

tarias en las sociedades rurales del norte peninsular.

Pere Benito i Monclús

Universitat de Lleida

Paolo Sibilla

Approdi e Percorsi. Saggi di antropologia alpina

Firenze, Leo S. Olschki, 2012, 224 páginas

Paolo Sibilla's book *Approdi e Percorsi. Saggi di Antropologia Alpina* is a collection of essays and conference lectures. They show different aspects of the culture of alpine communities and their social and economic systems. The author makes particular reference to the western Alps, but his observations and reflections are much more general in their significance. Indeed, even though the alpine regions have their own specific ecology and culture, as well as different pasts, they have many common traits because of their being mountainous. The book's themes vary from productive activities, strictly conditioned by constraints in the environment, to religious beliefs and local traditions, which correspond to the unique social organization of the alpine communities. Sibilla takes us on a real *voyage of discovery* into the world of the western Alps (p. 181). Conditions of life are complex there, even if, until the 1960s, these were viewed in a rather predictable and superficial manner.

The topics in the book are dealt with mainly from an anthropological and ethnographic point of view, albeit in a strictly interdisciplinary manner. Continual refe-

rence is made to sociological and historical points. The research carried out in this alpine territory, with its useful accompanying tips on methodology, provides us with an accurate picture in a very wide-ranging, international and cultural context. As a result, the treatment of diverse themes is both rigorous and detailed. Sibilla's description of his studies enables us to reconstruct the history of alpine communities and understand their persistence in such a physically hostile environment. The author also gives a valuable interpretation of socio-economic and cultural changes in the alpine mountain ranges and the effects of these on the people living there through recent times.

In the alpine areas, the traditional productive work, mainly in the primary sector, takes place according to a seasonal calendar. Such work requires differentiated use of the territory over time, according to different altitudes. Although apparently static, these societies are in fact marked by continual movement. This is apparent when there is an analysis of seasonal nomadism, which is linked to zootechnics based on alpine pasture grazing in summer (ch. 11) or

subsistence farming, such as the cultivation of grapes for winemaking (chapter 10).

The layout of land at different altitudes has a strong influence on ownership and on the regulations for access to the use of resources. Indeed, in alpine environments generally, the lowest-lying land is privately owned and is mostly destined for agricultural use, whereas woodlands and pastures at higher altitudes are still owned and managed collectively. In chapter 3 there is a description of such an example: the Walser settlement of Rimella in Piedmont. The local farming calendar, which regulates productive activities, features many elements found on the church calendar. Some elements are also to be found in the worship of saints, the succession of ritual festivities and social events. They all have a characteristic cycle, one which is bound to the seasons. Certain propitiatory celebrations and special prayers linked to particular times of the year are found not only in Piedmont and the Aosta Valley but also in some rural areas of France, Switzerland and the Andalusia region of Spain. The traditional alpine landscape, where it still exists, is a true reflection of differentiated use of mountain territory according to the time of year and location.

One particularly interesting and stimulating topic in this book is the concept of boundaries, which is analyzed thoroughly in chapter 2, but taken up again several times in other parts. Geographical boundaries are easily recognizable in mountainous areas, coinciding as they do with ridges. They define and organize spaces wherein community life unfolds. Since they are a

determining factor in people's sense of belonging to their territory and in the evolution of their social group's language, over time these geographical boundaries become cultural boundaries too. One of the most important aspects to emerge from the discourse on boundaries is the matter concerning mobility, both within a given area and from one area to another, even ones which are far away: in other words, emigration. Throughout time, emigration has left its mark on the lives of many alpine communities. In myths and legends there is the recurring idea of boundaries, often in the form of virgin summits, as illustrated in chapter 4, which focuses on the glaciers of Mount Rosa. Defying the unknown corresponds to the betrayal of the values of solidarity, compassion and frugality. These qualities form the basis of the moral ethics instilled into alpine populations. It is better to stay in the network of the widely used pathways and mule tracks that allow access to high altitudes. In this context, the role of mountain passes becomes fundamental. In effect, it is these passes that ensure contact between neighbouring valleys, guaranteeing penetrability and determining migratory movement.

In his book, Sibilla pays particular attention to the phenomenon of migration – a highly complex matter – and analyzes its two components: a) as a strategy to increase the availability of natural and economic resources, obviously scarce in mountainous areas; b) as a strategy to open up to the outside world, thus hindering the tendency to isolation, inbreeding and economic marginality. Contrary to popular opinion, the

person who leaves is neither isolated nor maladjusted but *has material and intellectual resources and a network of connections. These allow for the migrant's departure, integration in the new place and an ongoing sense of identity that binds him to his homeland* (p. 83). Groups of migrants, therefore, symbolize a rich storehouse of skills and culture. Separation, especially when not too distant, does not weaken but often strengthens the migrant's sense of identity. There are some direct consequences of emigration within the community of origin –on the one hand, the transmission of new values and new cultural patterns and on the other the importance of education, at least this is the case in the western Alps. It may even astonish us how much importance is placed in these small, isolated villages on primary education, which helps to keep up contact with distant relatives (ch. 8). But importance is also given to technical instruction in specific crafts and trades, which is seen as a driving force in the emancipation of these communities (ch. 9).

Ancient societies, seemingly disinclined to renewal, have been experiencing sweeping changes in productive activities and lifestyle with huge repercussions on community equilibrium in the last few decades. This has led to a redefining of boundaries and spaces and radical changes in the relationship between Man and the natural environment. *The antique Alpine society has had to adapt to pervasive widespread changes imposed by tourism and the growth of service industries. Throughout recent decades all this has caused substantial changes in environmental balance and has modified great*

tracts of the landscape (p. 31). As an emblematic example of such a transformation, Sibilla describes the case of the famous ski-resort, Sestriere in Piedmont (ch. 12). Because of the interest and promotion of the Agnelli family, important Italian entrepreneurs, a small group of houses, whose main livelihood was pasture grazing, became a modern, fashionable town in very few years, a popular point of reference among winter sports enthusiasts. Alpine societies nowadays are at different stages of transition between the old and the new. Sibilla, quoting Bauman (ch. 1), underlines how analysis of these once small, isolated communities and their history can supply us with apt tools to face global problems of greater weight, connected to an attempt to the rebuilding of cultural identity.

After reading this book, certain questions arise spontaneously. The imbalance and contradictions produced by socio-economic change in alpine areas are currently more and more complicated due to the economic crisis and the effects of climate change, already apparent in mountain ecosystems. These effects pose serious doubts about the models of development used so far for the Alps. What lessons can be learned from the study of ancient alpine communities and their past? If, on the one hand, we must resign ourselves to their disappearance, on the other hand it is clear that there is now a chance to reconsider their traditional values, however, not in order to revive their economic and social organization in a nostalgic way, but rather in order to find innovative starting points. These could lead to the creation of new

uses of resources and different ways of developing mountain territory, more in harmony with the natural equilibrium found there. Today more than ever is the need felt for models of development that do not waste resources or alter our basis for life

–alterations that, in mountain areas especially, easily risk becoming irreversible.

Maria Giulia Cantiani
 Università degli Studi di Trento

**Enric Saguer Hom, Gabriel Jover Avellá y Helena Benito Mundet (Eds.)
 Comptes de senyor, comptes de pagès. Les comptabilitats en la
 història rural**

Girona, Associació d'Història Rural de les Comarques Gironines/Centre de Recerca d'Història Rural de la Universitat de Girona/Documenta Universitaria, 2013, 358 pàgines

Este libro se emplaza en el punto de maduración de una larga etapa investigadora previa del grupo responsable de su confección (la señal lejana de partida habría sido un seminario celebrado en Girona en 1988, y la más cercana y ligada a esta publicación concreta, un nuevo seminario tenido en octubre de 2011) –acerca de la utilidad de las contabilidades agrarias como instrumento fundamental para avanzar– no sólo en la historia rural, sino también en otros terrenos históricos específicos, como se advierte en este volumen. Una maduración que, entre otros aspectos, se expresa en la voluntad de afirmación metodológica que subyace a varias de las colaboraciones aquí incluidas, ya sea de forma manifiesta o implícita. Y aunque lo aquí recogido se ciñe a un territorio limitado (diversas comarcas de Girona, de la isla de Mallorca, además de una última contribución referida a Navarra) se percibe un diálogo fluido y constante con la historiografía agraria general, tanto española como internacional, siempre enfocado

a subrayar la utilidad de este tipo de fuentes, y a explorar el variado abanico social en el que se ubicaron sus autores o la riqueza de posibilidades que ofrecen en diferentes planos históricos.

El volumen está estructurado de una manera muy provechosa:

a) Una introducción en la que los editores, Enric Saguer, Gabriel Jover y Helena Benito, establecen un autorizado marco historiográfico, metodológico y técnico acerca de este tipo de contabilidades. Ciertamente, la contribución que firman Saguer y Jover lleva a cabo una caracterización precisa de este tipo de documentos privados, su heterogeneidad y pluralidad de usos, su frecuente tosquedad desde el punto de vista de la técnica contable, el umbral que supuso –en las grandes haciendas– la presencia de un administrador, así como la profesionalización de esta figura, acreditando un conocimiento exhaustivo de la historiografía sobre la cuestión y el dominio de una amplia perspectiva espacio-temporal. Helena Benito, por su