

The Alps. The People: Anthropology of Small Communities. Demographic Movements. Women's Condition. Development Perspectives

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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 29(1) : 106

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm044>

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The Alps. The People: Anthropology of Small Communities. Demographic Movements. Women's Condition. Development Perspectives

By Michela Zucca. Trento, Italy:
Centro di Ecologia Alpina, 2006.
115 pp. € 20.00. ISBN 1827-8558.

This report is based on a 2003 project called "Patterns of sustainable development in the remote municipalities of Trentino (Italy)," in which the researchers asked: "Why are remote villages declining?" Based on demographic research from 1901 to 2001, they selected 5 socio-economically marginal communities in this geographical area for fieldwork.

The maps and charts are hand-somely presented in color, and demonstrate a quantitative study of demographic change.

European Union expansion is blamed for the demise of local small family-run agriculture, and it is suggested that large producers prefer to employ immigrant labor: "A slow, quiet ethnocide has suppressed work opportunities and the local symbolic identities of mountaineer, peasant, or farmer now hold negative and despairing connotations." The author writes that "We need a cultural renaissance of peasant civilization. The things they are ashamed of might well turn out worthy of transmission to posterity and an opportunity for employment and quality of life" (p 23).

The research and reporting is pervaded by idealization of the rural over the urban life despite clear evidence of out-migration and the closure of schools, pharmacies, post offices, banks and other necessary amenities in the communities. We are informed that "Even in the Alps, Italians regard themselves as city dwellers and local authorities are not prompted to see depopulation as an actual problem that needs to be tackled." The reader, therefore, immediately questions the source of concern for sustainability and wonders why the author's approach seeks a solution to issues that do not seem to concern the populus under study. Depopulation of rural areas, movement to cities, and the need for immigrant labor to work the land is occurring throughout Europe today.

The social pressures of life in these small communities may once have included: "A common faith, culture and exchange of favors which concurred to maintain a functional balance between countervailing forces. The ostensible egalitarianism may have concealed a strictly hierarchal and exclusionary organization where some hegemonic families and clans monopolized political representation and 'What people say' may have once neutralized most attempts at social change or entrepreneurship." However, as numbers of 'locals' decrease and immigrants, tourists or seasonal residents become more numerous, these pressures must have certainly become less effective (see Waldren 1996).

Most of this 'community' analysis is similar to work done long ago by Banfield (1958) and Friedl (1967) on 'amoral familism.' The plans to develop the areas seem to assume that top-down development will succeed: introducing skills training programs, fundraising techniques, tourism marketing and promotion, etc. Women are seen as "the key to change, sustainable, equitable and ultimately desirable development." However, their interests may lie in other directions.

I am afraid this report lacks qualitative research which would more accurately reflect the varied concerns of those who have remained in these rural areas and the potential futures they envision. It no doubt served a general quantitative purpose for government agencies, but does not offer any new directions for developing the areas and their populations who are ultimately the ones who must make life, agriculture and whatever they value sustainable.

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