

On mountain peasantry, public policies, and hope: development shaping the Alps

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short abstract

This paper mobilises historical and ethnographic data from the Western Alps to address local development as a modality of situated and desired transformation toward the future. In particular, it focuses on the discourse and vernacular frames that development policies contribute to reproduce.

long abstract

Local development is part of the horizon of hope of the Italian Alps today. Dating back to the second half of the 19th century, the crisis of mountain farming resulted in emigration, agricultural demise, and abandon. The idea that by improving public services and productive systems, depopulation will stop is a recurrent leitmotiv of the history of the Italian state. Misrepresentations of the actual conditions of mountain economy and of the logic of local peasantry eventually resulted in schemes not attempting the desired effects. Moreover, discourses and practices layered through decades has contributed to framing how people understand and enact public policies related to highland regions, and the kind of material and emotional future they desire.

The possibility of public intervention upon the economy of mountain peasants was however far from being self-evident at the inception of the Italian state. How it happened that mountain landscapes started to be regulated by public intervention? Which representations of peasantry made it possible? How, in intersecting with other social processes, development both shaped the social and economic environment of the Alpine space and discourses related to this latter? By mobilising historical and ethnographic data from a locality in Western Alps, this paper looks at development policies in the mountains as specific patterns of knowledge, power and hope in order to address questions related to scales of social life, memory, and value. Moreover, it adopts a microanalytical perspective to explore how discourses on mountains and mountain peasantry are reproduced through these situated initiatives.