

## **Notes on the Rural World in the Alpine valleys of the Lombardy (18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> Centuries)**

(Paolo Tedeschi – University of Milan-Bicocca)

*Working paper without notes and references: please do not quote.*

The aim of this paper is to illustrate some aspects of the rural world in the Alpine valleys of the Lombardy during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: the paper in particular shows how families of the Alpine villages were able to ensure the subsistence of their members until the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So this paper indicates:

a) The forms of property and their influence on productive systems concerning agriculture, forestry and cattle breeding.

b) The evolution of the relationship between the economy and the development of pluriactivity as the main way to maintain the economic equilibrium of families.

c) The relevant institutional and economical changes arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the crises of the Lombard Alpine valleys where there were no manufactures and the consequent increase of the permanent migration which halved the inhabitants in some Alpine villages (and sometimes the reduction attempted 70% and more).

Please note that this paper is in particular based on the documents existing in the records of private and public Archives concerning the Alpine valleys of the Eastern Lombardy, while the main sources for the other Lombard Alpine valleys are represented by the most relevant studies which were drawn up by the scholars of the Milanese universities since the 1950s.

### **1. Notes about the economy of the Lombard Alpine Valleys during the 18<sup>th</sup> century: the role of the agriculture in the pluriactivity system**

Even if the Alpine valleys of the Lombardy belonged to three different States and law systems (Austrian Empire, Republic of Venice and Swiss Confederation) until 1797, the existing forms of property and agrarian contracts were similar: the small arable land properties represented the majority and their dimensions increased only if the yields were very low; only properties represented by pastures and woods could be greater, but, in this case too, the dimensions decreased when quality of land improved. Arable land, kitchen garden and orchard were normally smallest than pastures and woods. Besides the land in the low valleys was smallest and more expensive than land in the high valleys. There were a lot of small landowners and, where the quality of land was high, it was also possible to find some tenants and sharecroppers: tenants were normally in pastures and woods far from the villages; sharecroppers were in the arable land and vineyards of the low valleys. Finally a great part of woods and pastures and less fructiferous land (such as the slopes not exposed to the sun) belonged to Municipalities which used them to guarantee some extra earnings to poor families belonged to the community.

Forests yielded raw material for heating, cooking, building, forges (using vegetable coal) and tanneries (using tannin). Pastures provided food for cattle, but when common land took the form of moorland it yielded only shrubs such as heather. Besides, walnuts and chestnuts represented a relevant integration for the poor diet of families. The average dimension of plots of arable land were small and the earnings were limited. This obviously avoided to landowners to make the correct investment for improving the productivity. In any case, even if peasants could have some loans from, the arable land was not able to produce cereals for satisfying the food needs of all members of the family. At the same time, peasants were wary about the cultivation of potatoes (their use for food started only after the Napoleonic age). So a relevant share of the inhabitants of Alpine valleys were obliged to adopt the pluriactivity system. They worked in agriculture and forestry and, at the same time, in manufacture or building or as miners or charcoal burners or woodcutters or longshoremen. It is evident that the main activity of the family depended on its members' skills: where there were craftsmen working in forges the production of iron goods became so important that the owned land was entrusted to wives and sons or it could also rent out. In other cases males worked in local manufactures producing goods in iron or brass or wool clothing or raw silk, or they

worked (in winter, when they had to dedicate less time for agriculture) in local mines and woods. This means that in the Alpine valleys where there existed more activities people could normally avoid to emigrate because the family earnings arrived from different jobs and allowed all members to have the necessary food, the house, the heating and the clothes: these latter obviously did not have a high quality but they guaranteed a decorous life style for most of Alpine people. Besides, the local system of redistribution of the wealth (managed by the communities and the ecclesiastic institution) allowed poorest family to survive too: they in fact received the subsidies paid by public and ecclesiastic institutions.

These latter, whose assets arrived from legacies of rich families, also represented the lender of last resort in a lot of Alpine villages. They gave money for the subsistence of poor people, but moreover they were fundamental for the economic equilibrium of the Alpine villages. They in fact coordinated a local credit system based on real estate guarantees: they offered credit for the agriculture and cattle breeding and, furthermore, they financed craftsmen's activities. They were normally managed by the most relevant families of the villages together the parish and they perfectly knew the needs of the inhabitants of the village who asked for a subsidy or a financing. They obviously had more money if in the village there were good quality land, forestry, manufactures, mines etc.: they normally disposed of the financial liquidity which was necessary for satisfying the needs of most of the inhabitants of the village.

When the yields of land were very low and there did not exist enough job in the village and nearby, some members of the Alpine family had to work a lot of time out of the native village and the rest of family lived using money sent by migrants and/or selling/eating the fruits of public land. It was a seasonally emigration which normally involved the adult males only: they worked as bricklayers in the towns of the plain or as longshoremen in docks of Genoa and Venice and the period of emigration obviously increased as well as the distance from the Alpine village. When, as in the case of workers in docks, the period of permanence out of the valleys was very long, there were also few people who remained in the towns: they represented the centre of the network which guaranteed to other Alpine inhabitants of the village the possibility to emigrate with the certitude to always find a job because they could know the requested skills and they were exactly prepared for that type of job. This explain why in that town for that work the most of migrant people arrived from the same Alpine village (or at least from the same area of the valley). In all these cases the rural works represented only a part of the several activities of the Alpine families villages and they were not the main ones if we consider the earnings: however, in the context of the pluriactivity system they were indispensable, exactly as the other productive activities, for the survival of all members of Alpine families.

In any case the emigration of most of Lombard Alpine people did not have a long duration: this in particular happened when they got a job in the farms of the Lombard hills and plain. They were normally employed for the harvest or grape harvest and in this case the women could participate too. Please note that this temporary job was relevant for Alpine migrants because they could receive some money (and also few cereals arriving by the gleaning), but it was also very important for the Lombard agriculture. In this case the Alpine rural world in fact furnished the workforce which allowed most of Lombard farms to quickly make the most relevant agrarian works: this in particular happened in the plain of the Eastern Lombardy where the number of available peasants was not enough to conclude the harvest in the correct time.

Finally the rural economy of the Alpine valleys, in particular in the villages situated in the high valleys and having great and high pastures, was characterized by the presence of transhumant cattle-breeders who bred cattle in the mountain valleys during the summer season and in the plain during the rest of the year. In the Summer they also produced cheese and they were important for the earnings of the Alpine village. The cattle-breeders paid the rent to the private landowners (or Municipalities in the case of common land): they gave money and the natural fertilizer produced by cows. They allowed Alpine communities to have more financial liquidity and, thanks to the fertilizers, to improve the yields of the arable land (which however remained low in comparison

with those of the hills and the plain). Besides the Municipalities received other money linked to the production of cheese, that is the rent for the rooms where the it was made and taxes for its transport (and eventually the sale) in the village. Cattle-breeding was the most important for the Alpine economy, but there also existed a relevant Alpine sheep farming which progressively reduced its space in favour of cows, while there were few goats which were also forbidden since the Napoleonic ages. The sheep and goat represented a relevant source of food (moreover milk and, only for religious holidays, meat) and money (related to the sales of the wool) for the Alpine families living in the villages situated in high valleys.

## **2. Notes about the relevant changes concerning the rural Alpine world during the 19<sup>th</sup> century**

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the French invasion changed the political context: all Lombard valleys were included in the Cisalpine Republic and the new administrative situation were confirmed during the Napoleon age and, after, by the Congress of Vienna who included the Lombard Alpine valleys in the Austrian Empire. This influenced the productive systems and the rural economy of the Alpine valleys because French and, in particular, Austrian governments decided to increase the taxation on the land and to promote the sales of public land and the other public real estate which was strictly linked to the agricultural sector, such as hay lofts, cattle sheds, stock rooms and flour mills.

The increase of taxes concerning the land was relevant even if the real level of taxation were not so high. The new level of taxation was strictly related to the new cadastre which was very accurate: it indicated the ordinary yield of every plot of land and so the possible earning for the landowner and, finally, the taxes that this latter had to pay. The new cadastral system, in particular those implemented by the Austrian government, had the aim to improve production and productivity in the agriculture and it also gave a real fiscal advantage for all landowners who were able to increase the yields of their land properties. In the cadastral data the level of production was in fact fixed for many years for every plot of land: this means that the taxes did not increase even if the effective production overcame the level established during the calculation of the production and yields. So best landowners who increased their effective harvest could join of the a low level of taxation of their real earnings: on the contrary the real taxation became highest for landowners who maintained the same harvest or they reduced it. In the first case they paid more taxes than in the past because taxes were higher; in the second case they paid taxes on a not existing production. They could avoid this only if they demonstrated that their harvest was less than the ordinary because of very negative weather conditions or very serious diseases of plants (as in the case of the oidium which destroyed in the early 1850s most of Lombard grape and strongly reduced the production of the Lombard wine). In the Alpine valleys, even if the yields were low as well as the related taxation, the new cadastre decreased the real earnings of peasants: it was not a great reduction, but in a lots of cases it touched poor small landowners who living at the limit of the subsistence level. In the Alpine village the new Austrian taxation on land was in fact higher than before because it was very difficult to increase the real production and in this case the real effect of the new cadastre was the increasing of taxes concerning land properties. Besides it is important to consider that during the 18<sup>th</sup> century the taxes on Alpine land were low and, in the case of the Eastern Lombardy belonged to the Republic of Venice, they were almost null because of the fiscal exemptions joined by the valleys: it is evident that for poor landowners who were used to pay very low taxes, the new cadastral system strongly changed the real level of taxation, moreover for all Alpine families owning small land which did not satisfy their food needs.

Concerning the process of privatization of common land (which started during the Napoleonic age but it became very relevant since 1839), it is important to underline that it did not improve the yields of land (as public authorities thought) and, on the contrary, it progressively created some environmental problems where new private owners over-exploited their new properties. Some new landowners (and also tenants when the common land was not sold) over-exploited their properties for many reasons. Sometimes their right on land was not sure because of the several discussions

concerning the sale of common land (some inhabitants of the Alpine village declared that land was really their property and not “common”) and so they decided to obtain the highest harvests in the first years possible without the necessary investment and care for assuring some good harvests in the medium term. In other cases they only had the money to buy land and they had no possibility to invest and increase the production: so they attempted to have a rapid return on their money by the over-exploitation of the land because their priority was survival and the future negative effects of their choices were only a secondary concern. This situation also concerned the forests, and in this case some environmental damages were provoked. Some landowners in fact exploited without respect for periods of re-planting: they ignored the minimal rotation rule (that is to cut a tree after eight years and, for the more valuable trees, after twelve years or more), and the woods were stripped more than the environment could tolerate. As a consequence, where the number of trees decreased greatly (or where the coppice substituted larger trees) there was an increased frequency of landslides and/or floods. Besides, the progressive decrease or the definitive loss of the produce derived from common land became a problem for poor families who did not own plots of land (or these latter were very small). So the loss of earnings linked to the exploitation of common land became one of the most relevant factors in the increase of emigration from the Alpine villages whose inhabitants’ lives were closely linked to the rent of common land (if it was leased) and to the sales of timber, hay, walnuts and chestnuts.

Another important change which modified the rural economy was represented, during the 1860s, by the Italian government’ decision to eliminate most of ecclesiastic institutions and sold their assets. Among these there were the ecclesiastic institutions which financed small landowners and manufactures in the Alpine valleys: this evidently reduced loans for Alpine agriculture and also for the traditional industrial activities. For peasants and artisans became very difficult to improve their productions and productivity: so when, after the 1880s, the new cooperative banks were able to fully substitute the ecclesiastic institutions’ rule (that is they were able to become the new lender of last resort in the Alpine valleys), many people had already sold their land or workshop and left their native villages to find a job in the plain where new industrial enterprises were born. So, while the Alpine villages having iron or brass or textile manufactures could maintain most of their inhabitants, the other ones were characterized by a progressive diminution of young people who emigrated in the Lombard plain: in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, most of peasants of these villages went to foreign countries in Europe and moreover in America. Some Alpine villages, which had never known the problem of permanent emigration for many centuries, lost in few decades a great proportion of their inhabitants: at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the population of these villages was halved (but sometimes it was reduced more than 70%), and this only happened where manufactures had never existed or had to stop their activity because of the lack of financing.

This decline was not only linked to the choices of governments, but it also depended on the great changes in the economy of the plain and on the improvement of transport through the Alps. While in the Alpine agriculture the unit-incomes were almost equal to those registered in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the hills and the plain new hybrid seeds, fertilizers and agrarian machines allowed to increase a lot the yields. Not only the climate conditions and the quality of soils could not allow an important improvement of the quantity and quality of harvests, but a lot of small landlords (having few money) did not change their rotations and did not use new technology and so their productivity did not increase as in the land of the hills and plain. Besides, for lots of Alpine families it was not possible to continue the traditional pluriactivity: the increase of the use of the agrarian machines and the great agrarian crisis of the 1880s reduced the need of peasant and in particular eliminated the need of temporarily workforce in the plain for the seasonal works. Furthermore the improvement of railways reduced in most of the villages of the Alpine valleys the traditional earnings linked to the transit of goods for the towns of Lombardy or for the northern European markets. The changes in technologies also favoured the creation in the plain of activities reducing earnings for people living in the valleys. One of the main examples was represented by the cattle breeders producing the cheese in Alpine pastures whose importance in the Lombard dairy market

grew up in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the number of Lombard cows increased and less space to sheep, the cheese producers wanted to take more profit by both of the great opportunities existing in the Lombard market and the new farms created in all the irrigated plain which added bovine cattle breeding to the production of cereals and forages. So some of them decided to create their new dairy factories in the plain and invested a lot of money to improve their productive systems: the quality of new stalls in the plain and the improvement transports guaranteed by the railways in the plain allowed the production of high quality cheese and its quick delivery to the richest town markets. While in the valleys the production of cheese remained the same, that is the production of low quantities during the summer, in the plain the new dairy factories increased and also diversified their production. The cheese produced in the modern dairy factories of the Lombard plain was more competitive (and in some cases had a better quality) than the Alpine cheese and this provoked the reduction of sales of this latter and also the transfer of other cheese producers in the plain where they could produce or, thank you to their expertise, trade butter and cheese and have higher earnings than in their previously job in the valleys.

The possibility to earn better than in the valleys in fact concerned all jobs not related to the agriculture sector: Lombard towns in fact offered to people of Alpine valleys some higher wages in the factories and in the building. The strong Lombard industrialization needed workforce and, by the perspectives of high wages, invited people coming from Alpine valleys to choose a permanent emigration with their families in the Lombard industrial towns. Besides, while the first step of industrialization was small-scale manufacturing, that was not capital-intensive and the economies of scale were not so relevant, the new factories of the second industrial revolution needed to increase their dimensions and, moreover, the medium-long term financing from banks progressively became fundamental for the manufactures' activities. Furthermore the modernisation of the productive system implied more financing and also more specialisation and flexibility face to the continuous variations in the national and international markets.

Changes were very rapid for the Alpine manufactures: since the 1880s only the Alpine craftsmen having a great ability in producing and selling their products could be competitive with the new enterprises of the plain having modern equipments and plants. At the end of the century the competition was possible only in the valleys where: a) there was space to enlarge the dimension of manufactures; b) there existed some ways and railways which guaranteed good and not expensive relations with the markets of the Lombard plain; c) new small enterprises were developed and they were able to diversify their productions and survive taking profit of the self-exploitation of the family of entrepreneurs and of the low cost of their workforce. Some industrial districts were born, in particular in the low valleys which in fact maintained and sometimes increased their inhabitants; in other valleys, as the secondary and highest ones, the absence or the close down of existing manufactures and sawmills obliged people to find a job abroad and it was not a seasonal one.

The low yields of land in fact got Alpine families below the subsistence level and there was no more the pluriactivity system which in the previously years guaranteed their survival: this evidently favoured the emigration and caused a strong demographic decline in some villages where rural activities represented the main earning. However the total demographic trend in the Alpine valleys was not negative because iron and brass and textile manufactures were present and became more competitive in lots of main valleys (as the Valtrompia, Valgobbia, Valcamonica, Valsabbia, Valseriana, Valbrembana, Valsassina, Valtellina etc.): they usually used a workforce who lived nearby and this obviously reduced the level of emigration from the Alpine valleys.

So at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the main socio-economical change in the Lombard Alps was represented by the strong reduction of the rural people: only the villages that were too closely linked to the exploitation of land lost a great share of their inhabitant. When public authorities noted what was happening, they found to stop the demographic decline: new public institutions (as the Cattedre ambulanti) sent their agronomists in the Lombard Alpine valleys to suggest peasants how to improve the yields of their land. At the same time new studies were dedicated to the improvement of the system of cultivation of arable land and in particular of pastures in the Alpine

valleys (the Alpicoltura). The public intervention partially limited the new emigration, but it could not call migrants back: the valleys without manufactures remained some economical depressed areas until the development of Alpine tourism which strongly modified the situation for some lucky villages only.

## **Conclusion**

The role of the agricultural sector in the life of the Lombard Alpine valleys remained relevant until the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even if the rural works were not able to guarantee the earnings for the survival of the Alpine families, they had represented for a great part of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries an important part of the pluriactivity system which allowed to maintain the socio-economical equilibrium in the Lombard Alpine villages. The members of the Alpine families in fact worked in agriculture and also in the industrial and extractive activities as iron or brass or textile manufactures and mining. Where there were no these activities adult males had to temporary emigrate to find a job as bricklayers in the towns of the plain or as longshoremen in docks of Genoa and Venice: they also worked in the Lombard farms of the hills and plain where their contribute was fundamental for allowing to conclude the harvest or grape harvest in the correct time (in this case the women also participated).

The pluriactivity system avoided a permanent emigration from the Alpine valleys but it progressively lost their relevance because of the institutional and technological changes which arrived during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The taxes concerning land properties increased and reduced the peasants' earnings, most of common land were sold and so they did not give their fruits to poor people of the village, the ecclesiastic institutions lost their assets and were not able to lend money for the local agricultural and industrial activities, the development of the railways transports and the birth of new modern and innovative manufactures in the Lombard towns got some Alpine manufactures less competitive and attracted Alpine people with higher wages. So in the Alpine valleys where manufactures were able to renew themselves and remained competitive, it was possible that some industrial districts were born (this happened in particular in the low valleys which in fact maintained and sometimes increased their inhabitants); in the other valleys, as the secondary and highest ones, the absence or the close down of existing manufactures and sawmills obliged people to find a job abroad and there was a demographic decline (inhabitants were halved and sometimes they were reduced of more than 70%).