Newcomers in the Italian Alps
Effects on Autochthonous Linguistic Minorities

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Abstract

After WWI the Italian Alps were characterized by a massive depopulation that lasted well into the 1970s. While in-migration concentrated mainly around central Alpine areas until a few years ago, now more and more municipalities in the Italian Alpine region show in part remarkable influx and thereby population gains. These newcomers – mostly amenity migrants representing “urban refugees” from outside the Alpine region – influence the local culture, not least with regard to the seven linguistic minorities that are settled in the area. This results first and foremost in the disappearance of the minority languages in everyday life, and the maintenance of the ethnic diversity is seriously threatened.

Keywords: Amenity Migration, Ethno-linguistic Minorities, Italian Alps, Demographic Change

1 Thesis

Nowhere in Western Europe is the ethno-linguistic structure more diverse than in the Italian Alps. In addition to the state majority, no less than seven linguistic minorities coexist here side by side, sometimes in close vicinity. In the framework of a current project supported by the Austrian Science Fund¹ we will emphasize that processes of depopulation and re-settlement of peripheral Alpine regions carry potential for considerable ethno-cultural changes.

The findings of the project “Counterurbanization in the Californian Sierra Nevada” (2003-2006) proved that there are demographic parallels between the Sierra Nevada and the Alps (cf. LÖFFLER & STEINICKE 2007): correspondingly, in parts of the Alps we can find in-migration not only in some major valleys and tourism-intensive areas, but also and specifically in remote, high-altitude regions. This particular migration leads to population gains and is the main reason for the recovery and extension of communities in these peripheral areas. Nevertheless, it is also responsible for the threat to ethnic diversity caused by current demographic processes.

Considering the current status of research (see also chapter 2 and 3) this contribution is based on the following major thesis:

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The preservation of the ethnic minorities in the Italian Alps has been complicated by decades of depopulation of mountainous areas. Furthermore, the present demographic shift threatens the ethnic diversity. New immigration in form of amenity (-led) migration now adds to the minorization of the smaller linguistic groups in their own territories.

The contribution is based on the one hand on analysis of the current state of the art, specifically on results to this issue presented by University of Innsbruck geographers in the last decade, as well as on own analysis of official statistical data. It is on the other hand derived from own surveys in the course of investigative visits among all ethno-linguistic minorities of the Italian Alpine arch (2009-2012). In the minority areas, experts were questioned about the ethnic boundaries with the neighboring regions. Generally these experts were persons in responsible positions in the communities as well as representatives of different cultural associations. In addition, written surveys were conducted with amenity migrants in various communities. Qualitative, empirical field work was applied to verify the results of the statistical interpretation, since the census data do not always reflect the actual situation. The integration of social media was a further component of our data acquisition techniques. With this tool it was possible to locate newcomers, to stay in contact, to interact with them, and to build a network. As mentioned in chapter 2, a well-developed telecommunications network is an important precondition for most amenity migrants to move to remote mountainous regions.

The study follows the concept of relativized constructivism (HELLER 2004), i.e., it argues that ethnic framing cannot be seen solely in terms of constructivism but also from a primordial or objective point of view. Thus, language affiliation plays a decisive role.

Before discussing the effects of current population processes on the linguistic minorities in the Italian Alps it seems reasonable to present the amenity (-led) migration approach\(^2\) and to add some remarks to the term “ethnic minority.”

\(^2\)To be precise, the term “amenity migration” is not entirely correct. Discussions within the Banff Conference (cf. MOSS et al. 2008) clarified that it is only a common term in English. It should also be emphasized here that in the strictest sense of the word amenity “migration” may not be a real migration because it does not in every case involve a permanent change of residence.

2 Amenity (-led Migration)

There are parallel structures between the approach of amenity migration and the model of counterurbanization (BERRY 1976); the latter describes the rediscovery and re-evaluation of rural areas as residential and commercial space. In the years 2006 MOSS – one of the pioneers in the field of amenity migration research – and 2008, MOSS et al. published two fundamental
anthologies on the subject, in which numerous experts discuss these occurrences in various mountain regions all over the world (see also Gosnell & Abrams 2011; McIntyre 2009, 2011; Steinicke et al. 2012; see also Revue de géographie alpine, vol. 99/1, 2011). Amenity-led migration represents a shift in preference of residential location from the urban space to remote but attractive rural (mountainous) regions, where it is the driving force behind current settlement expansions and population growth. Weekend and leisure residences have become increasingly second or retirement homes, which means that the time spent in the target area expands significantly. As more and more people are no longer confined to their places of work, the motivation to also transfer work-related aspects to the “new” residence is high. Further reasons for this turnaround are improved infrastructures in terms of telecommunication, traffic and supply, as well as affordable real estate and intensive leisure activities. Amenity migrants intend to settle in their destinations permanently, seasonally (one or more periods per year), or intermittently (moving between their residences more frequently). Seasonal or intermittent presence on site, however, also includes for instance second home owners or “multiple dwelling” (McIntyre 2008). Tourism, by contrast, is not seen as a part of amenity migration. Tourists typically visit without the intention to reside or earn a living at their destinations. Nevertheless, tourism plays an important role because it could be seen not only as a stepping stone to amenity migration but also as its supporter and facilitator (Price et al. 1997).

There is no doubt, the approach of amenity migration is an appropriate focal point to study the newcomers in the Alps. This is all the more relevant, as the specific literature since the late 1990s has typically included the multi-resident/dwelling aspect (cf. Price et al. 1997). The concept of multilocality overcomes the insufficient meaning of the terms “second” or “recreational homes,” which are either statistically defined or carry a tourism connotation. Thus, in order to analyze the full spectrum of “inhabitants for a time” in regard to their individual motivations and functions as well as their participation in the community, the integration of the multilocality approach opens up a new possibility to develop a more accurate definition for amenity migrants in the European Alps. According to recent findings, multilocality is not a subform of migration, but a third component between migration and daily circulation (Hilti 2009, 84; Weichhart 2009, 7). Overall, the studies of Moss (2006, 2008), Rolshoven (2007), McIntyre (2008), McIntyre et al. (2006), Hilti (2009), and Weichhard (2009) show that further research is essential to widen the perspective and to integrate the concept of “multiple dwelling.”
3 Demographic transformation

After WWII in the Italian Alps, except in South Tyrol, adverse natural and socio-agrarian factors as well as a lack of non-agricultural job opportunities led to a massive depopulation that lasted well into the 1970s (STEINICKE 1991). Figure 1 seeks to illustrate this out-migration period which has even led to the development of completely abandoned settlements (“ghost towns;” ČEDE & STEINICKE 2007). Depopulation in the Italian Alps has undoubtedly decreased since the 1980s, and from 1990 onwards the majority of the Alpine communities has been growing (fig. 2 and 3).

Fig. 1: Population development in the Italian Alps 1951-1991
Source: ISTAT, calculations and representation by the authors
Fig. 2: Population development in the Italian Alps 1991-2001
Source: ISTAT, calculations and representation by the authors

Fig. 3: Population development in the Italian Alps 2001-2011
Source: ISTAT, calculations and representation by the authors
While immigration until a few years ago concentrated mainly around central Alpine areas with strong economic, tourism and transportation connections, our analyses (BEISMANN 2009; WALDER et al. 2010; STEINICKE et al. 2010) show that peripherally located Italian Alpine communities progressively accomplish a positive migration balance (fig. 4). Considering the population development since the early 1990s, there are nonetheless still areas evident with some significant population losses. Even today the effects of unfavorable bio-demographic factors resulting from the migration period can be observed in many Italian Alpine communities.

Fig. 4: Migration balance in the Italian Alps 2001-2011
Source: ISTAT, calculations and representation by the authors

Nonetheless, we could identify for the first time that more and more municipalities in the Italian Alpine region, which were characterized by population losses in the last decades, now show in part remarkable influx and thereby population gains. Overall, the newcomers originate mainly from Italian-speaking areas or from abroad. According to the results of our interviews, however, we had to distinguish between the foothills and the interior of the Alps. The population gains in the foothills can be explained through interaction with the Padanian cities and constitute therefore a process of suburbanization or exurbanization (with daily commuting). On the other hand, the newcomers in the interior of the Alps are work- or leisure
oriented re-migrants, retirees, second home owners, guest workers from abroad and other non-natives, whereby each of them could be an amenity migrant (fig. 5).

Fig. 5: Different types of amenity migrants (Steinicke et al. 2010; 2011a; 2011b; Walder et al. 2010; compiled and represented by the authors)

4 Autochthonous Ethno-linguistic Minorities

The ethno-geographic relevance of amenity migration is to be seen in the fact that peripheral spaces and thus the minority areas in the Alps have become a target of newcomers who may reinforce the assimilation process in those areas.

While it is difficult to find a satisfactory definition for the term “minority” (HECKMANN 1992; KRAAS 1992; PLASSERAUD 1998), it is impossible to find generally accepted definitions of the political term “ethno-linguistic minority” and of the cultural term “ethnic group” (BARTH 1969; GANS 1979; HECKMANN 1992; BANKS 1996; PAN & PFEIL 2000; STEINICKE 2005; GELLNER 2006; BRUBAKER 2009). They may differ from country to country: in some parts of Europe ethnic minorities are described as special groups within a state that differ from the majority population in terms of objective (e.g. linguistic) and subjective (sense of group-awareness) factors. This definition includes a common determination to maintain the particular, historical status of an autochthonous linguistic community that is recognized in most European countries when a group has existed for about three generations in a given area (VEITER 1984). In contrast, guest workers and immigrants do form ethnic groups in the countries of the Alps, but they are not designated “ethnic minorities,” contrary to foreigners in countries like
the Netherlands, the U.S.A., Great Britain, and Canada. In the Alps the various ethnic groups may be distinguished from each other through linguistic characteristics. Thus, in order to be more precise, the term “(ethno-)linguistic group” should be preferred over the less specific term “ethnic group.”

Remote small-scale fragmented mountain areas, specifically the Italian Alps, provide favorable conditions for the preservation of ethno-linguistic groups.

![Map of Ethnic Minorities in the Italian Alps](image)

**Fig. 6:** “Minoranze linguistiche storiche” in the Italian Alps (according to the linguistic criteria) (Walder et al. 2010; modified by the authors)

### 5 The Impact of Current Demographic Transformation on the Ethno-linguistic Minorities

Although extensive literature from various scientific disciplines exists about ethno-linguistic minorities in Europe and the Alps (Sanguin 1993; Bauer 1999; Zürrer 1999; Pan & Pfeil 2000; Čede & Fleck 2005; Opitz 2007; Toso 2008), only very few papers address the influence of the current demographic development in the Alps on the various language groups living there.
In the 1970s, when mainly the economically induced migration or the birth deficit contributed to the depletion of linguistic minorities, assimilation progressed only insignificantly in peripheral areas. From 1990 onwards the re-settling of peripheral high mountain regions can be seen as a completely new process. Amenity migration leads “urban refugees” to the various Alpine valleys, where they shape the change of the ethnic diversity. The minority members are therefore presently subject to a more intensive assimilation process which becomes apparent in the gradual disappearance of minority languages from daily life, as well as in the disappearance of smaller autochthonous ethnic groups.

With the Implementation Act No. 482 (Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 297, 20.12.1999) Italy protects all its autochthonous ethno-linguistic minorities (minoranze linguistiche storiche) now. Thus, outside the autonomous provinces a demarcation can be made on the basis of juridical conditions that are to be viewed in the context of this law and the associated financial incentives. Our research showed, however, that due to the general lack of knowledge about the exact distribution of ethnic groups in the Italian Alps many Italian municipalities regard the new legal situation from a purely political-pragmatic perspective. For example, a certain ethnic self-assessment can be beneficial in gaining federal financial allowances. Therefore the true language boundaries do not always agree with the ethnic self-assessments of the municipalities. This reflects the political dilemma of establishing appropriate measures for effective protection of minorities and confirms the supposition that regulations for the protection of minorities can be taken to the point of absurdity (WALDER et al. 2010). Not only future policies, but also the demographic developments mentioned before will have an impact on the survival of the autochthonous linguistic minorities.

In the Italian Alps, the phenomenon of amenity migration is limited only to certain communities. Therefore a fragmented development – population growth and settlement expansions on the one hand, and increasing depopulation up to the point of “ghost towns” on the other – can be expected to continue.

In conclusion we present three case studies focused on newcomers in the minority areas.

Of the 15 historical Walser settlements that identify themselves as minority groups, German is now spoken only in four communities of Piedmont (Alagna Valsesia, Rimella, Formazza and Macugnaga) and in three communities in the Aosta Valley (Gressoney-Saint-Jean, Gressoney-La-Trinité and Issime). The region of Aosta Valley has promoted the teaching of German since 1993, whereupon the Walser communities of the Valle del Lys codified their own German dialects, and thus today pupils in Gressoney-Saint-Jean and Gressoney-La-Trinité can learn “titsch,” and those in Issime “töitschu;” but it is just language instruction and does not
result in a working language. In contrast to most other in-migration areas, the newcomers in the Lys Valley have generally integrated into the local population. An important role in this plays tourism advertising, which – as in the Ladin Dolomite areas – specifically highlights the special ethnic status. This has been one of the reasons that numerous Italian immigrants declare themselves members of the Walser ethnic group, often without understanding so much as the basics of the language (STEINICKE et al. 2011)

Fig. 7: Newcomers in the Walser Settlement Gressoney-La-Trinité (mapping and cartography by the authors 2010)

Another example studied in Mazzin (Fassa Valley) in the Eastern Alps shows the transformation of a former agricultural village to one that is now dominated by amenity and tourism residences (fig. 8). The positive effect here is that the population is growing again:
from 465 in the year 1921 down to a low of 355 in 1971, and from then on increasing to about 500 currently.

The final case study concerns the extreme western part of the Friulian Alps. It documents that newcomers can also be found in areas without tourism. In a devastating catastrophe in October 1963 a 3 km long landslide fell into the Vajont reservoir, causing a flood wave and killing around 2,000 people. Most survivors of Casso (and Erto) were moved to the newly built village of Vajont about 45 km southeast. In the following years more and more people moved back and started renovating their houses (STEINICKE 1991). The affordable living space also attracted some amenity-led migrants who began to settle in the area.
6 Concluding remarks

In our study we attempted to make aware of the current demographic changes in the Italian high mountains and their impact on the ethnic minorities. The current tendency of reverse migration to remote areas in the entire Alpine region, which of course does not occur in all high-altitude zones, enhances the change of the ethnic structure. This process includes the scenario whereby smaller autochthonous ethnic minorities may gradually disappear altogether.

Apart from the autonomous South Tyrol the minority languages are threatened in all parts of the Italian Alps because of assimilation, inter-marriage, media influence, a lack of education in schools, out-migration and in-migration, and the fact that in most cases only the older generation uses the autochthonous language. Nonetheless, in many minority communities we could observe a strong awareness for the minority culture. Especially newcomers to the Alpine communities in Piedmont, mostly amenity migrants, bear a strong relationship to the Occitan culture – even without being able to speak the minority language. This becomes
particularly apparent in the Occitan music and cuisine and in the appearance of the Occitan flag on town halls, private homes, official squares, mosaics on the street and many other places. There is no doubt that in-migration will enhance linguistic assimilation into the Italian language; on the other hand the urban refugees frequently support a kind of “symbolic ethnicity” (GANS 1979): they still like and cultivate heritage and the old local customs (Christmas and wedding rituals or architectural styles), but as mentioned, they often are no longer able to speak the autochthonous languages. Consequently, in everyday communication Italian is the predominant language.

In the context of in-migration the dispersed patterns of secondary residences, as well as amenity residences in the Alps, represent a planning problem, too. Regional development in sensitive high mountain regions has to lead to sustainability and must therefore operate with attention to environmental, cultural, demographic, and socio-economic consequences. Due to the increasing demand for land and concerns regarding the village character, regulations and guidelines are needed to curb rural sprawl and prevent the formation of villages of exclusively secondary homes.

Within the framework of our research activities in the Italian Alps we noticed indications of similar transformations in most parts of the French and Slovenian Alps and in demographic problem areas of the Swiss, Austrian, and German Alps. This new process has not been scrutinized so far, and therefore our future research seeks to study the origins and motivations of the “new highlanders” and especially their effects on the cultural and socio-economic structures for the entire Alpine space.

References


