Linking up the Alps

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HOW NETWORKS OF LOCAL POLITICAL ACTORS BUILD THE PAN-ALPINE REGION

While discovering the Alps for my PhD research, directing my eyes in the direction of the peaks, and exchanging with mayors of Alpine towns and protected areas rangers, my thoughts went to a book written by the Italian journalist and writer Paolo Rumiz. In the first part of his book *La leggenda dei monti naviganti (The legend of the sailing mountain)* he tells of his journey across the Alps. In the quote above, he perfectly renders the feelings I experienced towards the Alps. In his words, mountains can be, on the one hand, the place of an "unbearable hatchery of feuds, envies and closures"[1], and on the other, "the perfect place of refuge of extraordinary women and men, people capable of standing out against the absurd monoculture of the contemporary world"[2] (Rumiz, 2007).

If, as a young inhabitant of the Alps, I felt the weight of the mountain dwellers' closed-mindedness, I have discovered, by writing this book, another face of the people living in the mountains. It is with the people Rumiz describes as "extraordinary" that I had the fortune to work. Thanks to the time they devoted to me, I had the opportunity to explore questions that are specific to the Alpine context, but which also go well beyond it. The people I met could answer the main question I asked myself during my wandering in the Alps: "How do regions emerge in the contemporary world?" Moreover, they helped me to see the Alps as I had never seen them before. I am sincerely grateful to all of them.

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1   Own translation from Italian.
2   Own translation from Italian.

1. Introduction

The natural and socio-cultural Alpine territory is being threatened by increasing motorized traffic, the ageing of its population, the national fragmentation of the politics on its territory, and concerns linked to climate change. The general issue that this book is to understand the main social and political responses proposed by local political actors to solve these important social and ecological challenges. Already in the 1950s, some particularly sensitive local politicians and managers of protected areas alerted national authorities to the social and ecological crises that were threatening the Alpine region.

Forty years later, one solution recommended was the constitution of networks of local political actors implementing at the local level the Convention on the Protection of the Alps, usually called Alpine Convention. Local political actors view this international treaty as an appropriate tool to respond to the challenges facing the Alps. By imposing the concept of sustainable development as the solution for assuring the survival of the Alps, the convention can be considered a model for other mountain regions facing similar problems. Signed by the eight Alpine countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Slovenia and Switzerland) and the European Union, it entered into force in March 1995. The aim of the convention, according to its second article, is to "pursue a comprehensive policy for the preservation and protection of the Alps by applying the principles of prevention, payment by the polluter (the 'polluter pays' principle) and cooperation".[3] Additionally, through this convention, the contracting parties hope to intensify trans-border cooperation inside the Alpine perimeter defined by the treaty.

To cover this wide scope, a considerable number of transnational networks of local political actors, connecting local representatives, researchers, managers of protected areas and ecological associations,

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3   <www.alpconv.org/en/convention/framework/default.html>, consulted on the 01.12.2014.

were created. Their objective is to harmonize ecological balance, economic stability and social progress in mountain regions worldwide.[4] The networks have often been created on the initiative of the non-governmental organization *Commission Internationale pour la Protection des Alpes* (CIPRA), whose *raison d'être* is to "play a pioneering role in contributing to solving current problems and upcoming challenges aimed at bringing about a sustainable and ecological future for the Alpine region".[5]

Although the phenomenon of the constitution of networks of political actors is quite significant in terms of persons involved, money invested and projects undertaken, no in-depth scientific research has previously been conducted on this specific topic. This book endeavours to understand how and why local political actors, organized in pan-Alpine networks, chose to take mountain regions in general, and the Alps in particular, as the shared frame of reference for their involvement.

The discussion here will focus on two phenomena:

- Firstly, it explores if and how a pan-Alpine identity, detached from and/or combined with the more "traditional" national identities, is growing among and performed by local political actors on the basis of the Alpine Convention;
- Secondly, it analyses the contents and socio-political significance of the involvement of local political actors in the newly constituted pan-Alpine networks and region.

I will concentrate on three of the networks of local political actors formed in the Alps: Alliance in the Alps, Alparc and Alpine Pearls. These three networks have at least two characteristics in common: They are all willing to implement, albeit with different instruments, sustainable development at local level and they all recognize the Alpine Convention's map as the geographical limits of their actions. They are nevertheless different with regard to the kind of members they connect: Alparc ties together more than 900 large protected ar-

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4   See the CIPRA webpage: <www.cipra.org/en/cipra/international/networks>, consulted on the 01.12.2014.
5   <www.cipra.org/en/cipra>, consulted on the 01.12.2014.

eas (national parks, regional and/or nature parks, nature reserves, biosphere reserves and natural world heritage sites); Alliance in the Alps currently links more than 300 communities (villages, cities and regions); and Alpine Pearls associates 27 "of the most gorgeous holiday regions in the Alps", according to the network's advertising material. Alparc and Alliance in the Alps are the oldest (Alliance in the Alps was established in 1994, Alparc in 1997) and most active networks. The third, Alpine Pearls, is independent from CIPRA (as is Alparc) and was established by 17 villages wishing to create innovative and sustainable, environmentally friendly tourism packages.

1.1 Thematic focuses

The territorial result of the commitment of local political actors for the pan-Alpine idea, notably via the constitution of networks of local political actors, is sufficiently distinctive to see in it a "nascent region", a region with a distinct territorial framework and *ad hoc* institutions created for working at that scale. In fact, in recent years, the Alps have been increasingly recognized as a region in their own right within Europe, namely through the signing of the Alpine Convention. According to Balsiger, it represents a case of "ecoregional institutionalization" (Balsiger, 2007: 4), whereby the Alpine region is becoming institutionalized on the basis of an area defined by the Alpine Convention.

This initiative has been accompanied by a mobilization of inhabitants, local representatives, researchers, managers of protected areas, and ecological associations, which I call "local political actors". This mobilization has often taken the form of networks sharing a concern for ensuring that the objectives of the Alpine Convention materialize at the local level. Most networks promote sustainable development and use a horizontal mode of functioning, i.e. by giving social and political local actors the opportunity to exchange experiences and information beyond the boundaries of language and culture. Together, they ensure the Alps also function as a reference area for collective action.

CIPRA has played a decisive role in linking these two types of initiatives. In the first instance, it performed lobbying work to promote and support the drafting and the signature of the convention. In the second, it initiated projects for the implementation of the convention involving the base; notably, it helped with the establishment of pan-Alpine networks of local political actors. The Alpine region is thus taking shape and becoming institutionalized under these two initiatives, and it constitutes one of the trans-border regions that are contributing to changing the map of Europe (McNeill, 2004: 89).

The research presented in this book responds to Cuypers and Randier's suggestion that the Alpine Convention should not be studied solely from a legal perspective, but also by considering projects such as the creation of networks of local political actors that seek to implement it (Cuypers & Randier, 2009: 30). In this regard, the research contributes to what Pickles declares to be one of the principal aims of current geography, i. e. "to resituate human beings as actors in the production and reproduction of social life and places" (Pickles, in: Pudup, 1988: 373). The focus will be on those "actors that produce places" such as regions. The intention is not merely to show *that* regions are constructed, but above all to highlight *how* social configurations of actors and mechanisms of regional construction are taking place in the Alps.

In order to understand these regional construction processes, I have adopted the concept of "regional assemblage", coined by Allen and Cochrane (Allen & Cochrane, 2007). Regional assemblages are made possible by tangled, multi-scalar and multi-actor interactions. The Alpine regional assemblage, comprising a variety of social and political actors that operate at different territorial scales, constitutes a perfect research laboratory that allows to go beyond the "classical" dichotomous conceptions in regional studies, which Harrison brought up in a recent article (Harrison, 2012). In fact, as Harrison underscores, regional researchers normally see regions as territorially embedded *or* as relational and unbounded entities. As Harrison suggests, it is time to recognize that these two elements combine in regional assemblages in today's new regional world (Harrison, 2012). The focus of this research is precisely to show how these two ele-

ments (regions as territories and regions as networks) coexist in contemporary regional structures.

This book also aims to react to the criticism expressed by Bulkeley about the ways scientists study governance in general, and environmental governance in particular. Bulkeley levels her criticism at approaches that do not leave analytical space for arrangements that are "hybrid, involving a mix of state and non-state actors, or multi-scalar, including actors drawn from different levels of governance simultaneously, and provide little insight into how different forms of hierarchical and network governance interact and intersect to produce particular governance forms, mechanisms and outcomes" (Bulkeley, 2005: 881). This research analyses the hybrid configuration of Alpine governance and offers elements to measure its social and political significance.

Last, but not least, this research contributes to the debate on regional identity. By distinguishing two facets of identity (objectivation and identification), it aims to overcome the obstacle that many academics highlighted in the study of identity in the social sciences, i.e. that identity is an "indefinable" (Bray 2002: 14) and "ambiguous" (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 2) "catchword" (Häkli, 2001: 115), unable to help in the comprehension of social and political processes such as regional building. Brubaker and Cooper go as far as declaring that, "if identity is everywhere, it is nowhere" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000: 1). That is why I propose to look at identity by splitting the concept into two processes. On the one hand, *objectivation*, i.e. the identification of an object (or a family of objects) by a subject (or a collectivity) who thinks that this object is a pertinent category through which to understand the world or part of it (Debarbieux & Rudaz, 2010: 11); on the other hand, *identification*, i.e. the sense and will, shared by a considerable number of individuals, of belonging to the same group (Debarbieux, 2006: 342). Using this approach, I hope to reveal how (multiple?) Alpine identities are constructed.

At a more general level, following Murphy's reasoning, if one accepts that one project of contemporary geography should consist of focusing attention on the complexity and individuality of regions in describing and analysing social processes (Murphy, 1991: 25), it is clear that my book fits into this task. In fact, my intention is to in-

vestigate how local political actors argue for the specificity and individuality of the Alpine region, by analysing the latter through the social processes taking place there. As Gilbert argues, the analyses proposed by new regional geography[6] should not imply an exhaustive synthesis but rather underline particular aspects of society. As she affirms: "Synthesis is restricted to the interaction of the particular social processes seen as playing a leading role in the creation of the region" (Gilbert, 1988: 219). This is the favoured approach in the research: promoters, taking the leading role in the pan-Alpine region, are identified. Furthermore, I present some behaviours, ways of saying and doing, as well as processes of objectivation of and identification with the region.

1.2 Axes of analysis

This book is based on research that focuses on three axes of analysis at the intersection of two sub-fields within human geography: cultural (mainly chapter 5) and political (mainly chapters 6 and 7) geographies. Using its broader definition, cultural geography can be defined as the study of the

> [...] ways that meanings and social understandings are constructed, contested and negotiated, and in exploring the diverse ways these fuse and splinter around intersecting notions of culture, place and space. [...] It is a manner of linking ideas and imaginations with the material world. It explores how social groups engage with their landscapes, how people construct and make sense of their places and spaces (Aktinson *et al.*, 2005: 3).

It explores, among other things, the "ways [in which] people enact identity and belonging" (Aktinson, *et al.*, 2005: 3). Following Blacksell, political geography can be defined as the study of how

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6   For details on "new regional geography", see Section 2.6: "The advent of new regional geography".

> […] individuals and interest groups […] are continually vying with each other to promote their own interests thereby destabilising and changing the existing order and remaking the world in their own image. It is about the forces that go to shape the world we inhabit and how they play themselves out in the landscape across the world" (Blacksell, 2006: 1).

Because it simultaneously covers issues linked to identity building and processes of regional institutionalization, the present research can thus be considered as situated at the intersection of these two sub-fields.

The aim of the study is to expose the different modes in which the Alpine region is objectivized, identified and institutionalized through a process of social spatialization, defined by Shields as the "ongoing social construction of the spatial at the level of the social imaginary (collective mythologies, presuppositions) as well as interventions in the landscape (for example, the built environment)" (Shields: 1992: 31). This concept leads to a "rubric under which currently separated objects will be brought together to demonstrate their inter-connectedness and coordinated nature" (Shields: 1992: 31). This corresponds exactly to the process going on in the contemporary Alps: Local political actors bring together separated objects, i.e. the "national Alps", in order to construct a pan-Alpine project. They demonstrate their inter-connectedness via the construction of regional networks, which create new issues in the social imaginary (the creation of a pan-Alpine identity) and intervene in the Alpine landscape (by promoting sustainable development). As Shields points out, the term "social spatialization" makes it possible to name an object of study, in this case the pan-Alpine region, which encompasses the cultural logic of the spatial and allows us to analyse concrete actions, constructions, and institutional arrangements (Shields, 1992: 31).

1.3 Argument structure

The book is organized following the double process of social spatialization that Shields highlighted, focusing on the one hand on the questions linked to identity (what she calls "social imaginary") and on the other on issues concerning "concrete actions", i.e. the regional institutionalization's processes. The book is structured as eight chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion.

The first three chapters explain the theoretical and methodological framework of the research. Chapter 2 highlights the theoretical perspective in which this research is conceptualized. Chapter 3 presents the research methodology. Chapter 4 offers an overview of the three pan-Alpine institutions that will be considered in this study: the Alpine Convention, the Alpine networks of local political actors under examination and CIPRA.

The last three chapters are more strongly empirical and are built upon the material I collected during field work. Chapter 5 considers how the pan-Alpine region is identified and objectivized by local political actors. These two concepts explain the modalities of the rise of Alpine identities; they show the space of reference and involvement of the Alpine actors, i.e. the perimeter that motivates and gives meaning to the actions they undertake. Chapters 6 shows how local political actors, who identify with the Alpine region, organize in order to create an "institutional space", called "regional assemblage" (Allen, Cochrane, 2007), which enables the realization of projects. Chapter 7 analyses the political significance of these institutional arrangements in order to judge the potentiality of the establishment of the Alpine region. These analyses reveal the mechanisms underlying the construction of the "regional institutional architecture" (Balsiger, 2007: 5) and the regional assemblage (Allen, Cochrane, 2007) mechanisms taking place in the Alps, resulting in a complex system of governance at the mountain range scale.