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External Pressures and Local Responses: The Role of Communal Organization

Pier Paolo Viazza

In a conference devoted to the general theme of the discovery of the Alps, it is perhaps fitting for me to start by briefly telling the story of one particular discovery of the Alps, namely the anthropological investigation of Alpine communities which began in the 1950s as part of a growing interest in the study of European peasantries. One reason is that, as an anthropologist by training myself, this is the story I am most familiar with. But another reason is that it seems to me that the work of social and cultural anthropologists in the Alps has raised questions of considerable relevance also for those outside the discipline and generated a number of explanatory models which surely deserve to be tested by Alpine historians. In this paper I will refer especially to the anthropological treatment of the classic issue of the social organization of Alpine communities, and will consider the claim that strong institutional boundaries at the level of the local community could affect the degree of penetration of external forces, thereby playing a sometimes decisive role in the economic and demographic history of upland societies.

I

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the forerunners of modern anthropology - human geographers, students of folklore, sociologists like Robert Hertz - had all been deeply interested in the Alps, which they regarded to be a reliquary of old customs, sayings and artifacts long disappeared in most other parts of Europe.¹ Such a

1 CF. R. HERTZ, "Saint Besse. Étude d'un culte alpestre", *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 67 (1913), p.177, and more generally A. HELBOK, "Zur Soziologie und Volkskunde des Alpenraumes", *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 3 (1931), pp.101-112.

perception of mountains as refuge areas for archaic forms of social life was, of course, greatly modified by the transformations which followed the Second World War. Nevertheless, when in the late 1950s social anthropologists began to turn to the study of European peasantries, it was still widely assumed that "high in remote Alpine valleys" anthropological researchers could find more favourable conditions for their fieldwork, because peasant traditions were certainly hanging on more persistently than in the plains.² When anthropologists began to move to the Alps, they were therefore expecting to find villages still largely unspoiled by modernization. What they discovered was, on the contrary, that mountain farming was rapidly declining, that the traditional systems of beliefs were crumbling, and that only faint traces had been left both of village endogamy and of the legendary economic self-sufficiency of Alpine communities. Understandably enough, most anthropologists found it both convenient and commonsensical to conceptualize the changes they were observing as a transition from the closure of the past to the openness of the present day.³

Some anthropologists, however, were rather more wary of assuming that for a long and indefinite time Alpine communities had been closed and economically self-sufficient, with minimal contact with the

2 Cf. R.T. ANDERSON, *Modern Europe: An Anthropological Perspective*, Pacific Palisades, Cal.: Goodyear, 1973, p.102. For a general discussion of the development of Alpine anthropology, cf. P.P. VIAZZO, *Upland Communities. Environment, Population and Social Structure in the Alps since the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 49-66.

3 The clearest example of this tendency is probably represented by the work of the British social anthropologist F.G. Bailey, whose analysis and interpretation of contemporary changes rests entirely on the belief that Alpine communities had previously been closed and economically self-sufficient. The results of the research conducted by Bailey and his pupils in a number of European mountain communities are presented in two volumes edited by BAILEY: *Gifts and Poison. The Politics of Reputation*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1971 and *Debate and Compromise. The Politics of Innovation*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1973. For a critique of Bailey's approach, cf. S. SILVERMAN, "Bailey's Politics", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 2 (1974), pp.111-120, and especially D. ALBERA, "Open Systems and Closed Minds: The Limitations of Naivety in Social Anthropology - A Native's View", *Man* [n.s.] 23 (1988), pp.435-452.

outside world. In their highly influential book *The Hidden Frontier*, a comparative study of two adjacent villages in the Eastern Alps published in 1974, John Cole and Eric Wolf argued that since Alpine communities have been part of complex societies for centuries, then their local economies and ecological arrangements must have been dominated and shaped, even in the remote past, by what they called "larger, 'external' forces".⁴ Besides reflecting a particular theoretical view of the place of peasant communities in complex societies,⁵ such a statement voiced a reaction against the "internalist" approach favoured by the neo-functional school in ecological anthropology and was also a plea for a rapprochement between anthropology and history. More generally, it was typical of the intellectual climate of the 1970s, dominated by a propensity to grant priority to external forces and by a growing awareness of the limitations of the synchronic approach in anthropology.⁶

It is relevant to notice that these developments started in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But Tret and St Felix, the two villages studied by Cole and Wolf, had been selected as a locale for fieldwork well before that date, because they appeared to provide a suitable setting to investigate the interplay of ethnicity and ecology. Ironically, although Cole and Wolf's point was that the openness of Alpine communities in the past was bound to emerge from historical analysis, they had to put up with working in two villages whose history was very poorly

4 J.R. COLE and E.R. WOLF, *The Hidden Frontier. Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley*, New York: Academic Press, 1974, p.21.

5 Wolf's position is clearly stated in the opening page of his famous book *Peasants*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966, where he writes that "what goes on in Gopalpur, India, or Alcalá de la Sierra in Spain cannot be explained in terms of that village alone; the explanation must include consideration both of the outside forces impinging on these villages and of the reactions of villagers to these forces".

6 The impact of these theoretical developments on Alpine anthropology can be gauged by comparing the pioneering article by R.K. BURNS, "The Circum-Alpine Area: A Preliminary View", *Anthropological Quarterly* 36 (1963), pp.130-155, with the papers published nine years later in a special issue of the same journal devoted to the Alps, especially the introductory essay by G. BERTHOUD, "Dynamics of Ownership in the Circum-Alpine Area", *Anthropological Quarterly* 45 (1972), pp.117-124.

documented. Thus, their openness in the past was suggested on theoretical grounds, but could not be demonstrated empirically. In the last two decades, however, the path towards historical research opened up by Cole and Wolf has been trodden by an increasing number of anthropologists, and much evidence has cropped out to vindicate their approach and to support their claims. Indeed, the notion that even in the remote past mountain communities must have been economically open is now becoming commonplace among anthropologists, the tenet of a new orthodoxy.

But it should not be ignored that the new willingness of social anthropologists to dig into the past of their communities has also yielded a certain amount of counter-evidence. In an article published in 1979 in the *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte*, the American anthropologist Robert Netting recognized that the canonical image of the economically and demographically closed rural community had in recent years been vigorously attacked. Yet he maintained that in the Alps such communities did exist and that he could prove it.⁷ The proof came a couple of years later, in 1981, with the publication of Netting's major study of Törbel, a community in the Oberwallis, which contained a thorough analysis of the demographic history of this village since the late seventeenth century.⁸

The figures looked impressive, but Netting's claims were nevertheless received with a touch of scepticism by some of his colleagues. I must confess that at first I was myself rather inclined to scepticism. When Netting's book was published, I had just completed my own study of Alagna, a Walser community in the Italian Alps, and the contrast between the picture of Törbel presented by Netting and what I had found in Alagna, which had been for

7 "Eine lange Ahnenreihe. Die Fortdauer von Patrilinien über mehr als drei Jahrhunderte in einem schweizerischen Bergdorf", *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte* 29 (1979), pp.194-215.

8 *Balancing on an Alp. Ecological Change and Continuity in a Swiss Mountain Community*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. Netting's basic theoretical assumptions are incisively summarized in his paper "Reflections on an Alpine Village as Ecosystem", in E.F. MORAN (ed.), *The Ecosystem Concept in Anthropology*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1984.

centuries an eminently open community both economically and demographically, could hardly have been starker. It was difficult to believe that two communities located at perhaps fifty kilometres from one another, and largely sharing the same language and material culture, might have been so different.⁹ An unbiased perusal of the demographic evidence produced by Netting, however, leaves the reader in no doubt that Törbel had in fact maintained for prolonged periods of time a virtually closed population, little affected by either immigration or emigration. And his ethnographic evidence, while less conclusive than the demographic data, also makes a good case in favour of Netting's claim that throughout its peasant past Törbel had approached economic closure. What is more, the results of recent investigations of other Swiss mountain communities increase our confidence that Törbel, far from being an anomaly, was actually quite representative of the kind of community which was largely responsible for the growth of the Swiss Alpine population in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁰

The simple but all-important lesson emerging from these studies is that the closure of Alpine communities in the past should not be treated either as a universal feature or as a mere fallacy, but rather as a possibility. The fact that the economic and demographic history of a community like Törbel could depart so markedly from that of a community like Alagna indicates, in my view, that it would be wrong to look for only one model of the Alpine community, as some anthropologists have done. The recent advances in our knowledge of Alpine economy and demography in the past which I have just mentioned should make us wiser. A multiplicity of situations clearly

9 The main findings of my research on Alagna are presented in my Ph.D. thesis, *Ethnic Change in a Walser Community in the Italian Alps*, Department of Anthropology, University College London, 1983, and in a wider comparative perspective in my book *Upland Communities*. The striking contrast between Törbel and Alagna is discussed at length by NETTING, "Links and Boundaries: Reconsidering the Alpine Village as Ecosystem", in E.F. MORAN (ed.), *The Ecosystem Approach in Anthropology: From Concept to Practice*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1990, pp.236-239.

10 Cf. especially C. PFISTER, "Bevölkerung, Wirtschaft und Ernährung in den Berg- und Talgebieten des Kantons Bern 1760-1860", *Itinera* 5/6 (1986), pp.361-391.

requires a variety of descriptive models. But we should not be satisfied with just acknowledging and describing difference. We should also try to explain and understand it. And there seem to be good reasons to believe that a key to explanation might be provided by a closer consideration of the highly distinctive features of Alpine communal organization.

II

The social organization of upland communities has long been a favourite topic of research and speculation for historians, lawyers and social scientists. The nineteenth-century scholars who engaged in the debate on collective property and the dissolution of the peasant community were especially fascinated by the vestiges of communal social organization still to be found in the Alps and in other mountain areas of Europe. In particular, they were impressed by that "different way of possessing", to use Carlo Cattaneo's phrase, which transpired from patterns of land tenure which stood in marked contrast to the ones prevailing in the adjacent plains.¹¹

The main features of upland social organization are so well known that we need not dwell on them here other than to recall that Alpine communities typically looked like closed corporate bodies recruiting their membership through birth and residence, and that almost without exception the vast expanses of forested and grazing land located at high altitude were communally owned, their exploitation being governed by strict regulations recurring in largely the same form all over the Alps. By contrast, fields, meadows and the other

¹¹ The literature on this debate is vast. For a recent and useful general discussion, cf. P. SIBILLA, "Il gruppo corporato di 'vicinanza' e la proprietà collettiva in una comunità alemannica alpina", *Cheiron. Materiali e strumenti di aggiornamento storiografico* 7/8 (1988), pp.140-154. Cattaneo's characterization is quoted by Sibilla and is to be found in CATTANEO, *Scritti economici*, Florence: Le Monnier, 1956, vol.III, pp.187-188: "...non sono abusi, non sono privilegi, non sono usurpazioni: è un altro modo di possedere, un'altra legislazione, un altro ordine sociale, che, inosservato, discese da remotissimi secoli sino a noi".

resources lying in lower-altitude production zones were subject to individual tenure. However, given the delicate balance of resources and the high degree of interdependence between the households in the community, corporate bodies supervised both land use and land transfers. Land use tended to be reserved to the members of the village community, and sale of land to outsiders was usually discouraged or forbidden. Indeed, the community could maintain so strong a control over land use and rights that lowland notions of private property seemed to be misleading in the mountains.

As a whole, these organizational traits clearly fit very well with the classic anthropological notion of the "closed corporate community", which Eric Wolf first proposed in 1955 to designate the dominant form of village organization in the mountainous areas of twentieth-century Latin America. Wolf noticed that lowland village communities generally lacked a formalized social structure. Little attempt was made to restrict membership, and there was no legal provision to prohibit or limit sale of land to outsiders. The highland communities, on the other hand, tended to acquire the form of a corporation. A large proportion of the village land was owned in common, and the rest was usually available only to people born within the community and could not be alienated to outsiders. This restriction, Wolf observed, could be further strengthened by forcing community members to marry endogamously. Another distinctive characteristic of the corporate communities was the presence of mechanisms whereby differences in power and wealth were levelled. And in contrast to the "open" communities of the lowlands, which permitted "free permeation by outside influences", the highland communities used their institutional barriers to resist changes and innovations imposed from outside.¹²

12 The concept of the closed corporate community was first proposed by WOLF in his two papers "Types of Latin American Peasantry: A Preliminary Discussion", *American Anthropologist* 57 (1955), pp.452-471, and "Closed Corporate Peasant Communities in Mesoamerica and Central Java", *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13 (1957), pp.1-18, and further articulated in Peasants, pp.86-87. An account of the origins and development of this concept has been recently provided by Wolf himself, "The Vicissitudes

Predictably enough, Wolf's concept of the closed corporate community has been increasingly adopted by social and cultural anthropologists in their studies of the organization of Alpine communities.¹³ In some cases, this use has been merely descriptive. But a few anthropologists have more constructively laid emphasis on the "structural" properties of this particular kind of social organization and especially on its ability to establish a relatively closed frontier about the local group, with the effect of insulating the community from abrupt or indiscriminate influences from outside. What is more, it has also been proposed (most notably by Netting)¹⁴ that the Alpine closed corporate community possessed definable "demographic" properties as well. As we have seen, forms of communal organization approaching Wolf's ideal-type can be expected to cause high rates of village endogamy and to discourage or utterly prevent immigration. But it may be further argued that corporate regulation also prevents, or at least tends to slow down, permanent emigration. As Netting has pointed out, community membership with its attendant rights in a range of vital resources generally depended not only on birth but also on residence. Thus, people leaving their native village for good lost these rights and in a strongly corporative environment were unlikely to acquire similar rights elsewhere - a circumstance which could scarcely be an incentive to emigration. The general argument is, therefore, that structural closure tends to result in demographic

of the Closed Corporate Peasant Community", *American Ethnologist* 13 (1986), pp.325-329.

13 Cf. e.g. BURNS, "The Circum-Alpine Area", pp.144-148; J. FRIEDL, *Kippel. A Changing Village in the Alps*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974, p.4; R.E. RHOADES and S.I. THOMPSON, "Adaptive Strategies in Alpine Environments: Beyond Ecological Particularism", *American Ethnologist* 2 (1975), p.548; NETTING, "What Alpine Peasants Have in Common: Observations on Communal Tenure in a Swiss Village", *Human Ecology* 4 (1976), pp.136-137, and *Balancing on an Alp*; C. POPPI, "Kinship and Social Organization among the Ladins of the Val di Fassa", *Cambridge Anthropology*, 6 (1980); SIBILLA, *I luoghi della memoria*, Anzola d'Ossola: Fond. Enrico Monti, 1985, pp.39-45, and "Il gruppo corporato di 'vicinanza"'; VIAZZO, *Upland Communities*.

14 Cf. NETTING, "Eine lange Ahnenreihe", pp.201-205, and *Balancing on an Alp*, pp.76-82, 97-108.

closure. If true, this would have important implications for the study of the relationships between resources and population in Alpine environments. For it can be demonstrated, as I have tried to do elsewhere,¹⁵ that if we assume that the territorial boundaries of the various communities also tend to be unchanging and some equilibrium between population and resources has to be reached, then nuptiality can be expected (in view of the limited extent of emigration allowed by the model) to be the crucial regulatory mechanism.

III

The testing of the hypotheses clustered around the notion of the closed corporate community should make an interesting agenda not only for Alpine anthropologists, but also for economic, social and demographic historians. The first task will be that of ascertaining whether different degrees of penetration of external forces are actually correlated to the presence or absence of closed corporate organization. This was, of course, the argument put forward by Rudolf Braun in his seminal study of the uneven growth of cottage industry in the lowland and upland districts of Canton Zurich, where he demonstrated that the attempts by urban-based merchants to develop a putting-out system had been decisively constrained by the variable strength of communal regulations.¹⁶ The evidence summarized and discussed by Braun himself in his more recent general book on the end of the *ancien régime* in Switzerland strongly suggests that similar mechanisms were at work also in the Alpine areas of Switzerland. He maintains, for instance, that in Canton Glarus the lack of proto-industrial developments in districts like the Sernftal was due to the

15 Cf. P.P. VIAZZO and D. ALBERA, "Population, Resources, and Homeostatic Regulation in the Alps: The Role of Nuptiality", *Itinera* 5/6 (1986), pp.182-231, and more generally VIAZZO, *Upland Communities*.

16 Cf. especially *Industrialisierung und Volksleben: die Veränderungen der Lebensformen in einem ländlichen Industriegebiet vor 1800* (Zürcher Oberland), Erlenbach-Zurich, 1960; and "Protoindustrialization and Demographic Changes in the Canton of Zurich", in C. TILLY (ed.), *Historical Studies of Changing Fertility*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

existence of rigid corporate communities, whereas in places like the Linthal, where communal regulations were very loose, cottage industry thrived.¹⁷ But the same seems to apply to the penetration of commercial pastoralism. Braun discusses at length the case of Canton Uri, where a tightly closed communal organization allowed the local population both to prevent foreign intrusions into the local economy and to keep an egalitarian pattern of social stratification.¹⁸ And one wonders whether similar circumstances should not be taken into account to explain the strikingly divergent development of other Alpine localities. One well-documented case is the contrast between Saanen and the Oberhasli, two districts of the Bernese Oberland, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. While the communities of the Oberhasli retained an autarkic economy, with a growing but virtually closed population, the district of Saanen became a classic example of Hirtenland and experienced unprecedented pauperization and very high rates of emigration.¹⁹

Another important task is to establish whether the Alpine closed corporate community actually tended to be egalitarian and whether their dissolution resulted in increased stratification. It is worth remembering that in his original formulation of the concept, Wolf had defined the closed corporate community as a basically egalitarian coalition, characterized by levelling devices (such as periodic reallotments of land) or redistribution of wealth through ceremonials. A number of studies indicate that Alpine closed corporate communities could indeed be highly egalitarian,²⁰ but this apparently

17 R. BRAUN, *Das ausgehende Ancien Régime in der Schweiz. Aufriss einer Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984, p.37.

18 BRAUN, *Das ausgehende Ancien Régime*, pp. 75-77.

19 Cf. PFISTER, "Bevölkerung, Wirtschaft und Ernährung", pp.374-382.

20 Cf. e.g. E. WIEGANDT, "Inheritance and Demography in the Swiss Alps", *Ethnohistory* 24 (1977), pp.133-148; R. MCGUIRE and R.M. NETTING, "Leveling Peasants? The maintenance of Equality in a Swiss Alpine Community", *American Ethnologist* 9 (1982), pp.269-290; BRAUN, *Das ausgehende Ancien Régime*, pp.75-77; D.J. SIDDLE, "Articulating the Grid of Inheritance: The Accumulation and Transmission of Wealth in Peasant Savoy 1561-1792", *Itinera* 5/6 (1986), pp.123-181.

followed less from wealth-levelling mechanisms similar to those described by Wolf than from the working of partible inheritance, or from the effects of communal regulations such as the widespread clause prohibiting a cattle owner to "carry" more animals on the pastures than he could winter. But attention has also been directed to another mechanism which in closed corporate communities usually had levelling effects, namely the credit system.²¹ Although it should be stressed that the credit system did not function as a levelling mechanism in all Alpine closed corporate communities,²² nevertheless there is evidence showing that loans coming from the closed corporate community were crucial to help members to buy pieces of land or finance seasonal emigration, thereby preventing the growth of usury and capital accumulation.

The issue of egalitarianism is highly relevant to an understanding of the interaction between external pressures and local responses. The literature on the closed corporate community contains attempts to relate different patterns of allocation of power to varying degrees of penetration of outside forces leading to economic change. It has been suggested, in particular, that at either extreme of the spectrum (that is, where feudal lords are powerful and control vital resources, and where communities are egalitarian) the emergence of outward-oriented individuals or groups is likely to be stifled. It may be presumed that it will be in the middle range of the spectrum of allocation of power - that is, where there is a somewhat unequal distribution of power - that some peasants may have sufficient resources, given proper opportunities, to establish links with groups or institutions outside the village.²³ This is what seems to have

21 Cf. McGUIRE and NETTING, "Leveling Peasants?", p.283; and also Viazzo, *Upland Communities*, pp.283-284.

22 POPPI, "Kinship and Social Organization", pp.84-85, reports that in the Fassa Valley (Italian Eastern Alps) communal regulations severely limiting the settlement of outsiders were internally matched by a credit system which nullified the levelling effects of partible inheritance. The credit system was, in fact, instrumental in producing the concentration of land in the hands of relatively few families, which in turn paved the way to the commercialization of pastoral activities.

23 This issue is discussed by R.M. SMITH, "'Modernization' and the Corporate Medieval Village Community in England: Some Sceptical Reflections", in

happened in Saanen and other pastoral areas in Switzerland and elsewhere, where an inequalitarian pattern of social stratification made the institutional barriers of the closed corporate community unable to resist external pressures.

Finally, much more data remain to be gathered to establish whether the closed corporate community really possessed definable demographic properties. For the time being, the Alpine evidence known to me seems to suggest that "strong" corporate structures were in fact capable, in some circumstances, of maintaining not only a comparatively closed economy but also a largely closed population. The relation between "weak" corporate structures and migration was, on the other hand, mediated by the kind of economic change which external forces had brought about. Both the growth of cottage industry and the development of the Hirtenland appear to have been favoured by the weakness of communal structures. But the former kind of "open" economy caused a decrease in emigration and even encouraged immigration from agrarian areas; the latter, as the example of Saanen suggests, resulted in underemployment and high rates of emigration. It would therefore seem that a "strong" corporate community was able to prevent or slow down emigration not so much directly (because of the rights it conferred to its members)²⁴ as indirectly through the resistance it opposed to economic changes which might jeopardize the living standards of some villagers and force them to leave.

It has not been possible here to go beyond a hasty reference to a few recent and less recent studies and a sketchy formulation of a research agenda. As a concluding remark, I would like to observe that a survey of the anthropological and historical literature reveals that closed corporate communities have been more frequently studied in Switzerland than elsewhere in the Alps. I suspect that this may be partly due, particularly as far as anthropologists are concerned, to the fact that Switzerland is the Alpine country where closed corporate communities have survived longest, and actually persist to this very

A.R.H. BAKER and D. GREGORY, *Explorations in Historical Geography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp.150.

²⁴ Cf. especially NETTING, "Eine lange Ahnenreihe", p.195, and *Balancing on an Alp*, p.82.

day. But of course closed corporate communities once existed all over the Alps and it is to be hoped that in the future they can attract more attention than has been the case so far. Their virtual ubiquity, however, should not lead us to treat them as a constant of upland social organization. What has been briefly reported in this paper suggests that it is more profitable to treat the closed corporate community as a variable and to focus our inquiry on the varying strength of communal regulations over time and between places and on the differential ability of the members of Alpine communities to enforce these regulations as a way of stemming the impact of external forces and maintaining egalitarian patterns of social stratification within their villages.