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# Cultures and politics in the present-day Alps: issues relating to society, spatiality and reflexivity

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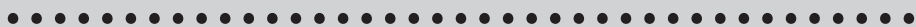
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**Abstract** : More than ever before, the Alps are affected by increasingly varied and powerful flows and equally by the multiplication of initiatives designed to strengthen or regenerate the idea of “locality” (place).

What spatialities and what territorialities activate the populations of the Alps today? What are the contemporary figures relating to circulation and flows and the complementary figures concerning spatial “anchoring” or fixity and new territorial foundations? These are the questions that this essay, proposes to develop.

*This text takes another look at the subject of a lecture given as part of celebrations to mark the centenary of the Institut de Géographie Alpine. This lecture, like the others given on this occasion, adopted a free format, presenting a report on the current situation in the Alps and prospects for the future. The written format adopted here logically takes the form of an essay. Readers looking for detailed illustrations and references are referred to three scientific articles published by the same author over recent years (see Appendix).*

**Keywords** : spatiality, territoriality, accessibility, mobility, identity.



The practice of scientific research is full of paradoxes. One of them – and not the least remarkable – is identifying emerging phenomena and trying to analyse them in terms of the most established concepts of the academic disciplines and their most preoccupying issues. And yet this is what this text attempts to do, with the help of a few fundamentals from geography. The risk of appearing to lack innovation when analysing new phenomena is thus a real one. However, it is worth taking this risk given that the social and spatial processes observable in the contemporary Alps benefit from being analysed in the light of these geographical fundamentals.

Indeed, what could be more traditional in geography than to examine the spatial dimension of societies in terms of the links between the movement of goods and people on the one hand and the physical impact or expression on the ground on the other? German geography since Friedrich Ratzel and French geography since Paul Vidal de la Blache have made this dialectic of opposing forces the focus of their intellectual endeavours. English-language geography in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theorizing about the relationship between *place* (representing stability) and *space* (the area covered by flows), and French-language geography, using the link between *espace* (space) and *territoire* (territory), took up this idea while giving it a new formulation. The current situation of Alpine societies and the research carried out on them brings us back to this dialectic. For, on a communication given at the occasion of the centenary of the institute responsible for this journal (June 2007). More than ever before, the Alps are affected by increasingly varied and powerful flows and equally by the multiplication of initiatives designed to strengthen or regenerate the idea of “locality” (place).

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## Movement and accessibility issues

To start with, what is the present situation of the Alps in terms of infrastructures and the movement of goods and people?

As far as infrastructures are concerned, it is important not to lose sight of the continuing improvements in accessibility to the Alpine massif and its most remote valleys. There is no doubt that the construction of motorways has slowed down, the Alpine Convention having put a damper on enthusiasm. But the ever improving quality of roads and road maintenance means that Alpine villages have never been so accessible, even though significant spatial imbalances still exist. This improved accessibility, however, has perhaps now reached its peak; with public finances in a state of crisis in several Alpine countries, the likelihood of increasing energy costs and the withdrawal of state funding for public transport could contribute to a changing trend in the coming years. In the meantime, conditions are favourable for the arrival of newcomers to the Alps, particularly commuters who are tending to settle at increasing distances from major urban centres. The increasing migration of amenities (for retirees, those working from home, etc.) is also benefiting from the same situation. Under these conditions, the Alps are enjoying a migratory balance that is positive overall, even though there are very marked spatial contrasts: sustained attractiveness of the French Alps and the extended peripheral areas of the major towns and cities of Switzerland, Lombardy and Bavaria; stagnation or decreasing populations in the piedmont areas of Carinthia and Styria.

The great infrastructure revolution in the Alps, however, has yet to happen. The major base tunnels under construction in Switzerland, and in the planning stages under the Brenner (Münich-Innsbruck-Verona) and Mont-Cenis (Lyon-Chambery-Turin) passes, will bring profound changes to traffic conditions between Italy and the rest of Europe. Yet the consequences of these developments for the Alps are still poorly identified. Although it seems likely that the Alps will not benefit a great deal from them and that, as simple areas of transit, they will tend to suffer by becoming a backwater for high-speed transportation in Europe, this new traffic may, in places, have the opposite effect. A few months after the inauguration of the first of these base tunnels, Loetschberg between Berne and Brigue (Valais), there has already been an explosion of leisure traffic to the Swiss canton of Valais (+30% over the three winter months of 2008 according to the Swiss national rail company). A little further east, another initiative provided additional evidence of the implications of this type of development and of the type of debate that it gives rise to: a project for a railway station, to be known as Porta Alpina, situated in the middle of the Gotthard tunnel, with a lift that takes you up to the level of the village of Sedrun in the upper Rhine valley, was supported by a coalition of local and regional interests. This station would have

placed a part of the canton of Grisons within some 30 minutes of Zurich and Milan. Although abandoned because of additional costs and traffic complications, this project gave rise to real public debate on accessibility in the Alps in the era of underground infrastructures; but in the end, its abandonment seems to confirm the fears of those who are concerned about the Alps becoming marginalised by high-speed transport networks in Europe.

The space in which communication flows and infrastructures operate permanently redefines the position of places and their conditions of accessibility. The Alps are no exception to this rule. Their population density and central position in Europe places them within easy reach of numerous major cities on the continent. But the construction work underway at present is a reminder that the Alps are still outside the Europe of major metropolitan cities.

## Society and territoriality issues

The ever increasing accessibility of cities, villages and alpine valleys, and the population migrations they give rise to, have continued to increase diversity among alpine inhabitants. The arrival of numerous citizens ready to make the daily journey to work in nearby towns, of retirees and remote workers, workers in the tourism sector, sometimes seasonal workers, has increased the heterogeneity of local populations and diversified cultural practices as well as expectations regarding services and amenities. The remaining regulatory ramparts controlling the movement of people fell with the entry of Slovenia into the European Union and the opening of the Swiss labour market to nationals of the European Union. Even restrictions in the Swiss housing and property market, the last to fix a quota on the acquisition of property by foreigners, could well be lifted, thus further opening the way for new inhabitants in the alpine valleys. Current conditions are therefore very favourable for an intensive mixing of people.

This situation, however, has not been without its detractors. The fear of a property boom, particularly in the resorts, has led to hostile reactions to the construction of second homes, going as far as to introduce moratoriums, as in Saint Moritz and Cran-Montana since 2007. More importantly perhaps, numerous initiatives have tried to cultivate the social link or reterritorialise economic practices. Throughout the Alps, there is an increasing number of initiatives aimed at celebrating one form or another of the cultural heritage; short marketing circuits have been set up for local products; product guarantees of origin (appellations contrôlées), which began in France and Italy, have now spread to Switzerland and Austria, combining the advantages of marketing added value and the constitution of real professional networks; regional currencies, very popular in the germanophone world, are increasing in the Swiss, German and Austrian Alps, and here too with the hope of contributing to the perpetuation of local and regional transactions and to economic solidarity.

Today, alpine research is suffering from a lack of data and case studies on the social and cultural transformations brought about by new types of exchange and new migratory *practices*. It seems highly likely that the numerous initiatives aimed at cultivating social ties, reforging territories and supporting local economic activity are a reflection of the concerns of local populations and their renewed need for a feeling of attachment...in particular at a time when the Alpine states are expecting a reduction in the density of public service networks (post offices, healthcare, etc.).

## New identities ? New images ? New broders

In this context, the question of the future of social ties and divisions within alpine populations concerns just as much the politicians as the scientists. From the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, researchers had come to terms with a traditionalist and backward-looking conception of alpine societies. They had come to an understanding of the influence of working class culture in the valley bottoms, and of the upheaval caused by the repeated contact between alpine populations and tourists. But no sooner had these categories been adopted than they became no longer really functional: tourists became sedentary; town dwellers became residents; the presence of workers is on the wane; and alpine residents have themselves become enthusiastic participants in modern mobility, making the most of several different possible workplaces, and becoming tourists in the inter-season period. It is probable that, thanks to this mixing and this questioning of the usual ways of thinking about social diversity in the Alps, personal and collective identities undergo a profound transformation. But in this field too, data and analyses are lacking.

However, there are a few indications that with regard to feelings of belonging, the traditional references, essentially national and regional in nature, are gradually being replaced by new references. The major urban regions are increasingly polarising both practices and representations, independently of inherited institutional frameworks. Cross-border cooperative agreements are now more common and, above all, the Alps as a whole, taken as an area of identification, have now assumed an importance that historically they have never had. Networks of actors have been organised at the scale of the Alps, displaying some kind of panalpine activism. The European community programme known as the "Alpine Space", although covering an area that extends well beyond the Alps, has given rise to and supported numerous initiatives between communes, associations, protected areas, and companies throughout the mountain range. Undoubtedly we are witnessing the emergence of a complex governance at the scale of the entire Alpine region, with an increasing number of actors and levels of action: States, still present, and responsible for coordinating their initiatives within the framework of the Alpine Convention; sub-state entities (regions, cantons, lander, etc.) that have long been involved, or have become involved more recently, in specifically alpine politics; communes increasingly in a position to set up partnerships themselves across the Alps; associations and clubs, and alpine federations of associations and clubs that are increasingly willing to speak out in defence of their conception of the way the Alps are used and developed, etc. Few trans-national regions have experienced such public activity. The Alps are a fascinating area of observation for a phenomenon that seems certain to become more marked.

## Materiality and the Imaginary of the Alps

The mixing of alpine populations and the current redefinition of methods of collective identification, backed up by new local territorialities, owes a lot to the development of communication infrastructures and the intensification of flows. In this respect, the processes underlying flows and spatial fixity are in the agreement. But the flows in question do not only concern goods and people, which were the focal point of interest for the first the-

oreticians of modern geography. To appreciate their capacity for radical reform in terms of spatiality and territoriality, it is important to recognise, following the work of writers such as Claude Raffestin, the overriding importance of the certainly less tangible flows of symbolic and economic transactions.

The monetarisation of methods of production and exchange has become generalised, benefiting from the recourse to currencies with world-status ambitions, such as the euro. The adoption of this single currency by most of the alpine states is evidence of the search for functional efficiency in market transactions, to the detriment of the symbolic function usually associated with national currencies. This being the case, goods and services are much the same throughout the entire alpine region, with the euro acting as mediator in establishing equivalence in transactions. It is as a reaction to this generalised equivalence that regional currencies and services for non-monetarised exchanges were conceived and implemented. It is as if the combat, very unequal and in fact somewhat derisory, between the options relating to the monetarisation of exchanges reflected, at its scale and in a competitive manner, the tension between the logics underpinning spatial flows and spatial fixity on which the main part of this analysis is based.

The circulation of representations, images and models constitutes another indication of the increasing role of forms of mediation in the transformation of alpine territorialities. More than ever, the management of the alpine area is based on a reduced number of models and representations. The material ascendancy of forms of work that were for a long time dominant (agriculture, stock-rearing, industry) has become less marked; the alpine economy, mirroring what has happened in Europe as a whole, has become predominantly oriented towards the services, many of which derive considerable benefit from the alpine milieu. These contextual elements have thus acquired a new economic function, at the very time they were taking on, in a new way, a symbolic and identity function.

It is in this way that the transformation of the relationship with the alpine landscape and environment may be interpreted. The landscape is increasingly seen as something other than the non-intentional product of ordinary practices (namely agricultural and pastoral). More and more it is considered as an economic asset (the market value of which may be evaluated, if we are to believe certain writers), as a tourism resource and a symbolic referent, if the multiplication of the forms of celebrating and collectively promoting landscape heritages is anything to go by. As for the environment, it is less and less thought of as a simple context within which the productive activities and daily lives of inhabitants are played out. It too is increasingly seen as an economic resource, namely touristic, and as an amenity. It is now no longer surprising to witness the deployment of techniques and politics of landscaping and environmental management, since the landscape and the environment have become the main identifiers of "alpineness", or of this alpine territoriality specific to the present period that is based on exploiting the visible and sensitive forms of the geographical context.

## **Reasons for global change and its various forms**

It is in this context that the diverse reactions to the interaction of geographical scales and to the global changes observed in the Alps today can be studied.

The various manifestations of the increased circulation of persons, goods, images and money, the consequences observed and the response from local societies have already been referred to. The dialectic between the logic of flows and the logic of fixity is at work here. Only its objects and its scales differ from those of which authors of the past century wrote about when they theorised on the territoriality of modern nation States.

The question of climate change is relatively new. No need to remind ourselves here of the indices, measurements, scenarios and consequences in terms of winter tourism, agricultural production and natural risks, in that they are already known. However, to date there has been far less reflection on the spatial and territorial dimensions of this phenomenon. Let us attempt to correct this in the following paragraphs.

Climate warming, with regard to the part resulting from human activities, is the global or planetary expression of the addition, and the expression in the form of flows, of innumerable local practices, and particularly of energy consumption. In some ways, it too can be interpreted as a form of globalisation (of deployment in the global space) by flows that the traditional territorial institutions cannot regulate. What are the reactions to this warming and its consequences? And what are the spatial and territorial forms of these reactions?

One type of reaction consists in artificialising conditions for exercising economic activities in order to escape climatic uncertainties. The spectacular increase in investments in artificial snow installations observed over recent years is the most remarkable illustration of this phenomenon. This type of reaction has something of the nature of today's dominant attitudes with regard to the environment and the landscape: new know-how and new technological devices increase our control over the environment, and the latter is used to ensure the perpetuation of that which has already been acquired (the landscape or the ski area) and to optimise resources. Though this reaction involves consuming energy to create something artificial, can it also be qualified as territorial in that its aim is to reinforce a system of practices, in this case economic and recreational, in a given place?

A second type of reaction consists in adapting local practices to new climatic and political conditions. In the case of skiing, this adaptation can take the form of removing equipment from ski areas where climatic conditions have become too uncertain: Abondance in Savoie, Bosco Gurin and Cari in the Tessin region have just joined the growing group of municipalities that have opted for this solution. It can also take the form of new practices and new rules regarding construction: for some years now, Voralberg has been an experimental region in this respect. In such cases, here too the reactions can probably be considered as territorial if their aim is to radically reform or, more modestly, to adjust a system of practices and representations in response to a changing environment.

## The Alps, a region? What region?

Thus, if the Alps today are, as they were yesterday, at the crossroads of logics governing spatial flows and spatial fixity, and of different forms of spatiality and territoriality, can one conclude that nothing very new will happen, at least in this part of the world? No, of course not. The concepts may remain relevant even if the facts that they refer to, or their

combination, change. To be specific, the novelty of the present situation is not based on concepts that can be used to describe the present spatiality of alpine populations, but on two reorientations that reflect a change in the relationship that these populations have with their geographical environment.

The first is the increasing withdrawal, introspective in nature, enacted by alpine populations with regard to their environment and with regard to themselves. The spatialities and territorialities identified by scientific analysis are first and foremost identified by the actors of everyday life themselves. Interventions on the landscape, the environment, the area's heritage and monetary circulation are all intentional and all stem from a more or less sophisticated diagnosis of the flows and territorialities that are at work.

The second is that this process of introspective distancing is the very condition for the existence of the Alps in a mode that is different from that which has prevailed for a considerable time. For a long time, the Alps only represented a entity relevant in the eyes of the scientific world, and secondarily a geopolitical object identified and worked by the States concerned. Today the introspection that is found at the heart of some of the territorial initiatives identified here – associations of alpine communes, the Alpine Convention, networks of managers, ski resorts or companies, etc. – is also based on just as many representations of the Alps, representations that orient the action, and on the action itself. The Alps as such emerge under the double effect of shared representations and competing or concerted actions that refer to these representations.

*Translation: Brian Keogh*

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