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Essay

Approaching the Alps

A Brief Exploration of some Anthropological Theory and the “Montagnards” in the Swiss Mountains

Sachbereichs-/Regionalübung
***“What's new in the swiss mountains? From territorialized communities to delocalized
digital economy”***

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Mountains in Motion

The Alps are in motion. The mountain chain connecting eight countries in central Europe is moving slightly northwards every year and some of the peaks are still growing higher. But the Alps are not only in motion from a geological point of view. Through the lenses of social sciences, the alpine area presents itself dynamic and evolving. New infrastructural installations, new ways of living and new imaginaries are spreading deep into the once so remote alpine valleys. A traditional and romantic view, who considers the people populating the Alps as “Heidis”, “Alpöhis” or other stereotypical figures,¹ seems definitely outdated. Questions about identity, culture and territoriality in the Alps have to be addressed nowadays in new ways, due to the five so-called “megatrends” a swiss federal institution points out: Globalisation, digitalisation, individualisation, demographic change, and climate change (Rat für Raumordnung 2019). But what view on the inhabitants (and visitors) of the alpine countryside, the villages, towns and even cities in the mountains is appropriate today? How can the social sciences these days think about the population and the social processes in the Alps? In this essay, I try to explore some theoretical approaches to study life and people in alpine areas, seek to bring them at least in loose connections to one another and aim to apply them to chosen examples of current alpine research undertaken by scholars in Switzerland.

I focalise in this essay strongly on a text by Bernard Debarbieux (2017) about different conceptions of “a human type – the Montagnard”, circulating around the notion of territoriality, culture and identity. His conceptual thinking includes already many very important aspects to approach a mountain population. Then I have a look at the tension between individual and collective modes of identification referring to a debate between Craig Calhoun and Rogers Brubaker. By this I seek to better grasp the notion of identity. Finally, I bring these two parts of my essay very briefly in relation to the theoretical reflections of Gerd Baumann (1997) about the distinction of a demotic and a dominant discourse, which permits to touch also aspects of power; and the considerations of Olaf Zenker (2011) about the notion of

¹ I focus mainly on conceptual and theoretical problems of a scientific approach to people living in a certain geographical environment, in this case the Alps. The examples I use to illuminate my arguments will focus more precisely on the *Swiss Alps*, corresponding to the seminar entitled “What’s new in the Swiss mountains?”.

autochthony, which permits to implement more profoundly a temporal dimension to the presented reflexions. I claim that this theoretical and conceptual explorations prepare the ground for a further examination and debate about possible scientific approaches to people being involved in the everyday life in alpine regions (and spatially delimited areas in general). References to recent and current research of Thierry Amrein (2013; 2019) in Val d'Anniviers and Reto Bürgin in Lower Engadin permit to illuminate the theoretical reflections presented here.

Some Thoughts about the "Montagnard-Type"

The starting point of Bernard Debarbieux in his article "How can one be a Montagnard?" is as follows: "This paper analyses the historical emergence of a set of conceptions about people living in mountains and the invention of a corresponding human type – the Montagnard [...]" (Debarbieux 2017: 2). For me, this quotation of Debarbieux builds my point of departure, since it seems in two ways revealing concerning my reflections about life and people in the Alps. First, he tries to conceptualise a "human type" somehow linked to the mountains, which is nowadays a very interesting but intricate task. But Debarbieux is not only talking about the Montagnard as an "ethno- and social type", but also about his correlation with a "presumed mountain-population" (Debarbieux 2017: 5). There he sets the individual Montagnard in relation with a group, a whole population. I will start here with the second quotation of Debarbieux.

With the expression of "presumed mountain-populations" Debarbieux points out a vital difficulty in the analysis of the respective collectives, namely: Who should we presume and who is presumed by local actors to be part of such a collective like a mountain-population? Only the all-year-round inhabitants of the valleys or also the seasonal workers? Only the locally born or also the immigrants? Are short time visitors or tourists also part of the mountain-population? And are emigrants from the alpine areas still somehow part of the mountain-population, once they left to live in urban areas? These questions are vital, in empirical settings for actors in the respective areas, but also for scholars who try to delimit their "field" of research. The definition of the individuals and one or several groups relevant for a study is already the first difficulty in approaching the social processes in the Alps.

Already the next thinking step would be nearly impossible, would all these simple questions not be unified by an underlying and pivotal spatial or territorial argument: All of them are interested in people which are somehow linked to the Alps. Debarbieux and others suggest two different approaches to such a territoriality. Either we choose a specific *place* – like the communal borders of Scuol for instance – to define the mountain-population; or we delimit the area more blurred as a *space* – like the region or area of Lower Engadin – to refer to a mountain-population. These two possibilities to create an analytical spatial frame diverse in varying ways. Debarbieux distinguishes *place* – as a site of stability and somehow linked to the soil, from *space* – as an area of flows and circulations, mainly of people and goods (Debarbieux 2008: 37). Zenker also refers to the same relation of stability and flow, but in a more global context: “In recent years it has become increasingly evident that globalization and identity operate in some kind of dialectic between flow and closure (Meyer and Geschiere, 1999), with the contradictory expansions of modernity producing an accelerated desire for interconnecting individuals, groups and ‘their’ *territories*, and for firmly rooting such triads in global space” (Zenker 2011: 64; my emphasis). The territoriality of the Alps (but as Zenker mentions, not only of the Alps) consists therefore also of these two interconnected dimensions. In everyday life, the two dimensions might not even be strictly separated from each other. But anthropologists are often conscious about them, and as a consequence they try to distinguish them. If one then focalises in a scientific research more on one aspect in this dialectical relation between *place* and *space*, there is a certain danger to over- or underestimate the other, for instance the social and political impact of locally born persons respectively of immigrants.

Thierry Amreins article “We, the Anniviards!” (2019) shows this in an illuminating way. Amrein focalised in his doctoral research between 2006 and 2008 mainly on the relation between local family organisation and the outcome of the parcoursArianna programme in Val d’Anniviers in Valais, a project that tried to provide women in this valley with the necessary skills to partake individually and as independent entrepreneurs in the economy. At the same time, he also gained rich insights into other socio-political processes of the valley, which are more relevant here: He pursued the developments in relation to an important political process in the area – the vote concerning a petition for a communal merger.

The media predictions for the vote about the merger of six communities in the alpine valley of Anniviers anticipated a rejection of the petition. Even a sociologist familiar with the local circumstances expected a refusal of the merger. But it should turn out not as he had presumed: “An hour ago, I bet that the “no” would prevail. As a sociologist, I must have the humility to admit that I was wrong, that I did not use the right antennas to better feel the population” (Amrein 2019: 1). The outcome was unexpected for many. The Anniviards voted clearly in favour of the merger of six small valley-communities. Amreins analysis may be linked to the two notions of place and space: While the media and the sociologist rather focalised on *place* and its stability, fixation and some sort of sturdiness (namely from the locally born persons), Amrein was not surprised by the outcome, simply because he acknowledged the importance of *space*, that is the circulation, fluidity and mobility of people (and ideas) to and from the valley (namely the immigrants in general and the immigrant women in particular). This example shows nicely the precarious relation between stability and fluidity in empirical settings and between *place* and *space* in social sciences.

The difficulty for social research described by Debarbieux gains even more complexity, if we take seriously the idea of the “Montagnard” as a “type” of person, who is somehow connected to the above described territoriality (conceptualised as place and/or space) of the mountains (Debarbieux 2017: 8). The notion demands to ascribe certain traits to the individuals considered (or identified) as Montagnards and therefore linked to this territoriality. But what and who defines this type of person? Debarbieux describes three different approaches to this problematic, which I will present here in form of questions to be asked: First, are the individual or collective traits primarily adapted to the local (“natural”, physical or structural) circumstances and gain then an identifying function? (Like Buffon would have claimed, see Debarbieux 2017: 3f.) Second, is a Montagnard defined through institutional prescriptions from a political power, like the state for instance? (As Célérier assumed, see Debarbieux 2017: 4) Or third, are individuals able to identify themselves legitimately on their own as belonging to the type of person called Montagnard and to define the necessary personal traits to do so? (Which is the position of Byers, see Debarbieux 2017: 4). Debarbieux describes how all these three approaches have been promoted diachronically at some point in the past and

are still relevant synchronous in the present (Debarbieux 2017: 3-9): “Rather than consider that one perspective on the relations between identity [...], culture and territoriality supplants the preceding one, it proposes considering these narratives as illustrations of different *imaginaries of territoriality* which can coexist and be combined within logics of action tending to singularize corresponding social and *geographic entities*” (Debarbieux 2017: 8; my emphasis). Debarbieux here clearly points out the importance and possibility of different logics to link the three elements territoriality – culture – identity.

The crucial point with all three approaches of Debarbieux described before is exactly that they all link a certain spatiality or territoriality (place and space) to a specific culture and a defined identity as Montagnard, but with different logical connections that link these three elements. Though, territoriality is vital, the constitutive elements to think about the Montagnard-Type are static (they stay the same), but the logical links between them are dynamic.

Taking into account not only the territoriality, but also the aspects of culture and identity, the complexity of a social research in the Alps is already exceeding. And not even most of the relevant terms have been outlined. In what follows, I will not be able to define adequately the notion of culture. I omit a detailed discussion of it, since it would demand an exceeding effort in such a short essay (I have written my bachelor thesis about it). It has to be sufficient here to present Debarbieux’ own thoughts concerning culture, which are closely related to the development of the notion of identity: “From culture as a fact of nature to culture as an institutional phenomenon, to culture as an inter-subjective construction [...]”, Debarbieux (2017: 7) outlines the evolution of this notion throughout the last about 400 years. These three definitions of culture are linked to the historical emergence of the three approaches to “Montagnards” presented above. Below I add some additional reflections about identity. Before that however, I would like to outline the difficulty of the here described links between territoriality, culture and identity with an example of a current research by Reto Bürgin. All information about this research project I use in this essay originate from a presentation Bürgin held in the seminar “What’s new in the Swiss Mountains?” the 14th November 2019 in Berne.

Bürgin is conducting a research in Lower Engadin about the “Mia Engadina” project, a programme which seeks to promote and advance the digitalisation in this specific

alpine area (with new digital infrastructure, new marketing strategies, etc.). Bürgin is interested in how the “community” in Lower Engadin experiences digitalisation² and how digitalisation may change “rural communities”, or in other words this alpine community (probably Debarbieux would have used here the notion of mountain-people, which is linked to the one of Montagnard). A pivotal question for Bürgin was how to define “community” but also how to get hold of the empirical “community” affected by the “Mia Engadina” project.

With my hypothesis that all individual “Montagnards” form together a “community of Montagnards”, one can apply the reflections behind the notion of “Montagnard” also fruitfully for Bürgin’s reflections about “community”. One needs to adapt the individual type “Montagnard” simply to the collective type of a “community of Montagnards” (referring in other words to a “typical” community). I claim then, that the three approaches Debarbieux outlined in his article and which I have briefly discussed above would also be applicable in Bürgin’s research about the impact of digitalisation. The new cultural traits digitalisation brings along have consequences for a “community of Montagnards” and the way such a collective identifies itself. But since the definition of the type of an individual Montagnard, as the collective type of a community of Montagnards too, varies, depending on the different casual logics relating territoriality, culture and identity, Bürgin would presumably get several different definitions of “community”. Therefore the possible outcome concerning his research interests would vary too.

Lacking adequate scope in this essay to go into further detail, I cannot outline more precisely the path Bürgin could pursue or the consequences which might be linked with it. I only can oversimplify in order to hopefully illustrate the direction of my assumptions: If a “Montagnard” is a locally born, 60 years old farmer, who is not interested in digitalisation (and the core community consists of such Montagnards)³, the results of Bürgin’s research would diverge dramatically to the case, when a “Montagnard” is a second home owner who works in the creative industry and considers himself a Montagnard because he is a passionate mountain climber (and

² The important role of infrastructure (for mobility, communication, etc.) in the triad of territoriality – culture – identity describes Debarbieux in his article “Culture et politiques dans les Alpes contemporaines” (Debarbieux 2008: 38f.).

³ This example correlates with the approach of Buffon in the article of Debarbieux and the first above suggested connection between territoriality, culture and identity (2017: 3f.).

the core community consists of such Montagnards)⁴. But this would have to be analysed and described in more detail elsewhere.

Some Thoughts about Identity

I already mentioned my intention to deepen my reflections on the notion of identity in this essay. For that reason, I throw now a closer look at the debate between Craig Calhoun (2003a,b) and Rogers Brubaker (2003). Calhoun (2003a) suggests an emphasis on groupism, that is on collective identities, founded on the assumption of a profound human solidarity (either based on interdependence, culture, shared categorical identities, a network of social relations, public communication, material power). Solidarity in his case demands a certain spatial proximity. The interconnection of solidarity and proximity creates after Calhoun identification and collective identities which – and this has not become ultimately clear for me – either precede individual identities or have a stronger impact on everyday practices (Calhoun 2003b). The opposite approach, individual identification or identity, Calhoun sees in close connection to a neoliberal and cosmopolitan discourse of individualism, which in his eyes undermines the fundamental solidarity between humans and therefore underestimates the empirical relevance of collective identification for social research (Calhoun 2003a). He clearly prefers a groupist social ontology before an individualist social ontology.

While Calhoun opposed individualism and groupism to one another as two different modes of thinking and being, Brubaker searched a way out of this dichotomy with the help of Pierre Bourdieus relational ontological presumptions (see Bourdieu et al. 2013). Brubaker (2003) claims that neither individualism, nor groupism with their respective ontological assertions fulfil the needs of an adequate empirical social research. Identity must be understood therefor as set of different relational connections. Such an understanding of “identity” raises again the complexity of the notion “Montagnard”. I try to illustrate this with some reflections about digital nomads in co-working spaces in the Alps, a topic Bürgin is interested in for his study and about which we students conducted our own research during the seminar.

⁴ This example correlates with the approach of Byers in the article of Debarbieux and the third above suggested connection between territoriality, culture and identity (2017: 4f.).

Apparently, many co-working spaces in the Alps are not highly frequented. Bürgin, others in class and I myself made the experience of mostly empty spaces. But nevertheless, there are some digital nomads using the infrastructure in the Alps for their work. Now, in which ways are they related to other people in digital and physical proximity? Obviously, through the infrastructure they have sort of a relation to a nearly infinite number of people. Therefore, we have to precise and focalise on direct communicative interaction which may allow to create a personal relationship. Or to put it differently, are they talking to other people in the Alps (and to whom?) or are they rather talking to other people on the internet?

Both communicating partners may consider themselves somehow as Montagnards (like the examples above), and the digital nomad is then confronted with a Montagnard in physical proximity and at the same time with another Montagnard in digital proximity. Now, if there is a relational social ontology, we may ask which relation is more relevant or stronger for the definition of a Montagnard in this case?

Places and Persons, Times and Discourses – How to Handle it?

It is too early for an answer to this question. At the same time, there is not enough place in this essay left, to go into detail with other revealing conceptions. Still and at the end of this text, I would like to refer to Gerd Baumann (1997) and his differentiation of a “demotic” and a “dominant” discourse to implement an argument which is more sensitive to power relations. Although Baumann’s concept is normally applied to concepts of ethnicity and culture, it could surely be fruitfully used also for processes of identification in a context like the one presented here. Another final reference I would like to make to Olaf Zenker’s (2011) distinction between an “individualized autochthony”, which promotes the *same present* of cultural traits in a certain place, and an “collectivized autochthony”, which is evoking a *shared past* at a certain place where the cultural traits originate from. His argumentation would allow a closer look at temporal dimension which should be recognized also in a scientific approach to a mountain-population.

In this essay, I was looking for an approach to study people living in the alps. Throughout these reflections the complexity of this task was growing more and

more, and although there is not yet an easy solution insight, the path I went already prepared the ground to think more profoundly about several empirical examples that occurred in recent or current research. And probably already the consciousness of the interdependency and uniqueness of time, place and people in any specific empirical study may be a valuable output of this essay.

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