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# Refugees and Mountain

## Introduction

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“The Alpine community must not forget the  
refugees”

Francesco Pastorelli<sup>1</sup> (*alpMedia*, 2018)

- 1 The “point of view” of Francesco Pastorelli, Director of CIPRA Italy, was published on the *alpMedia* journal on March 2018:

“While the Alpine regions are working on a unified Alps via the European Strategy for the Alps (Eusalp), the nation states are fencing themselves off. Where is the spirit of solidarity of the European Union? Can we, within the framework of the Alpine Convention, continue to address issues of the environment, landscape, transport and tourism, while in the cold snow of the Alpine border crossings people are risking their lives having faced great dangers crossing the desert or the sea? Solutions to the immigration problem are difficult to find; here is not the right place to decide on the distribution of refugees, or whether they should be accepted or rejected. But we cannot accept that people fleeing from war and hunger should encounter walls and barbed wire in the Alps, in wealthy Europe, that they do not receive help when in need; or that those who wish to help should be threatened with prosecution and prison. At the same time, small communities on the frontiers should not be left to handle the problem on their own.”

- 2 With these words Pastorelli touches upon a topic that is often overlooked both in the political and the academic debate on the Alpine region: the people who, recently and for a number of reasons (e.g., political, economic, social, cultural, and often a sum of all of the above), flee their homes to find refuge elsewhere and thus find themselves passing through or settling in mountain areas.
- 3 Indeed, it was only in November 2018, in Chambéry, during a meeting of the network “Alpine Town of the Year”, that the issue was openly debated for the first time. Cristina Del Biaggio, who was present during the abovementioned meeting, recalls the precautions taken to address a topic deemed crucial, but at the same time considered by the coordinators of the meeting as “hot” and potentially controversial. However, the meeting in itself has shown that local decision-makers are eager to exchange opinions, ideas, and experiences: “We are finally talking about this!” a representative from the

municipality of Bressanone/Brixen said, while the representatives of the Chamonix municipality presented their project of asylum seekers and refugees' reception within local families and the tensions it provoked within the community. The representative of the Annecy municipality reported how the arrival of 200 Sudanese asylum seekers in town provoked a "wave of panic", while other municipalities' representatives lamented the impossibility to discuss the topic with the local administrations.

- 4 In the same period, also "Alpine" media started to address the topic. For example, the recent publication of the dedicated issue of *Alpiscena*<sup>2</sup> (n°105/2019) analyses "how migration and cultural diversity characterises the Alps".
- 5 Following the general praxis of dismissal of the issue of refugees' presence in the Alpine region, the protocols ratified by the Alpine Convention, including the Convention itself, focus primarily on themes such as the protection of nature and landscape, agriculture, forestry and tourism, energy and transportation, and significantly less on social and demographic issues. The protocol "population and culture", for instance, was discussed but not ratified by the member states. However, a breach was opened by the Interreg project PlurAlps<sup>3</sup>, launched in late 2016, whose main objective was to support municipalities, but also small and medium businesses and civil society as a whole, for the development of a welcoming society, which, in turn, opens up opportunities to increase the territorial attractiveness and social cohesion of rural and mountainous areas.<sup>4</sup>
- 6 The present *JAR/RGA* issue aims to contribute to answer to the question posed by Pastorelli proposing scientific arguments stemming from the current framework of migration policies. We thus adopt two different perspectives: on the one hand, we look at the Alpine borders as crossing points for people in search of a refuge; on the other hand, we address the welcoming (or the lack thereof) and settling in of refugees in mountainous regions.

## Crossing the Alps as "unwelcome" people

"In a nature which is raw and wild, harsh and wonderful,  
 looking for passages, following paths, overcoming crevasses and snowfields,  
 men embarked on their journeys to cross the Alps.  
 In a time in which crossing mountains was very risky...  
 When the route and the journey were a necessity...  
 Generous and brave men built places of reception and safety on the pathways  
 crossing the mountains.  
 Places of arrival and restoration to favour the crossings  
 of the Alps, the hinge of Europe.  
 Promotional video shot for the exposition *Hospitia. Mille anni di accoglienza e ospitalità  
 nelle Alpi* (Milan, November 2019)<sup>5</sup>

- 7 For centuries, wanderers and pilgrims have been protected by mountain shelters such as the ones of Gran San Bernardo and San Gottardo from dangers and bandits; these shelters are the object of the exposition *Hospitia. Mille anni di accoglienza e ospitalità nelle Alpi*. Today, different men and women repeat the same gestures of solidarity with different wanderers who flee from the miseries and violence of their countries of origin. In the Aosta and in the Tarentaise Valleys, studied by Philippe Hanus, there are no shelters to host the fugitives of World War II but "lonely passeurs" and some organisations –that the author defines "semi-mafia-like"– that lived of the profits of

irregular labour migration. Hanus describes the risks and recalls the accidents linked to the irregular crossing of the Italian-French border of those years and the prowess of custom officers and gendarmes in rescue operations.

Poster of the exhibition *Hospitia. Mille anni di accoglienza e ospitalità nelle Alpi* (Milan, November 2019)



- 8 The role of law enforcement, the people who have to surveil these same borders, seems to have completely changed today. Sarah Bachelierie's article describes how the traque is currently organised: the traque is the stakeout carried out by border police to trace and apprehend people who are trying to cross the Alps irregularly to reach France, having no legal pathways available to enter France. A "men hunt", as Martina Tazzioli defines it, which endangers the lives of men and women on the run. The "flight" is conceptualised by Tazzioli both in historical and sociological terms: historically, by retracing the memory of the Val Susa inhabitants who recall other migrants that crossed their valley decades ago, and sociologically by evidencing the organisation of rescue operations that can be studied as "mobile infrastructure of solidarity". The latter is defined as "mobile", due not only to its precariousness derived from periodic criminalisation, but also because the infrastructure has to constantly reshape to adapt to the changing border checks and, in turn, to the changing migration routes. Tazzioli also shows how the infrastructure of solidarity, which today protects and supports people in search of refuge, and its criminalisation are the result of experimentations that took place over the decades and that have shaped the political geography of the region.
- 9 The memory of Alpine populations' struggles is the focus of the article of Pierre Chomette. Chomette explores particularly the Clarée Valley, in the French Hautes-Alpes. His analysis, similarly to Tazzioli's, addresses the issue of the collective memory of these struggles that for decades have characterised said territory. However, Chomette questions the substance of this memory, which he considers "pacified", and its instrumentalisation for the purposes of territorial marketing. The author proposes a

“geopolitics of local memories” and analyses and compares the discourses about the ecologist movements active in the Clarée Valley at the end of the 20th century with the narrative on mobilisations that emerged more recently with the arrival of refugees in the region. The historic and emblematic figure of Emilie Carles, one of the cornerstones of today’s “grammars of struggle at the local level”, is analysed by Chomette together with the processes of “essentialization”<sup>6</sup> of the mountains and “naturalisation” of its new inhabitants. The author concludes with one hypothesis: “The mountains today do not seem to be more of a refuge for exiled people than any other space. However, their perception evolves with the re-actualization of Alpine memories and the dissemination of essentializing discourses.”

- 10 Whereas Hanus, Tazzioli and Chomette propose an analysis of the geo-history and geopolitics of the Italian-French border’s crossings, Cecilia Vergnano addresses this issue from the standpoint of “emotions” and “affects”. She assumes that the encounter and, even more, the rescue of people in distress might lead to the constitution of contentious politics which aims to combat the lethal nature of the border regime. Vergnano stresses how emotions can thus contribute to the redefinition of migratory routes and help reshape what Doreen Massey calls “geographies of responsibility” (Massey, 2004).
- 11 The authors of this special issue highlight that the new migratory routes across the Alps not only have become obstacle courses but they are also marked by violence. Indeed, migration policies have rendered the crossings difficult and sometimes mortal. Bachelier and Tazzioli have analysed how the lethality of the mountain crossings is not due to the characteristics that are typical of the mountain: the mountain is not hostile *per se* but it is made hostile. It is indeed the migratory regime (Cvajner et al., 2018; Gil Araujo, 2011) that forces today hundreds of people, as has already happened in the past, to clash with the materiality of the rocks, with the freezing cold of Alpine winters, with the slopes drawn by the orography.
- 12 The borders drawn where “mountain regions” end are often “taken for granted”, especially considering the natural limits of a territory which has become the bedrock of collective action. The *JAR/RGA* issue n. 97-2 (2009)<sup>7</sup>, coordinated by Bernard Debarbieux, addressed precisely this issue. The articles of the aforementioned issue answered to the question: “Under what conditions and what circumstances are a mountain massif or range used as a reference for regional construction?” Focus of the analysis were the actions that take place on a territory with well-defined borders, namely the ones of the Alpine Convention. Said borders were rarely, and peacefully, questioned and contested during the creation of the Convention, which was ratified in 1995: this was the case of the Eastern border of the Convention (Del Biaggio, 2016, 131–32).
- 13 Today, with the political and economic crises of the South Mediterranean countries and, therefore, with the arrival of people in search of a refuge, the Alps become again punctuated with places of no-crossing, of contention and violence for “unwelcome” people. The “spatial disobedience” (Tazzioli, 2017), shaped by the bodies of people who decide to physically transgress the rules imposed by the border regime, brings individuals and groups of people who show solidarity to refuse the legitimacy of the closure of national borders. Borders that banish people in search of a refuge from the place where they imagined their refuge to be when they left their homes. The price of this transgression might be their own lives: since 2016, around forty people have died along the alpine borders (Del Biaggio, 2019)<sup>8</sup>.

- 14 What is observable in the Alps is similar to a phenomenon that is also evident in other areas characterised by natural but potentially dangerous environments: deserts, seas, rivers, other mountains. These spaces are only potentially, not intrinsically, dangerous. It is clear by looking at the mobility practices of people with regular travel permits that these areas, and the national borders within them, are crossed regularly and without risks for work purposes, or to practice sports and leisure activities (e.g., the ski resort “Via Lattea” which runs in between the Italian Susa Valley and the French Hautes-Alpes, the Mediterranean cruises, or desert trekking).
- 15 Tazzioli underlines that what makes it dangerous for “unwelcome foreigners” – following the approach of the “colonial present” that Bachellerie derives from Gregory (2004)– is not only the “militarisation of the borders” (Giliberti, 2018), but also their weaponization. In fact, there is not only an increase in border guards and tech equipment for the border patrolling, which determines borders’ militarization, but also tactics that take into consideration the peculiarities of the terrain. The terrain is intended as “relation of power, with a heritage in geology and the military, the control of which allows the establishment and maintenance of order” (Elden, 2010, p. 804). Order, as Elden presents it, is to be considered as one of three processes composing a triptych, almost as a pun: bordering, ordering and othering (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen, 2002). The “men hunt” (*traque*), described by Bachellerie, carried out by the border patrolling agents in the Hautes-Alpes region can be analysed as a tactic implemented both at regional and local levels which forces people to face the natural elements transformed into weapons (e.g., pushing people to cross snowy forests at night instead of using roads or ski slopes during the day).
- 16 This is how natural elements surrounding the borders are weaponised. The term weaponisation<sup>9</sup>, first used in relation to the analysis of the U.S. political strategy named “Prevention Through Deterrence”, describes the U.S. government’s strategy of using the desert as a weapon (De Leon, 2015, 36). De León shows how the U.S. have purposely funnelled migrants in a hostile terrain to ensure that border patrols can take strategic advantage from the natural environment. Weaponisation is more than mere militarisation of borders. It is not only the act of bringing arms and men to the borders to better control (or try to impede) crossings, but also the willingness to profit from the natural elements to strengthen the barrier effect. With the idea of weaponization of the Alpine border, we suggest that there is a voluntary instrumentalization of potentially dangerous natural elements (e.g., steep slopes, freezing canals and rivers, the snow) from those who are implementing hostile politics (and policy) towards persons who, by crossing the borders, are searching for a refuge.

## To welcome and to be welcomed in mountain regions

- 17 Mountains, be them either weaponized or conducive to the creation of “mobile infrastructures of solidarity”, are not only a place of passage but also a place of arrival. Since 2015, reception systems for refugees and asylum seekers have been reorganised in EU countries and mountains have started again to be populated by young people coming from a multitude of far-away countries. There are several reasons why mountain regions were identified as places where to host asylum seekers. On the one hand, the immediate economic advantage of using empty apartments and reception and touristic facilities facing a harsh crisis, on the other hand the political and social

“advantage” of making asylum seekers isolated and thus invisible to the majority of Europeans living in cities. Independently from the main rationale, asylum seekers’ place of reception is generally imposed by the decision-makers in charge and not chosen by the beneficiaries. Mountain areas thus do not have the same bucolic appeal for asylum seekers and refugees as it is for “neo-ruralists” and tourists; on the contrary, mountains often become places of isolation and exclusion, negative emotions that only the support of an active and welcoming local community can mitigate.

- 18 Invisibility, isolation and need for integration: these are the main issues highlighted by Viviane Cretton while describing the “*foyers d’en-haut*”, collective reception centres located in the Swiss Alps. Cretton analyses what it means for refugees and asylum seekers to be on the mountains, to be forced to live there and in a constant waiting mode, uncertainty and frustration, which are typical feelings for those who are in the long process of asylum request (Kobelinsky, 2014) in Switzerland as elsewhere in Europe. Moreover, Cretton evidences the paradox of the integration imperative imposed by Switzerland on all asylum seekers and refugees who are hosted in reception centres, including those who are forced to live far away from city centres and, thus, often cut out from any opportunity of socialisation. This peculiar position makes the waiting period even more frustrating for people not hosted in reception centres that are closer to cities.
- 19 On the other hand, the local population of mountain areas, which often times has shown hostility towards the sudden and unforeseen opening of collective reception centres in scarcely populated areas, has sometimes instead retraced and renewed memories of welcoming people fleeing persecution and war. These memories, described by William Berthomière and Christophe Imbert, create fertile ground for the welcoming of the new fugitives in search of refuge, as in the case of the Ariège Valley in the Pyrenees, or in the Susa Valley in the Italian Alps. It is interesting to notice that, indeed, the Piedmont Alps have seen the appearance of the first folk choir singing songs in Piedmont’s dialect composed of both refugees coming from different parts of Africa and Italians, both residing in the Lanzo Valleys. The choir is called “Coro Moro” and retraces the melodies of local folk songs changing the lyrics to adapt them to the experiences of the “new highlanders” (*nuovi montanari* in Italian, see Corrado *et al.*, 2014; Dematteis *et al.*, 2019).
- 20 The numerous welcoming and solidarity experiences promoted by local communities when receiving refugees and asylum seekers, and analysed only for a small part in this special issue, seem to give body to the idea of a “mountain refuge”, concept that has been widely addressed by the authors who contributed to the present special issue. In fact, in some cases the local population living in mountain areas has been able to transform the imposition from the national reception system to open reception centres in mountain areas into an opportunity to ensure that the needs of the territory match the needs of refugees and asylum seekers, who are hosted in a difficult environment. This is how the arrival of new people has opened the opportunity to regenerate mountain territories, triggering a virtuous circle involving the active participation of the local community, the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers, and local development (Galera *et al.*, 2018).
- 21 However, the paradoxes of the mountain-reception interaction seem never-ending. The European Union, while being a promoter of policies that criminalise migrants’ crossings (and their supporters) of the Alpine borders and silent observer of national



policies that use mountains as a place of segregation and isolation, is also the funder of research and innovation projects aiming at analysing and promoting the replicability of virtuous experiences of reception, integration and regeneration of mountain areas. The attention received by rural and remote areas for what concerns refugees reception practices has recently increased. In 2020 two projects financed through the H2020 fund were launched on these issues: Welcoming Spaces and MATILDE. The first aims to address two issues by connecting them: the revitalisation of areas with declining population and the need to find a welcoming space for migrants who move in these areas. MATILDE instead focuses on the evaluation of the impact of migration on rural and mountainous areas in terms of social cohesion and local development with the objective of promoting the integration process and the positive impacts for these areas.

- 22 In conclusion, if migrants can support the economic and social development of the mountains and, at the same time, mountains can be a welcoming place where migrants can integrate, why are European and national policies still supporting and enforcing a vicious regime in which mountains become hostile environments for migrants and migrants become hostile towards mountains? The present special issue wants to highlight precisely these paradoxes that mountains, similarly to the sea, shine a light on and make impossible to ignore. “My hands feel their feet. It’s real”, says Anne in Vergnano’s article. Those bodies, of men and women searching for a refuge, are not only visible on a television screen, pictured on a boat in the Mediterranean, but they cross mountainous territories and, sometimes, either compelled by migratory regimes or by their own choice, stay on these territories and transform them. This is happening in the Apennines, as Molinari shows in a recent book (Molinari, 2020), but also in the Pyrenees and in the Alps, as shown by the authors of this special issue.

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## NOTES

1. [https://www.cipra.org/en/news/the-alpine-community-must-not-forget-the-refugees?set\\_language=en](https://www.cipra.org/en/news/the-alpine-community-must-not-forget-the-refugees?set_language=en)
2. <https://www.cipra.org/it/pubblicazioni/alpinscena-ndeg-105-vieni-andiamo-resta-arriviamo>
3. <https://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/pluralps/en/home>
4. <https://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/pluralps/en/about/objectives>
5. <https://www.foe.it/files/2019/11/VIDEO-2019-10-14-14-23-51.mp4>
6. Process through which the organisation of space in “natural” categories are considered as pre-existing its human-made classification.
7. <https://journals.openedition.org/rga/853>
8. A research on the number and the cartography of victims at alpine borders is still ongoing. Cristina Del Biaggio, together with Sarah Bachelleterie, conduct said research.
9. For the Italian and French version of this preface, we translated (and interpreted) the English term “weaponization” with *hoplopoïesis* (in French) and *oplopoiesi* (in Italian) (Del Biaggio, 2020). It

describes the process of transformation of an object not intrinsically dangerous in a weapon. The neologism is built upon two terms that have an ancient Greek origin: first, the term *hoplis*, which stands for weapon, and second, *poiesi* that indicates the act of doing, creating, building, transforming. It thus describes the process of transformation of an object not intrinsically dangerous in a weapon.

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