Alpine culture as a key factor for sustainable development in the Alps

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Abstract

First we discuss the definition of "Alpine culture", because there are severe misunderstandings, closely connected with the problems of the Protocol on "population and culture" of the Alpine Convention. Then we look at the relations between culture and language and finally we shall show how Alpine culture could be a key factor for sustainable development in the Alps.

Keywords: Alpine culture, Alpine Convention, language, sustainable development

Introduction

For most people in Europe, Alpine culture is something definite, i.e. the culture of the local peasants in the Alps and the same throughout the entire Alps, strongly influenced by the hostile nature of the Alps. But this shared perception is wrong and thus functions as a barrier for sustainable development in the Alps.

Therefore it is very important to make clear what Alpine culture means in reality (not as a stereotype) before obstacles can be cleared away. This is also important for current political debates in the Alps.

What is "Alpine culture"?

If you ask the question "What is Alpine culture?" you assume that a common ground exists. But this assumption has sparked off discussions and it is not yet clear if we can speak of a "common Alpine culture" at all.

In the Alps, the three great families of European languages – Germanic, Romance, and Slavic – are present and they meet here. Thus we have a border situation which becomes increasingly problematic. As we have known for a long time now, these languages strongly correlate with the different value systems inherent to these languages. For example, the German language is known in Europe for a positive attitude to the forest (the forest as ideal-type nature) whereas the Romance languages of the Mediteranean express a certain fear of the forest and the ideal-type nature there is the "garden" which ought to be protected by mankind against hostile nature. These differences of language and values are strongly connected with different nutritional bias (more milk in the North, more oil/wine in the South). It is clear that this brings about different cultures in the Alps.

Then we have the political history in the Alps with early territories and states changing frequently and substantially. This had a great impact on both regional culture and regional values and thus history is responsible for many inner-Alpine differences that are important these days.

Finally, we can conclude that there is no common Alpine culture – great differences between many Alpine cultures are clearly identifiable.

On the other hand, there are some common features. All the different groups of people that have come into the Alps have developed some common characteristics: agricultural land use is divided into that of the valleys and that of the Alpine pastures ("Staffelwirtschaft"), milk from these pastures is made into cheese (by methods learned from the old inhabitants), many instruments in traditional agriculture are still in use and have been adapted in a specific manner to Alpine conditions. And we find these common characteristics throughout the entire Alpine region and there are a lot of old fairy-tales with common characteristics in many Alpine regions that may draw on a common experience within the hostile high mountain environment. These common characteristics are often identified as the "real" Alpine culture.

It is important to identify both these parts and therefore it must be made clear that these common elements of cultures are only "secondary commonalities" while the basic common characteristics in the Alps are somehow different. The greatest differences are those between the languages and they are always strongly connected with cultural differences and different values, attitudes and customs too.

Up to the 18th century it was the traditional dimension of Alpine culture which carried importance. From that time onwards the Industrial revolution changed culture thoroughly. An industrial society is very dynamic and these dynamics were and still are too big for many people. They fear they might lose their own sources, traditions and values in exchange for a world of industrial divisions of labour. Therefore, in the middle of the industrial society we can observe the emergence of a totally new concept of traditional culture: an old tradition is created to counterbalance these quick changes. A tradition that appears very old and ought not change and becomes more important the older it is. This is a fiction of traditional culture because real tradition changes constantly (not very quickly, but always a little bit) and never stands still. This makes no sense in the traditional society (loss of actuality). Only in the industrial society an old tradition that does not change has great value, because it represents the anti-position to the industrial dynamic – and this new behaviour makes sense to a great number of people.

In all of Europe, you find this newly created "old tradition" as the "invention of a new traditionalism", but in the Alps, this invention is of even greater importance. During the Industrial Revolution the Alps stood for the great and beautiful nature to be admired, and the people living there in a traditional manner were seen as the "ideal men", as the "good wild person without harm". This is the view from outside, from the great industrial cities, not from inside. But all across Europe the people of the industrial cities are very busy changing Alpine culture, correcting real Alpine culture with the aim of realising "ideal traditional culture" (the new invented tradition) in the Alps.

This new development begins in the year 1805 with the first two "Unspunnen-Feste" (rural festivals, created by persons from the cities), gathers momentum in the 1840s (with the king of Bavaria, the new government of Salzburg and other noble persons as central actors) and comes to the first great boom in the years between 1880 and 1914. During this time the great conservation movements of "Natur-schutz" and "Heimatschutz" (which are closely connected at that time) were created and gathered many members. During that time many old traditions (with irregular and spontaneous forms) were severely fixed (no more change), which changed their character totally, and many new traditions were invented "ex novo", but after two, three years all persons spoke of an "old tradition".

The key agents of this cultural change have been the intellectuals living in the Alps (priests, teachers, public administration officers etc.) who, along with scientists and politicians in the greater cities, have significantly shaped the common under-standing of culture. Traditional actors like the farmers or other inhabitants of the Alps with lower education levels were excluded from the construction of this tradi-tion and then played their role as the "simple participants" that had to obey the or-ders of their intellectual fellow citizens.

In this manner, however, traditional cultures in the Alps were subjected to deep changes. Traditional customs were no longer a common activity of the whole vil-lage (all inhabitants as actors), but became a so-called "Schaubrauch", i.e. a custom executed by a minority of actors for the benefit of spectators. With this change the traditional culture lost its vitality and became a pattern of museality (repeating the past without making sense for the present in modern societies). In this new situation the idea of a common culture in the Alps emerged, which would previously have been considered strange and even wrong. The idea of a common Alpine culture is thus a result of industrial society.

If you want to understand and discuss Alpine culture you must go beyond the traditional perceptions in this realm. Culture is the capacity to improve your own life and the world you are living in with that spirit. Living a good life that makes sense in a good community with others is at the core of culture. In this way, the UNESCO defines culture in its very broad understanding as "not only the high (philosophy, lit-erature, opera) and the popular culture, but also as all forms of life that carry mean-ing (Sinn) for the lives of a great number of people on a broad basis (i.e. via cinema, sports, TV, disco, and so on…)".

However, adopting this definition of culture – which seems to be very helpful and important – also implies seeing very clearly that the problems and opportuni-ties of culture in the mountains differ greatly from those in city regions. In the Alps you have different problems and different opportunities. To resolve these problems, you need not make use of the idea of a common Alpine culture but try to identify the common problems of the Alps (loss of labour and agriculture, traffic, second homes etc.) as the basis for cultural life in the Alps instead. Hence culture is very im-portant for resolving these problems. It is important that all inhabitants of the Alps participate in and work on this narrative (even those who do not belong to the group of traditional inhabitants [refugees, asylum seekers etc.]).

If you understand Alpine culture in this manner, the main task for this concept is to influence current developments of globalisation and climate change in such a way as to acknowledge that the Alps remain a region in which people can live an economically, culturally and ecologically enriched and "sustainable" life. This is only possible once the Alps are perceived as neither entirely dependent on the global political economy, nor totally autarkic from it. Understood in this fashion, culture has to invent and enhance this dependency and autarchy ("ausgewogene Doppelnutzung") in such a way as to ensure that it provides the Alps with a good and sustainable future.

Alpine culture in the framework of the Alpine Convention

The "Alpine Convention" is a political treaty between eight states and the European Community and envisages developing a sustainable future for the Alps. In the preparatory Conference of Berchtesgaden of 1989, there was a large declaration (89 points) outlining the need for a "Convention" of the Alps and in its first sentences the central argument was that a "protocol" (protocols are the main strategy in the Alpine Convention to emphasise certain themes and problems) on cultural and population issues was very important for all subsequent protocols. But when the Alpine Convention was declared in 1991, the first five protocols were defined without a protocol devoted to population and culture. Not until ten years later a working group of the Alpine Convention was installed which had the mandate to develop this part. However, this group discussed only the problems of minorities in the Alps (basic concept: Alpine culture seen in the traditional manner) and thus folded within two years.

Afterwards, a second working group was installed which started with a "more contemporary concept of Alpine culture". But once the work was finished, the Alpine Conference (the ministers of environment of the eight states with Alpine regions) preferred not to have a "protocol" on "culture" in place. Instead, only a "declaration" could enter the stages.

Why that? There are two different answers (for more details see Bätzing 2002):

1. The significance of Alpine culture is not very clear, especially in the international context of the Alps. There are different meanings (some persons see Alpine culture in a traditional way, others in a modern one) and it is very difficult to create a common understanding in this area.

2. Culture is a political theme that in most Alpine states is dealt with at regional and not at national level. These regions are usually very proud to have this important competence and hence do not appreciate state interference in this field. The Alpine Convention is a treaty between states and the state representatives are working together at an international level. Therefore, the political level for culture (= the regions) are usually not involved in these talks.

These concrete problems with culture in the framework of political work at the European level make clear that the discussions on "Alpine culture" are not simply academic, but revolve around real, political problems.

Alpine culture and language

Usually we tend to think that language has the function of exchanging information (bites and bytes). This perception is wrong: with language we also communicate certain values and beliefs (i.e. world views). Language is more than just an exchange of information – language is the expression of a certain experience of the world. Hence the different languages in Europe also express different experiences of the world and its history. You can perceive that very clearly in words that you cannot translate because another language fails to translate this experience. For example, the Portuguese word "saudade" means a specific manner of depression (the depression of being little and poor after a time period of individual wealth and you do not know why this has happened to you) which you cannot translate into English with just one word. You must explain it with many words instead. Other words like "Weltanschauung" or "Heimat" in German, the Italian "vincolo", the French "desenclavement" and so on always translate a certain experience of the world into specific words (combined with a certain history) that do not exist in another language.

In the Alps, these experiences are very important because this region covers four great European languages (German, French, Italian and Slovenian), three real languages without the status of a "high language" or state language (Occitan, Franco-Provençale, Romansh) and hundreds of dialects. All these languages and dialects contain different takes on the Alps and on the world. In this context, however, the "smaller languages" are of greater importance (languages without the status of a high language) because they express the feelings of minority cultures in the Alps and thus lack the totality constitutive of bigger languages.

Today you quite often hear the opinion that the Alpine debate in all languages is very, very expensive. Therefore, it would be a good solution to communicate in English. I think that this is a very big problem: if you communicate in English about the problems of the Alps, the discussion is suddenly reduced to communicating information without values (information as bites and bytes) and so you reduce the complexity of Alpine problems. You cut off many different feelings and experiences. And if you are trying to work out some solutions to common Alpine problems in English, you will find only stereotyped solutions which are sometimes far, far away from Alpine realities. Communicating about Alpine problems means understanding how the Alpine neighbours view the same problems from their own perspective – and this takes time to understand.

Enabling people to understand and speak at least one of the other Alpine languages constitutes an important goal within the Alpine debate. The ideal would be the Swiss reality: everyone in Switzerland speaks their own language (German, French, Italian) and all the others understand that language but answer in their own language. Only in this manner could you find real solutions for current Alpine problems. And only in this manner could you enhance Alpine culture as a multi-lingual reality.

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