what is taken for granted and tacitly assumed, the collective subconscious, psychological and mental framework of a particular society at a given time. Anthropological historiography describes the culture of a community, its aspirations, its change, standstill, or even regression, its adaptation to the environment and to changing economic, political, religious and social conditions. Its focus is on collective history, where groups, communities and the masses play the central role and where the experts attempts to figure out the whys and wherefores of the life of anonymous people at the same time influencing and influenced by the socio-cultural milieu.

Teaching people to appreciate popular wisdom: identity economy and the role of tradition

Fieldwork research, mostly in Africa, enabled Balandier¹⁶ and other exponents of dynamic anthropology, a branch of anthropology that is concerned with changes in the communities under study, to question the commonly held view that there existed a dualism between tradition and modernity. This, he found too simplistic and reductionist. Today, globalization is bringing these issues back into the limelight. Dynamic anthropology identifies and explicates multifarious influences and cultural changes affecting not only traditional cultures but society as a whole.

Modernity and globalization are often perceived by the public as leading to destructureation, fragmentation, if not to the extinction of age-old systems of values. In reality, while some disappear, other cultures are revitalized, sometimes restored, when symbols and rituals of collective identification are once again in fashion. Hobsbawm¹⁷ submits that a tradition is not a cultural fact, it is not something that is already present in a society: it is a use that changes over time and can be made from nothing; and its adoption is made more convenient by material and immaterial needs.

This is why we should not think of tradition as something that belongs to the past; to the contrary, it plays an important part in the definition of the present, by affecting the perception of events and of the need and direction of change and the development of collective creativity leading to new forms of economy. For all the conservatives' efforts to argue the contrary, the interplay of tradition and modernity is not antagonistic but dialectic. It follows that categories such as false and authentic have little meaning in the debate revolving around the concepts of modernity and tradition. The French anthropologist Gérard Lenclud, pondering on the meaning of tradition, maintains that it does not correspond to "a product of the past, a work from a different time that contemporaries should receive passively;" something traditional is "not what has always been, but what we want it to be." This approach, according to Lenclud, "helps us dispose of a false problem, namely the question (...) of change and preservation, of rates of relative transformation and conservation"¹⁸.

¹⁶ Georges Balandier, *Le désordre: éloge du mouvement*, Paris, Flayard, 1988. The French ethnologist focused on the changing occurring in African societies from the viewpoint of the semiotics of development, and cast light on the relations between alternative representation of modernity.

¹⁷ Eric J. Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger (edited by), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1983

¹⁸ Gérard Lenclud, La tradizione non è più quella di un tempo, in *Oltre il folklore*, edited by Pietro Clemente and Fabio Mugnaini, Carocci, Roma, 2001, p. 31.

But then again, what is the function of tradition? Why is it so badly needed in the timeframe, space, mentality, sensibility of the community under scrutiny or in which positive actions are being undertaken?

Sometimes anthropologists (in their new professional task of community development) may be asked to revise, modernize and reinvent rituals and archaic folklore to make them more plausible. This can be done for several reasons, like rebuilding cohesion around shared symbolisms to prevent social break-ups, or to promote tourism and the identity economy, and so forth. In the light of the above, refusing to do this in the name of academic purism and the cult of authenticity may be counterproductive: the degree of acceptance of the revised tradition is really the only indication that such effort was worth it. "Old times" nostalgia (you lived better when you lived worse and nobody had anything and everybody was so happy) is meaningless and, if considered as an approach, is methodologically wrong. Real life requires others. Specialised work of a "professional of culture" (anthropologist, historian) is necessary because building something "authentic", deeply linked with the territory, is a high-sophisticated act. At the same time, authenticity represents a high value touristic factor.

One of the most interesting and stimulating outcomes of the combination of ecological and anthropological research concerns traditional skills and knowledge in the use of environmental resources. One can easily see it as hyper-specialization and balanced adjustment to every single local condition, in accordance with the requirements of a specific culture and its dominant values.

There is a general tendency to cut down on waste and function as a closed cycle, one in which garbage is re-utilised as an energy source (e.g. manure), both ecologically and economically. Indeed, the two terms come from the same Greek root, *oikos*, which stands for home, indicating both the domestic and the natural environment as a shelter and a production unit. They are not opposed but complementary, and this the most important lesson we have to learn from rural civilizations.

One of the ways in which we can recover this traditional wisdom is by means of the identity economy, which is at once technology-oriented and rooted in the history of a community as well as based on innovative forms of advertising. It combines high margins of profit, respect for and appreciation of local identities, and social growth. It is along this line that several communities with a strong identity are working to brand their products as traditional.

Since the report of the Club of Rome and MIT¹⁹ was published, which explained that growth is not unlimited, that the current conception of economy, environment and their relationship might lead to catastrophic consequences, traditional systems of farming and forestry, herding and land-management have been resumed. Archaic economies that had been of interest only to anthropologists are now studied by other specialists who hope to find out the key to sustainable development, one more respectful of the environment, cultures and local identities, and of the Third World; and one centred on the use of local renewable energies, on setting of limits, on the reduction of pollutants, and on a commitment to implement Rio de Janeiro's Agenda 21.

Sustainable development and the big cultural challenge: to create limits to go on

The issue of socio-cultural change is crucial when it comes to sustainable development and to putting an upper limit to growth for environmental reasons. The most popular definition of sustainable development is the one used in the Brundtland Report, in 1987, which led to the official adoption of the same definition by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCDE), organized by the United Nations. The report, entitled "Our common future," reads as follows: "humanity has the ability to make development sustainable, to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development does imply limits – not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities."

¹⁹ Donella H. Meadows, *Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind*, New American Library, 1977

Such a definition can be contradictory, and this is precisely the opinion of Serge Latouche, the chief advocate of downscaling growth²⁰. In point of fact, our culture is still heavily influenced by nineteenth century evolutionism, stressing the importance of the notion of “progress” as the engine of a more affluent and ultimately better society, thanks to a larger distribution of goods, and of a linear perspective on human history. Therefore, despite the results of many studies published over the past decades,¹¹ which demonstrate that further growth is impossible, coming to terms with the reality that the production of goods should be curtailed and that it is about time that we implement forms of sustainable development, remains awfully unpleasant.

Human beings can partly circumvent natural selection and intervene to alter the natural order in a way that does not compromise it. But they can also neutralize or destroy those processes that allow ecosystems to adjust to change, regain their balance and re-establish their self-sufficiency. The result is deterioration and loss of biodiversity.

Human beings decide to what extent the modification of the environment should be pursued, which model of socio-economic development is the most advisable: a sustainable, long-term and harmonious approach, or something entirely different, since between wilderness and deterioration lies a gamut of options. We think it would be most desirable for the natural environment and human society that humanity attempted to strike a balance between the improvements of both. Protecting nature does not mean placing it in a crystal coffin. What we should rather do is to manage in a fair and effective way human progress and the evolution of the environment.

It is plainly evident that this is the ideal challenge for anthropologists, because their expertise enables them to explain what has already been done and to make an important contribution to the decision-making process concerning the steps that should be taken to redirect attitudes and practices toward the environment in the light of the local culture, its values and its history.

Anthropology and Economy

Even today, the common perception of economics – among ordinary people as in the ivory tower – is that it is an exact science²¹, based on mathematical models that can be applied to clearly definable situations: underdeveloped countries, countries of the Northern hemisphere, agriculture, industry, new economy... Save for the Anglo-Saxon countries, anthropology is seen as too subjective a discipline to make reliable predictions about what will happen in the future in a given community, especially with regard to the economic sphere. However, the most receptive economic analysts have known for a long time that barter, much in the same way as the exchange in the global market, must obey to cultural, not only functional, rules. The way in which production is planned, a commodity is assigned a material and symbolic value, and is marketed, is the result of cultural dynamics specific to each civilization. The ability to propose and the willingness to accept a new, manufactured need (of goods, services, living standards, etc.) are contingent on the effectiveness of a message. A cultural model can be imported, exported, removed more quickly than a commodity. Economy and anthropology are interrelated and the science of economics cannot be dissociated from the study of the society where cultural and consumer practices take shape. From this perspective, marketing strategies can greatly benefit from a methodical ethnographic analysis. The hi-tech boom has produced an enormous quantity of data to examine. But such is the amount of information that even the most sophisticated computers could not handle it. One has to pick out the most valuable information, and anthropological criteria can help considerably in making this choice, by showing the navigation through variables and functions, figures and reports to meet the expectations of the client, together with one's own.

Anthropology cannot certainly replace economics, but it can scrutinize the same evidence and offer a constructive critique, bringing out the implicit and hidden relations between production, distribution and consumption on the one hand, and society and culture on the other hand, because individuals and groups with their biases, beliefs and undisclosed assumptions, are the only true agents in these relations.

²⁰ Serene Latouche, *L'occidentalisation du monde. Essai sur la signification, la portée et les limites de l'uniformisation planétaire*, édition La Découverte, Paris, 1989

²¹ Michela Zucca, *Antropologia pratica e applicata*, Simone, Napoli, 2001, p. 401

The practical implications of this analysis, which are of considerable interest, are however all too often ignored by those who manage the economic growth of a country or a region.

Economics as we see it is how people's decisions on how to produce commercialise and consume are informed by their background and habits of thought and action, which are in turn culturally, socially, and historically determined variables.

Recently, then, the debate on some crucial economic questions has moved from universities, public offices and corporations to the public arena, and across the world. The destruction of non-renewable energy sources, the increasing economic rift between the rich and the poor, globalization, the influence of advertising, and the commodification of individual identities, the changing nature of work, are matters of consequences for the public.

In pre-industrial communities, even in small rural communities, the dominant economic model was autarchy: people tried to produce what was necessary to support themselves and resorted very little to market exchange. Family ties defined production relations. Production seldom exceeded the needs of a family. This system collapsed with the advent of market economy in both colonial societies and rural communities in Europe.

Today we cannot possibly define that system as backward, because it did manage to accomplish what contemporary economists can only dream of: a closed cycle of production-consumption-recycling-environmental care. The collapse of this age-old system led to environmental degradation. This is why we cannot think of it as a simple economic model. On the contrary, it is a complex model that minimizes the ecological impact and may offer some valid solution in these times of environmental crisis. In this sense, the work of anthropologists fills the gap left by other academicians, providing the expertise necessary to develop a new economic paradigm more attuned to the demands of the public, more respectful of nature, more responsive to the disparities between developed and developing countries, and between mountains and plains, cities and countryside.

The methodology to improve creativity and start development process: research/action

During fieldwork with the research group of the Centre of Alpine Ecology in Trento, and during the sustainable development projects carried on in the Alps and in Italian mountains I have directed, we have employed the action-research technique, consisting in data-collection aimed at the development of a given region, through the involvement of its population²². The goal is eminently practical: the actors involved in an action-research study are both the researchers and the informants. The definition of the problem comes at a later stage, when researchers and the community come together to discuss the relevant information and decide in concert what should be done next.

The observation of the social context is vital. "context" is an expression which comes from the Latin verb "*con-tessere*", meaning "to weave together" and, by extension, "fabric." Specifically, "context" includes all the elements that define the identity of a group, a set of complex economic, social, cultural, human, religious, mythical, and archetypal relations that constitute a social milieu. This is the key-scenario for every development plan. It must consider both economic and socio-cultural dimensions and must be empirically tested, by trial and error. This is what makes it flexible: it varies as the context changes, for there are no universally applicable, pre-packaged solutions. Needless to say, theory is important, since no intervention can be built on a foundation lacking an accurate theoretical framework and a reasonable amount of information.

Two methodological assumptions underpin this approach:

1. The gradual emancipation of the social sciences from positivism and the theoretical models of the hard sciences, with their irrefutable results and their scientific reliability based on universal laws. Diversity of human behaviour generates a variety of situations and solutions even when the context is ostensibly the same: it is this complexity that a positivistic approach cannot fully grasp;
2. Expertise must be applied. Expertise is only valuable when it is of some use.

²²Michela Zucca, *Antropologia cit.*, pp. 71-72

Guidelines

For this kind of action-research we have followed the EU preferential guidelines. The proposed criteria are as follows:

- Capacity of the project designers to make it suit the needs of the community;
- Bottom-up approach at every stage;
- Broad participation in planning and execution;
- Increased equal opportunities, especially for women, through mainstreaming and empowerment throughout the design and implementation of the project; involvement and economic, social and cultural growth of disadvantaged areas;
- Identification and involvement of end-users, by informal as well as direct contact
- Project sustainability.

What needs to be evaluated

When it comes to economic development, including sustainable development, the first thing to do is to appraise the initial conditions. A project cannot take off without it and one needs to address the following issues:

- The number of inhabitants of a community;
- Their occupations;
- Their age;
- Their schooling and education;
- Their attitude towards entrepreneurship;
- The core values of the community;
- The community's expectations;
- The expectations of the most dynamic social actors;
- The role and expectations of women;
- The role and expectations of young people;
- Conflict and disagreement;
- Distribution of wealth;
- Family ties and patron-client relations;
- Formal and informal associative and aggregative patterns, within and without the community;
- Business activities;
- Entrepreneurial spirit;
- Relations and partnership between economic actors;
- Drive for innovations among the young generations;
- Type of local government and policy-making process;
- Degree of consensus about the initiatives of the local authorities;
- Measure of trust;
- Trust and consensus with respect to action-researchers and their project;

Culture as a tool to create a Local Development Strategy in a European way

Constant, specialized training is needed for all the people involved in this kind of project: authorities, entrepreneurs, new employees, teachers, etc. More generally, the whole population should be kept informed about the progress and outcome of this programme; while researchers have to realise that these tasks are not irrelevant to their career goals. Widespread participation of ordinary citizens will allow them to take matters in their own hands. This approach may well cause disagreement and conflict, but the solution to these problems lies in the role of negotiators and coordinators between the

various sides performed by researchers and in viewing tourists not only as a necessary hassle, but as a source of potential beneficial change.

In order to reverse the current demographic and social trends you need a cultural renaissance of peasant civilization, in a new and creative way, especially among the youth, who must understand that the things that they are most ashamed of might well turn out to be worthy of transmission to posterity and a great opportunity for employment and for the enhancement of the quality of life in the mountain valleys.

In addition to a strong cultural identity, almost all European localities, especially outside big metropolitan concentrations, own important potential resources, which could (should) be used as a basis for a process of sustainable local development. (A locality can be seen as a small universe composed of a territory, the community that lives there, and its social reality – activities, problems and interests - shared by all the population.) The potential resources of the place may take diverse forms, such as regional products and natural production systems where rural and agro-tourism and handicraft activity play a relevant role. Furthermore, the territory and the community living there own a history and a cultural heritage, which also constitute, in themselves, an important resource for the development of the locality. However, all of these potential resources may only be useful to promote the local development of the region (locality) if they are used in the context of a Local Development Strategy.

A Local Development Strategy has to be designed and implemented with the active participation of all community actors and must be centred on people's needs and aspirations and oriented to create complementary synergies among the existing potential resources. In fact, development is not made *for* people; development is made *with* and *for* people. A Local Development Strategy, developed with the active involvement of people and based on the relationships between individuals and the territory where they live, is the only way to attract people and to create stable life projects for the residents. This is important because the localities that can be involved can be situated in the marginal European contexts of large Mediterranean flatlands, cold lands of Northern Europe and high mountains such Alps, Pirenees, Carpathian, are suffering from depopulation - a strong human desertification - which, by itself, poses a problem for any development strategy. In addition, each of these European regions is very interested in preserving its environmental capital and promoting sustainable practices in the fields of agriculture, forest and wildlife, tourism and energy. Furthermore, these European regions must be convinced that critical issues concerning sustainable development could be better tackled through effective transnational cooperation among regions situated in marginal areas of Europe and suffering human desertification.

The marginal and fragile regions of this continent must decide to cooperate by exchanging their local experience in promoting sustainable development based on their local resources, namely their history, cultural heritage, handicraft activity, rural and agro-tourism, and other regional products and activities. Only exchanging experience and good practices, only unite themselves in a European project, their weak voices will be heard: and their needs will be recognised and understood on European and political level. Sustainable mountain development strategy based on rural cooperation, forest and wildlife management, agriculture and pastures, marketing of quality foodstuffs and integrated tourism; preservation of environmental capital and promotion of sustainable practices in the fields of agriculture, husbandry, tourism and energy; sustainable practices in agriculture and forestry (ecological cultivation and forest exploitation, wild grazing and alpage management, preservation of bio-diversity), as well as new forms of tourism, based on the promotion of the natural and cultural heritage: these are the new forms of identity economy based on traditional culture creatively elaborated.

Conclusions: there is no one-fit-all solution: every time you will have to start from the beginning, but....

The socio-economic development of the alpine and rural regions of Europe region can only ride on the back of a comprehensive strategy comprising flexible measures that must be tailored for specific sites and conditions. It is not uncommon to find out that cultural variables matter more than botanic and agronomic characteristics. One first has to persuade local people that selling their cattle would be unsound, then one can train the younger generation to become good farmers.

It would be equally unreasonable to gear production and marketing towards the local market, because networks of distribution are by now globalized and several goods can be purchased for less, while local populations are not heading towards higher levels of consumption of the local produce, which is generally rather expensive, especially butter and cheese, which are inseparably associated with the mountains in the popular imagery. The only consumers who can afford it in large quantities come from the outside.

Having said that, being able to produce goods that are in great demand can be a major boost for the residents' self-esteem, and it is likely to be much more helpful than converting hold farms into boarding houses or resorts, something that calls for a great deal of money and for a deep knowledge of tourism provision and management, which are not always available.

Sustainable and participatory development schemes will encompass new and old vocations, such as mountain pasture that, with the help of state-of-the-art technology and adequate training, will be made much more profitable and less alienating.

Aside from production, it is important that we all understand that the profit margins for local entrepreneurs will remain rather thin; unless residents get involved into the marketing and distribution of dairies, herbs, meat, honey, flax, etc., and learn how to successfully apply for regional, national and EU subsidies. Products should be sold where they are produced, and where they can be accompanied by other services such as hospitality, the mildness and salubriousness of the climate, and the wholesomeness of the food, in a pleasant environment.

This goal can only be achieved if petty politics and internecine strife are left aside, once and for all, and if local authorities finally realise that investing in the local culture, local resources and local people is really the only available option.