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► **To cite this version:**

Melissa Blanchard. Observing the Multiple Intersections of Mobilities through "Return Migration" in the Alps. *New Diversities*, 2017, 19 (13), pp.75-87. hal-02989804

HAL Id: hal-02989804

<https://hal.science/hal-02989804>

Submitted on 21 Jan 2021

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Observing the Multiple Intersections of Mobilities through “Return Migration” in the Alps

by MELISSA BLANCHARD (CNRS/Aix-Marseille Université, France)

Abstract

Through a comparative study of “return migration” from Latin America towards two Alpine regions in Italy and in France, this article questions the scientific distinction between forms of spatially-bound mobilities. By analyzing different generations’ mobilities within the same family network over time, it sheds light on the tropisms underlying the taken-for-granted distinction between migration and mobility. It proposes to use “migration” only to refer to movement across State frontiers, and it critically examines the notion of return.

“Return” is a common feature of Alpine mobility. As it was part of the internal circular skilled-work mobility that developed in the early modern era, it constituted an essential component of transatlantic migration that later occurred. The comparison of “return” in the two regions shows that different paths of mobility are influenced not only by economic opportunities and migration policies, but also by inheritance norms. The article thus calls for a “systemic” study of mobility, encompassing history, economics, policy, law and kinship. Insight from long-lasting, taken-for-granted-yet-unknown European migrations, which are still going on in the contemporary era, not only helps understand some of the socio-economic changes European societies are facing, but may also bring light to some issues that are at stake in more recent and more visible migrations.

Keywords: mobility, immobility, return migration, inheritance norms, emigration’s money, policies, Alps, Latin America, France, Italy

Introduction

This paper questions the scientific distinction between forms of spatially-bound mobilities from the standpoint of the Alpine area. Building on research I carried out on “return migration” in the French and Italian Alps from Latin America, it analyzes different generations’ mobilities within the same family network. It argues that immobility, internal mobility and international migration are intertwined before and after “return.” It also attempts to bridge the gap between mobility and migration studies, so as to apprehend movement as a complex social fact, a “total social fact” (Mauss 1966) encompassing multiple dimensions of human life.

In the modern era, the Alpine valleys have been part of a socio-economic system based on seasonal mobility of skilled workers at a regional level. In the twentieth century, this short-range circular mobility turned into international migration, but the places Alpiners settled in were part of an extended network that was tightly bound to the home-place, to which people continued to come back over time. Academic research usually separates different forms of mobility, which are conceptualized through pre-established models (Urry 2000). So, migration is linked to economic necessities, work mobility to executive and scientific professions, tourism to leisure, pilgrimage

to religious aspirations (Albera and Blanchard 2015). But the long familiarity of Alpiners with movement for professional purposes and the multiple reasons motivating their “return,” from nostalgia and family inheritance to tourism and economic necessity, bring one to question the very distinction between migration and mobility. On the one hand, this distinction seems to be founded on political concerns as well as on a class tropism, since people moving across the borders of a State are considered migrants if they are non-skilled laborers, and mobiles if they are highly-skilled professionals. While inside a State, migration usually refers to non-skilled laborers moving from rural to urban areas. In order to break with these implicit social representations, in this paper I shall use the term “migration” only to refer to a movement crossing a State’s frontier, regardless of who is moving. On the other hand, the current distinction between different types of mobility (linked to economic and religious reasons or to leisure) hides the social complexity of every human movement, which can indeed combine the motivations and characteristics usually attributed to one of these forms. Ethnographic accounts show that the distinctions between these forms of mobility are blurred, and that they interact and hybridize each other. Historic records confirm that such boundaries were nonexistent in many societies, as internal work mobility could easily expand into international migration, and economic mobility overlap with religious mobility and tourism (Albera 2000, Albera and Ottonelli 2000).

This paper will first sketch a picture of short-range and then international mobilities characterizing the Alpine region and will examine the analytical notions employed from a critical perspective (1, 2). It will then present accounts of “returnees” from South America that were collected during fieldwork (3, 4). Next, it will analyze “return migration” paths in a comparative perspective, showing the necessity to take into account the historical, economical and legal context in order to fully understand them (5). Finally, it will address the distinctions among different

mobility forms and will challenge some mainstream assumptions that run under current theorizations of “return migration” (6). To conclude, the article will plead for an integrated approach to mobility, combining anthropology with history, economics and law.

1. A Long-Term Perspective: The Alps in a System of Short-Range Regional Mobility

Since the late 80s, anthropological research has shown that families in the Alpine region have shared what has been called a “culture of mobility” (Albera and Corti 2000). Since the beginning of the modern era, the economy of Alpine valleys has been based on mixed production, a blend of agriculture and pastoralism, complemented by the seasonal mobility of skilled workers and peddlers, at a regional level (Fontaine 1993). During the snowy season, men left their villages in the high valleys and moved towards the towns on the plains nearby where they could employ their skills as stone-cutters, carpenters, masons and tinkers. Others left as peddlers, carrying wares on their back and walking through valleys and towns in the neighboring regions. Men came back in spring, when the snow melted and their families needed more hands for agricultural labor. The number of men migrating could be substantial, and life in alpine villages depended on women, who mostly stayed in place and managed the land and livestock. Due to the absence of men in these areas, Alpine women gained autonomy in decision-making at a household and at a village level, experiencing a considerable change in their status; the women’s responsibility and elevated status occurred sooner here than in other regions (Viazzo 2001). But women were not only those who made men’s mobility possible. Even if in lesser numbers, they participated in a gender-specific professional mobility that could last years: they often worked as servants, teachers and nannies (Corti 2002). The self-sufficient, sedentary peasant community is thus more an academic invention than an accurate description of past societies’ modes of life (Rosental 1999).

In the twentieth century, with new opportunities opening overseas as in Northern Europe, this short-range circular mobility easily turned into long-distance international migration (Audenino 2009). The seasonal character of mobility disappeared, as distances grew wider and the cost of travel substantially increased. Over time, entire families left their original villages, and Alpine valleys suffered heavy depopulation (Viazzo 1998). The prospect and of returning was always implicated in Alpine international migrations and often turned into reality. The interviews I gathered during fieldwork on the Italian and French Alps show that people continued to leave Alpine valleys, on both sides, until the mid-70s, and began to come back massively at the beginning of the 80s, following world-wide economic changes (the oil crisis of 1974; the rapid economic growth of European countries in the 80s) and political upheavals in Latin America (such as the dictatorships in Chile and Argentina).¹

International migration then appears as a “stretched” version of previous seasonal mobility, in that distances and periods of absence are bigger. Nevertheless, the same “culture of mobility,” in the sense of a capability to use movement and space as resources, seems to connect neighboring and very remote areas and to be transmitted from generation to generation within Alpine families.

2. A Critical View on Return, Mobility and Migration

Before introducing the material I collected during fieldwork, let me clarify some of the concepts

¹ Counting emigrants’ “returns” is very difficult, because they do not fit into the statistical categories generally used at the State and at the regional level (King 1986, Douki 2013). To quantify these returns, I gathered information about the beneficiaries of return policies from the Bureau of Emigration of the Province of Trento, in Italy, as well as estimations made by the association *Sabença de la Valèia* and by the *Musée de la Vallée* de Barcelonnette, in France. Coupling this data with my observations, it seems that 1 out of 10 inhabitants in the Trentino is a former emigrant, and 1 out of 15 is an emigrant in the Ubaye Valley.

I shall use in its presentation. The first is the notion of “return,” which can be a contentious tool of analysis. Both emigrants and emigrants’ children use this term to refer to their movement from Latin America to Europe. However, it clearly accounts for two different experiences, as emigrants’ children are often born abroad. They do not really “come back” to Europe: moving towards their parents’ country, on the contrary, may seem more as a new migration in the eye of an outsider. The “return” of emigrants and that of their children, indeed, designate two experiences that are the opposite of one another and result in a radically different position towards identity and territory. In effect, the country in which emigrants’ children were born is the immigration country of their parents, while their destination country is their parents’ country of origin (King and Christou 2010). The notion of return must be handled with a critical perspective. Throughout the text I shall use it in inverted commas both to respect the informants’ linguistic choices and to describe the heterogeneous incoming flows that stem from the massive emigration such regions underwent in the past decades.

A second distinction relates to the different semantic range of the terms of migration and mobility. The notions of migration and mobility are linked to political concerns which legitimate or de-legitimate movement and which may reflect into academic practice (Hui 2016). The term migration usually refers to movement across the borders of a State, but there are cases in which the same phenomenon is defined as mobility. Indeed, laborers, who are commonly not welcomed by nation-states, are considered migrants, while highly skilled professionals, called mobiles, are generally welcomed. Mobility, positively connoted, entails expectations of gain for individuals and States, while migration, negatively connoted, involves control, social integration, or a threat for national identity (Faist 2013). A disparity of values and a social hierarchy, thus, underlies this terminological distinction: professional mobility applies to higher classes and movements from urban to rural areas, whereas

internal migration is for lower classes looking to increase their status and mostly moving from rural to urban areas.

Migration is also a legal construct, as it refers to the administrative experience of an individual changing of legal status – from citizen to foreigner – due to crossing State frontiers. The State is thus a crucial actor defining what is to be considered as migration and what, as mobility. Indeed, regulation over international migration is the crucial means through which the State claims its sovereignty (Xiang 2016). But there are countries in which the State also regulates mobility within its borders, labeling it as internal migration as a way of claiming sovereignty over its subjects (Hugo 2016). Internal migration too may thus be a State construct. If people who move are turned into migrants by States through regulations and border processes, we cannot assume that the category of migrants has an atemporal relevance, as it may not be conceptually useful for understanding the complexity of any professional movement at any time (Hui 2016).

In the Alpine region, transhumance and skilled-work mobility have been part of the everyday life of families for centuries. So, when the life of people living in a particular zone (such as the Alps) is inherently characterized by movement, are we entitled to call such movement an internal migration, applying to actors' external categories that are not meaningful for them in their everyday experience?

Breaking with disciplinary boundaries and with the epistemological biases of each term, in the following text I shall use the term, mobility, to refer to people's movement inside a State – a mobility that is not linked to crossing administrative borders – while I shall use migration to refer to movement across States, implying the crossing of borders and the submission to (or the identification of ways to bypass) an administrative experience.

3. Alpine Migrations Overseas

The case studies discussed in this article are drawn from two stages of fieldwork. A first phase

of ethnographic research took place in the Italian Alpine region of Trentino, in northeastern Italy, between 2010 and 2013. I interviewed different members of twenty families of "returnees" from Chile and Argentina. A second stage of fieldwork took place in 2016 on the French region of Alpes de Haute Provence and more specifically in the Ubaye Valley, with migrants "coming back" from Mexico. There, I interviewed members of 8 returnees' families. For the most part, I interviewed two members of every nuclear family: either two siblings or a parent and a child. In both settings, through biographic interviews, I gathered life histories and family narratives. I also focused on oral history, asking individuals for accounts of their grandparents' biography and of life in their village in the past. I focused my attention on mobility on a household basis and over generations, gathering information also on professional paths and family arrangements. I spent time with interviewees, sharing moments at home, at their workplace and sometimes in every-day village life. The interviews I collected showed the tensions and hierarchies that crisscross families and that can determine both mobility and professional paths, in relation to gender, generation, and with the position of individuals among their siblings. Examining the "return" experience of three generations – that of emigrants, emigrants' children and emigrants' grandchildren – provides an accurate ethnographic account of the complex relations linking different forms of mobility over time.

Oral history accounts I gathered from returnees from Chile and Argentina in the Trentino and from returnees from Mexico in Alpine Provence, suggest that in the countries where they emigrated, Alpiners were rarely immobile. Tracing different generations' experience, they confirm patterns that have been described by historians. The first men leaving the Ubaye Valley for Mexico were peddlers, mostly fabric traders, who left in the 1820s, to seize the trading opportunities opening with the independence of the new Mexican State (Gouy 1980). They travelled overseas with the goods they purchased in France

and roamed across the country to sell them. They then settled as fixed traders in Mexico City, where they built big stores and called other men from their village and family to come and join them. The most fortunate opened factories in other towns or in the countryside around Mexico City to produce their own fabrics and so avoid customs duties (Gamboa Ojeda 2009). They had their wives come from their native valley and in the majority of cases came back with their families once they “made their fortune” in Mexico, and they left their business to fellow countrymen (Collectif 2014). This process lasted until the beginning of the seventies.

Trentines migrating towards Chile and Argentina have a completely different profile. From the mid-nineteenth century, Trentino inhabitants emigrated to these two countries, as woodcutters or craftsmen moving through different towns and offering services to the local population (Groselli 2000). They worked for several years before going back to the Trentino, marrying and founding families. They could temporarily go back to Latin America now and then to integrate their household economy. Others emigrated to flee political persecution at different periods, especially during the World Wars. But most Trentines were attracted by the opportunities these States offered them to colonize “virgin” farmland. This was land the Argentinian and Chilean governments took from native Mapuche people in their attempt to whiten the local population. The relation the Trentino has with Chile is quite specific: almost a thousand people, grouped together in household units, emigrated in the early 50s as part of two populating expeditions organized by the Trentino-Alto Adige region and the Chilean government. This emigration was financed by the Marshall Plan. They were sent from their original region, devastated by war, to colonize lands in northern Chile, where they were promised they could acquire farmland and a house at very low rates. As the expeditions turned out to be state-organized frauds, people who sold everything they had in the Trentino in order to begin a new life in Chile found them-

selves poorer than when they left (Groselli 2011). Some of them sought fortune in other agricultural areas, while the majority moved towards the capital, Santiago, where they found jobs in the building sector or in factories opened by fellow countrymen. Others had to be repatriated by consular services. Thus, Alpine people very often remained mobile overseas, moving from rural to urban areas in search of employment, or crossing the country as merchants or skilled laborers.

4. Four Accounts of Family “Return Migration”

A comparison of “return migration” between two regions² occurring in different nation-states allows one to appreciate how different legal and historical contexts, which in turn influence the forms of family organization (Albera 2011), shape choices about coming back and moving within the return country.

Focusing on regions enables one to avoid the conceptual restrictions of methodological nationalism, which takes States and nations as “natural” units of analysis (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Examining these movements in terms of national migration would be meaningless, as emigrations coming from both France and Italy were built on local networks and on a regional socio-economic organization. Communities wouldn’t be useful research units either, as it would be problematic to draw the boundaries of communities “at home.” Do they coincide with valleys, with administrative provinces, with an origin village/hamlet? Ethnography reveals that even in a single valley, inhabitants may draw distinctions among themselves on the basis of the position they occupy in it. On the contrary, working with families, which I consider as middle-range social aggregates, as my research units, allows me to move beyond individual accounts and attain an intermediate dimension of comparison.

² In this paper, I use the term, region, in a broad sense, to indicate not an administrative division, but an area having a distinctive form of socio-economic organization and a single juridical and political framework.

The accounts I am presenting show that mobility is part of families' experience through all generations, both in the origin/return country and overseas.

Marina, 52, works in her in-laws' restaurant in a hamlet in a touristic upland valley in Trentino. Her family first lived in the rural area of Mezzocorona, a village in the biggest valley of the region. From Mezzocorona, her grandfather and then her father used to move towards the towns of Verona and Mantua to work as stonecutters and masons during the winter. Three generations of the family (Marina's grandfather with his seven children and his parents) emigrated to Chile in the 50s. They first headed towards the rural area of La Serena and later moved to the urban area of the capital, Santiago. When Marina's father came back, in 1970, bringing his own family with him, he headed first towards the urban area of Trent, the regional capital, and then towards the rural area of Val di Non. Maria recalls:

"I was born in Chile and I lived there until I was eight years old, in Santiago. My mother is from south Chile, but she moved to the capital and met my father, who is Trentine. For me, coming to Italy was a huge trauma. My dad wanted to come back because he was nostalgic, he wanted to return to his family. He came to Chile in the fifties, when the Italian State sent families to South America. He went with his entire family: his parents, his brothers and his grandparents. My grandfather came back with my grandmother and all his children because the arable land they promised them, next to La Serena, turned out to be impossible to cultivate. My father remained in Chile and moved to Santiago, where he began working with other Trentines in the building industry. Italians had little colonies there, where they hung out together. Then, my father worked at Carozzi, a pasta factory owned by a fellow countryman, on the outskirts of Santiago. He decided to come back in 1970, because everyone was telling him "come back to Italy, we're fine here, we've all got a car" and so on. But in the end, we had nothing! Maybe we were better off in Chile. We came back by boat, a month-long trip. My father thought he would have his family's support, his brothers and sis-

ters where in Trent. But the family did not exist anymore, after they came back, they all became Jehovah's Witnesses. When we came back, I was ten and we settled in Trent. It was very traumatic, because it is not your home. I looked at this old, ancient city and it seemed to me like I was going a century back.

We received little aid from the Province; nowadays people coming back are treated like princes! But our family benefitted only from the paid return trip. This, they owed us, since it's they who sent us there! The first apartment we had was a dump, it was above a restaurant, with shared bathrooms in the stairway and I got viral hepatitis. At school, it was very difficult for me, because I had to learn Italian, so I didn't go much further; no one taught me how to study, our parents were too busy trying to make a living. Then I met my fiancé. He was the son of emigrants too. His parents bought the family house parts from their siblings, in Val di Non, and opened a restaurant there. I have worked there since I was 23 and I still work in our family restaurant. I hope we will soon be able to convert our part of the house into a bed and breakfast, since tourism is flourishing here."

Cristina, 44, works in a family-run mountain hotel and lives in a village in Val di Sole, Trentino. Before leaving Italy, her father's family lived in the same area. Her paternal grandfather used to move towards the plains of Modena and Cremona as a *ramaio*, or tinkerer, repairing boilers and kitchen utensils. Her father didn't carry on this craft and left for Chile. Her mother's family was from another valley, Valsugana. Her maternal grandmother worked as a laborer in a silk factory in the neighboring Valle dell'Adige, where her maternal grandfather worked as a mason. Not much time was left for farming. Cristina's father left the Trentino in the 50s with his brothers, while Cristina's mother left with her parents in the same period. Cristina's parents met in the rural area of La Serena; they married and moved towards the copper mining area in northern Chile. They then went back to the Trentino, heading towards the rural areas of Folgarida and Dimaro.

"I was born in Chile from emigrant parents from the Trentino. I arrived in Italy in 1973. Dad is from Dimaro and mom from Valsugana. I was born in Copiacò, in the desert, where my father was working as a miner. We came back in 1973 because my father had a project with his brothers, which they set up a few years earlier. It was the construction of a hotel in Folgarida. We came because there was this project. They were three brothers in Chile and they had to pick one to come here with his family. He was the eldest and so we arrived. The entire family: seven brothers and sisters and my parents. But we were all born there. The whole family emigrated in 1952, when there was an agreement between the Italian and the Chilean government. Then De Gasperi, who was from the Trentino, was the Prime Minister. And here, it was a period of crisis.

At that time, a bus full of people left Dimaro; there were more than fifty emigrants. My father left with his brothers. My mother, on the contrary, left with her parents, who are buried in Chile and all her brothers and sisters are still there. We are the only ones from Dimaro who came back to Val di Sole. The others went to Trent, Rovereto, small towns. Because, you know, a backward process was set up. First we had aid for leaving, then the Province helped people coming back. For us, it was difficult to come back. We were doing well in Chile; we didn't want to come back. But we had to, because of this investment project."

Pietro, 43, works in its own spare parts replacement firm, in a middle-range town in the Trentino, Riva del Garda. His paternal family was from the rural area of the Valle di Fivè, not far from the Lake Garda. The men of his father's family used to be *carbonai*, coalmen, who moved towards the neighboring town of Brescia to sell coal. They were very poor, had no fields of their own and used to migrate from spring to autumn, when the first snow came. His mother's father was a farmer and a baker in Dro, a small town on a neighboring plain. His parents met in the Trentino and emigrated together to Argentina around the late 40s, to join a sister of his mother, who had already emigrated there with her husband.

Pietro came back some thirty years later and settled first in the rural area of Arco and then in the urban area of Riva del Garda, both on the Piana dell'Alto Garda.

"I came here 20 years ago from Argentina, where I was born. I was 23 years old and came back with my fiancée, an Argentinian of Spanish descent. She was 21. We married when we arrived, in order for her to have Italian papers. I had an Italian passport, in addition to my Argentinian citizenship, thanks to my parents. In Buenos Aires, they had a car spare parts firm. In Argentina, it was very difficult because of the economic situation, even if we had a house and our parents there. Before we left, we had a little bar, our in-laws gave it to us to run. We were going to the university in the evening and we worked in the bar during the day. But a moment came when everyone paid us with food stamps, which were paid 30 days later. They were always losing their value because of inflation, day after day. So, they didn't even cover the bar expenses, not even the pastries. So, we asked people to pay cash, or we would be obliged to raise our prices. It was a real pity, for lots of young people who got to start their lives, it was an obstacle. My parents began urging us children to go away, to seek a better future. They said there was no future there. I don't know if I could have done so. They stayed in Argentina. You see, the migrant mind? They were able to say it, so we, the children, went away and they remained there, alone. Then my father died and my mother was left alone. But since she's got a sister there, who is 90 years old, she doesn't want to come back. Otherwise she would have spent six months here and six months there. But they are very fond of Argentina. When we came, we benefitted from the financial aid of the Province. They paid us our airplane ticket and helped us with our apartment rent during the first year.

My brother came a year before me; he went to Varignano, next to Arco. So, I arrived on Friday and on Sunday I was already working in a bakery. I didn't lose a moment. Then I worked as a sales agent and when our family grew, I decided to open my own company to earn more money. We were very determined. This is why we were able to do what we did. To come here leaving our families there. When my mother left the Trentino for Argentina,

she took a boat and had to say goodbye to her parents forever. Nowadays it is different; we see each other every day, with Skype, and airplane tickets are less expensive. Every summer someone is coming to see us. I didn't think my parents and my in-laws would ever use a computer, and yet here they are! We are not rich, anyway, and we cannot go as often as we would like, we miss our parents a lot".

Robert, 69, retired, is an ex hotel manager and receptionist, living in Mandelieu, a small town on the Côte d'Azur. His family settled in the rural zone next to Saint-Paul-sur-Ubaye, in the Alps de Haute Provence. The men of his paternal family used to be tinkers during the winter, and moved across the surrounding region until they reached the city of Lyon. Robert emigrated to Mexico City in the 50s and came back with his own family in the 80s. They first headed towards Saint-Paul and rapidly moved to Mandelieu, a resort town on the neighboring Côte d'Azur.

"I left the hamlet where I was born, near Saint-Paul-sur-Ubaye, in 1952. In addition to farming, in my family we were tinkers from father to son: my father and grandfather used to cross the country, moving towards Lyon during winter. I didn't want to work as a tinkerer, a job that was fading anyway, or to be a peasant. I didn't want to go work in a factory or as a mason either. I was the first of four sons and two daughters and I knew I would inherit the family property. But before that, I knew that I had to live with my parents in the family house and take care of our land. I was sixteen and I couldn't imagine doing so. Then, I decided to leave for adventure and went to work in a cousin's hotel in Mexico City. You know, our valley has timeless ties with Mexico; they even set up factories there! I worked as a waiter in that hotel and later as a manager. I enjoyed that work. Then I met my wife, the daughter of a rich countryman. It wasn't easy to get her father to consent to our marriage, since I was not what you would call rich, but she managed to have him give us his approval. We had four children. We came back to see the family during summer holidays. My brothers moved too, some to Lyon and the neighboring area, others to Paris. One of my sisters remained in

the valley and took care of my parents. In the 80s I was still working in that hotel, but things were not going well. Then my father died and I inherited the house and the land. It wasn't that much, you know, but I wanted to come back anyway. I wanted to see my home-place, my sisters. I wanted my children to have a French education. So, we came in 1987; I was fifty. My eldest son was fifteen; my youngest daughter, eight. My children were happy; they wanted to see France and the Eiffel Tower, even if they knew that my family was from a small mountain village. I sold the land to a neighbor and kept the house, but we didn't want to live there. It is a little hamlet and we were used to the city. I had a little savings but I still had to work. I couldn't stay in the valley, so we moved to the Côte d'Azur, which is not very far away. I had some French acquaintances from Mexico who opened up a hotel in Mandelieu. They gave me the opportunity to work as a receptionist in this small hotel, a job I kept until I retired at age 65. We go back and forth between the coast, where we live, and Saint-Paul, where we spend our holidays."

5. Comparing "Return Migration" in two Alpine Regions

The life histories I gathered show that people continue to "return" to the Alpine area, heading towards their or their family's place of origin and sometimes moving from these locations towards new destinations, which they choose on the basis of economic opportunities. These accounts illustrate that "return" is a common feature of migrations coming from the Alps. As it was part of the internal circular mobility that developed in the early modern era, it constituted an essential component of transatlantic emigration. This is not exceptional. Even if shared representations of the emigration from Europe towards the Americas usually depict it as a one-way trip, literature shows that return has always constituted a significant part of these movements (Wyman 1993, Cerase 2001).

However, it is difficult to establish the place of return in the migratory cycle. The life histories I have presented show that migrants were mobile before going overseas, just as they were when they were in South America and when

they came back. So, we can wonder if using the term “return migration” as an analytic category we don’t simply cut a specific moment out of a wider dynamic of mobility.

Another ambiguity lies in the uneven experience of the different generations of migrants. Various generations are “coming back” in the Alps: the emigrants who left in the 1950-1975 period who are now retiring, as well as emigrants’ children or descendants, who may have distant European ancestry. These ambiguities help to understand what the life histories I gathered suggest: the places of “return” and the interconnections between international migration, internal mobility and immobility are necessarily plural, when one observes them through the lens of “return.” Choices about mobility, immobility and places migrants “return” to depend on a plethora of factors, among which are policies, economic opportunities, family relations and inheritance laws. This is particularly clear when we analyze the major differences between the movements heading to the two regions I considered in this study.

A first difference lies in norms of inheritance. Inheritance rules of Alpine Provence³ are based on the model of the stem family, in what has been called a house society. In this system, the eldest son is entitled to inherit the family’s patrimony, that is, the family house and land (Collomp 1983). The other children are compensated for their part with dowries, when possible, or they do not inherit anything. Inheritance perspectives may be a reason for coming back to Alpine Provence, as a son may inherit the whole family property. This is why, for example, Robert decided to come back to France when his father died. Inheritance norms allowed him to become the only owner of the family lands and house and, as such, to sell the land and have some cash with which he could begin a new life. On the contrary, in the Trentino, family property is divided among all sons

³ These traditional rules still continue to apply even if the introduction of the Civil Code in the late 1880s established the division of the family patrimony among all children.

and daughters (Cole and Wolf 1974). Men who didn’t achieve success are not encouraged to come back as, with some luck, they would inherit just a small part of the family land and/or house.

A second discrepancy relates to the different financial investment patterns and internal mobility behaviors I observed. In the Ubaye Valley, “returnees” who earned a fortune through their trade and cloth factories in Mexico invested in monumental villas and graves. These buildings are striking in the local architectural environment, which is composed of Provençal farms and village houses (Homps 2004). The importance emigrants attributed to house building in the Ubaye Valley, compared to the Trentino, seems to testify to the central value that is conferred to the family residence in the house society. “Returnees” from the Ubaye Valley invest mainly in real estate, in their home villages – where they settle to retire, or which they frequent as a holiday resort – as on the Côte d’Azur and in Paris. Like Robert, who moved to the Côte d’Azur for professional reasons, “returnees” move across their (or their parents’) original country following professional and investment opportunities. Internal mobility is a consequence of the return from international migration, as it is fundamental to make savings fruitful and to stabilize a path of social ascension.

For emigrants of Trentine-origin, huge economic achievements are less frequent, and so are “returns” linked to the display of success and the enjoyment of money. “Returnees” both benefit from and contribute to the growth of the tourist industry, as they come back with cash they invest in construction of new hotel complexes, ski resorts and restaurants. “Returnees” heading towards the Trentino are less mobile than those going back to the Ubaye Valley. Economic investment opportunities linked to tourism are greater there, as the region is highly valued by tourists. So, Cristina’s family came back to build a holiday resort with the money they put aside through emigration, while Marina works in a restaurant her in-laws opened after coming back from emigration and plans to invest in a bed and breakfast.

The third major difference lies in the presence of return migration policies in the Trentino. These policies include offering financial aid, housing and work facilities for “emigrants coming back” from destination countries who are willing to settle in the region. These measures, which can be seen as ethnic-preference migratory policies (Joppke 2005), were implemented in the 90s and were aimed to encourage the region’s re-population; they were also meant to discourage rural exodus. With a broad definition of what an emigrant is,⁴ these policies attracted lots of old and new migrants. Some “returnees” re-discovered a (sometimes as distant as a fifth generation) local ancestry in order to benefit from interesting financial facilities and to carry out what may be considered a new migration. Such policies imply that “returnees” will stay in the local territory for as long as they benefit from these facilities: they thus discourage internal mobility. Marina’s and Cristina’s families, as well as Pietro, the son of emigrants, benefitted from these policies in order to “come back” to the Trentino.

Nonetheless, even if “return” migration may be accomplished thanks to policies of ethnic affinity, it engenders social difference in everyday social interaction. This is maintained both by “returnees” and by the inhabitants of the places they settle in. Such a dynamic is not specific to the two regions I studied and has been extensively analyzed in the literature (Baldassar 2001).

Regardless of their generation, “returnees” are called “the Mexicans” in the Ubaye Valley. This label encompasses both envy and contempt towards people who left the valley, supposedly got rich abroad and returned with money to show off. On their turn, “returnees” openly adopt a behavior that distances themselves and their children from local inhabitants, engaging in internal mobility to signify social difference. Additionally, the valley’s principal municipality took advantage of the “Mexican” label. Without the “returnees” participating in it, in the 90s the

municipal council invented a French-Mexican annual festival, *fêtes latino-mexicaines* that is supposed to draw special attention to the hybridized identity of the valley, by celebrating its connection to Mexico. During a week, *mariachis*, Mexican artists and singers, perform in the valley capital, promoting tourism by marketing ethnicity (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009).

In Trentino, “returnees” from Argentina and Chile suffer different degrees of social exclusion, depending on the size of the town in which they settle. In high valley villages, the children of emigrants that come back at the age of retirement are considered strangers, as Cristina stresses. Her family was not able to integrate into the local social life, even if she and her brothers settled in the her father’s village. In larger towns, “returnees” are not ostracized or considered local. They rebuild their life as a foreigner would do: they create new social ties, often frequenting local “Chilean” or “Argentinian” clubs, which are composed mostly by migrants of Italian descent. However, when it comes to claiming local identity before the Italian State, in order to obtain social and economic advantages, emigrants could be rapidly reintegrated into local communities. So, the largest ethno-linguistic minority of the region, that of the Ladin, uses the Internet to reach out to its emigrant population, scattered around the world. They are summoned to come and join the local community in the annual festival showcasing the Ladin ethnic identity. The forms in which the social differences engendered by migration interact with local ethnic identity, thus, vary according to the geographical context and its legal framework.

6. The Connections between Mobility, Migration and Immobility

The cases I have presented show that international migration can stem from internal mobility and that “return” migration may lead to more internal mobility. Very often, Alpiners were already engaged in paths of circular mobility before leaving for South America. When they “come back,” migrants possibly return in/

⁴ Anyone who can prove he/she had an ancestor who left the Trentino.

to mobility: they do not necessarily resettle in the place they left, but they move around the country or around their original region following economic opportunities. Emigrants' children and descendants may easily adopt mobility, too, following a family habit. Pietro's case is exemplary, as his own migration "back" to Italy was stimulated by his parents. They were the first to urge him to leave Argentina. So, to leave them, when the economic crisis was at its peak, encouraging him to experience backwards the same journey they made when they were young. The habit of moving is transmitted from parents to children, making mobility an appropriate response in times of crisis, as it was a stable element of the family economy for the previous generations. The four accounts I presented show that, in each family, circular professional mobility was converted into international migration, as men who were used to leave for long periods decided to emigrate overseas when better opportunities presented themselves. These individuals accumulated a "mobility capital," including various skills acquired through the repeated experience of moving, such as the knowledge of migration (and return) policies, of the different opportunities available in the regions and countries of destination, as well as relational skills (Martiniello and Réa 2014). This capital forms part of the Alpine culture of mobility that is passed on through generations.

The account of Alpiners mobility urges us to reconsider the scientific division between internal mobility and international migration (King and Skeldon 2010). These appear to be part of a single dynamic, rather than being two different processes. This dynamic encompasses immobility as a third element, with which the former have a dialectic relation (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

The study of Alpine mobility challenges both the postulates on the novelty of transnationalism and the fundamental assumption of methodological nationalism, the immobility of a people inside a nation-state's boundaries, which justifies its homogeneity, its "sameness." The his-

torical roots of mobility processes coming from and heading towards the Alpine area suggest that transnational movements of people, ideas, money and objects are not a novelty. This point has been widely discussed also in other case studies, comparing contemporary migrations with historic migrations to the USA (Foner 2001). This is not to say, however, that recent changes in travel and communication modes haven't accelerated such transnational processes. Methodological nationalism considers that people in single nation-states share a unique language and the same culture, while migration confronts them with "otherness." "Return migration" and the dynamics of expression of social diversity it engenders challenges these assumptions, showing the crucial place that mobility can take in a same region, exposing it to unexpected contacts with different forms of otherness.

The case studies I presented also question theories which posit that return migration to rural areas is typical of emergent countries, while return migration in developed countries is directed mostly towards urban areas (King and Skeldon 2010). But the rural regions migrants "come back" to are no longer as they were when they left. Rapid development, thanks to the growth of the tourism economy as well as to emigrants' remittances and financial investments, has completely changed the social and economic environment in the Trentino and in the Ubaye Valley.

Conclusion

Ethnography indicates that, in order to better understand contemporary phenomena, it is fundamental to take due account of history and to make a "systemic" study of mobility encompassing economics, policy, law and kinship as well as biographic accounts.

In more general terms, the research results I have presented point out the importance of integrating the study of contemporary migration, often focused on exotic movements traveling on a South-North or East-West axis and supposedly challenging Western European national identi-

ties, with insight from long-lasting, “taken-for-granted-yet-unknown” European migrations. These are still going on in the contemporary era and condition some of the socio-economic changes we are facing. Nevertheless, their influence over our society remains unseen. On the contrary, given their complexity and their depth in time, such migrations may enlighten some issues that are at stake in more recent and more visible migrations.

These case studies also show that more efforts have to be made to overstep the “immobility paradigm” that dominated European historical, sociological, geographic and demographic research in the past century. The development of anthropological research in Europe, and especially in the Alps, offering a historical perspective on the societies studied, has already questioned this paradigm at the end of the twentieth century. But the studies that have been carried out in emigrants’ original regions in Alpine Europe have often assumed that emigrants’ return corresponded to their “natural” and unproblematic integration in the local or national community they left (Lorenzetti et Granet-Abisset 2009). This means that more research needs to be done to understand the effects of emigration on European local societies, on one hand, and to build new theoretical perspectives integrating immobility, internal mobility and international migration, on the other.

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