

Household Income Strategies in the Lombard Valleys: Persistence and Loss of a Traditional Economic Equilibrium in an Alpine area (end 18th – early 20th centuries)

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Introduction: aim and topics of the paper and sources used.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the strategies followed, from the end of the 18th century to the early 20th century, by the families of the Lombard Alpine villages who were able to ensure the subsistence of their members. The analysed period is very important because it was characterised by some relevant changes concerning the institutions which strongly influenced the society and the economy of the Lombard valleys. Because of these changes the household income strategies underwent a dramatic transformation. It was especially the case of the “Integrated Peasant Economy” (hereafter IPE) which had allowed for many centuries to maintain the economic equilibrium of the Lombard Alpine families. The IPE, and in general all strategies which permitted to integrate the scarce income sources of the most of Alpine families, fell into an irreversible crisis and provoked the loss of the traditional economic equilibrium. The economy and the demographic balance of a lot of Lombard valleys were strongly influenced in negative way and only in few valleys it was possible to maintain the usual conditions and progressively increase inhabitants’ quality of life.

Until this crisis the mountains (which cover a relevant part of Lombardy) were able to maintain a high population density. At the end of the 18th century in a lot of Lombard valleys (in particular in the low ones of the Eastern Lombardy) it overcame 65 inhabitants per km² and so it was higher than that of Belgium (41), the Low Countries (51) and England (61). At the beginning of the 20th century the population density was remaining at that level in few valleys (in particular where some industrial districts had been created), but there existed a lot of valleys (in particular the highest ones) where the inhabitants were reduced at a third¹. That’s why this paper also allows to understand why the break of the equilibrium did not provoke the same effects everywhere.

The analysis of the Lombard case is important because it was the case of a region which, from the Middle Age onwards, belonged to the most developed and urbanized area of Europe. We may also mention the very early construction of a complex irrigation system in the Lombard plain, that enabled artificial meadows, intensive agriculture (comprising rice), and animal husbandry. It’s therefore worthy of note to understand how the IPE works in such a region and the consequences of the Lombard industrial take off at the end of the 19th century on the IPE. At the same time IPE

¹ About the economical, demographical and social conditions of the Lombard Alpine valleys during the analysed period see: Romani 1950; Merzario 1981; Mocarelli 1995, 1997; Besana 1997; Colli 1997; Marchesi 2003; Tedeschi 2001, 2002, 2007.

permits to show some aspects of the changes concerning a developed region as Lombardy, where the development of manufactures can be only in part explained by the typical model of a cereal and textile producing region (those on which the proto-industrial theory was modelled)² because in Lombardy very different specialized cultivations (mulberry trees, linen, vines, citrus fruit, olives) were added to the cereals granting relevant earnings and orienting the relationship between the agriculture and a lot of different manufacturing activities.

Besides the presence of the classic putting-out system, typical of the textile productive system, there in fact existed some important transformation activities with a centralized manufacturing system. So there did not exist a real diffused proto-industry but some manufactures which had diversified high quality productions and were fully integrated with the primary sector. It is important to note that a lot of them, even if they found in the Lombard towns their main markets (in particular for the hand manufactured products in iron, brass, wood etc.), remained concentrated in the mountainous belt where they could easily dispose of raw materials, wood and water (energy sources)³. The countryside was strictly linked to the economy of the Lombard towns too: in the first half of the 19th century, it was in fact achieved the full agrarian and commercial equilibrium which also included some high value added products arriving from the valleys (as the dairy products and the mulberry leaves for silk-cocoons)⁴.

This means that Alpine productions were important for the Lombard economy as a whole and, until new technologies strongly changed the economic context, the regional social and economic equilibrium depended also on the demographic and economic equilibrium in its Alpine villages. So the success of the IPE in the Alpine villages helped both the life of the local families and the prosperity and wealth of the whole region⁵.

Concerning the sources used in this paper it is important to note that the study is based on various types of sources related both to the analysed period and the territory. For the valleys of Eastern Lombardy both documents in archives and the existing literature were used, while for the other valleys a wide bibliography is already available and allowed to enlarge this contribution to a

² The issue is widely discussed in Dewerpe 1985. But see also, with special regards to the household income strategies in the Italian family in the long run, Cento Bull, Corner 1993.

³ About the Lombard economic development from the early modern period onward and in particular during the 19th century see, among other, Zaninelli 1988-1990; Cafagna 1989c Merzario 1989; Carera 1996; Mocarrelli 2001; Carera 2002; Romano 2012; Conca Messina 2016.

⁴ About the relation between agriculture and the other economic sectors see Romani 1957, 57-76, 81-85, and 1963, 3-161; Cafagna 1989b; Cova 1977; Moioli 1978; Zaninelli 1979; Faccini 1986, 308-317, 381-409, 707-749; Della Peruta 1996, 95-126; Tedeschi, 2006, 2008a, 2013a.

⁵ About the household income strategies in the Alps and the mobility of Alpine people who could become real entrepreneurs see: Villani 1989; Coppola 1991; Fontana, Leonardi, Trezzi 1998; Mocarrelli 2003; Panjek 2015; Tedeschi 2015.

regional level⁶. In doing so this paper also permits to realize interesting comparisons with other Alpine regions and, more in general, other upland areas.

1. The relevance of household income strategies for the economy of the Lombard valleys

In the Lombard valleys the agriculture alone could not guarantee the survival of the numerous inhabitants, despite the fact that there were significant resources for animal farming and for exploiting wood and that the little soil available was farmed intensively for growing cereals and some other specialized crops. It was necessary therefore, to resort to other additional activities, often carried out in close connection with the needs and rhythms of agriculture.

For the Alpine economy the solutions to compensate the lack of earnings and food could be represented by the migrant work, by the setting up locally of manufacturing activities and in particular by the resort to the IPE. This last had been for many centuries the main way used to maintain the economic and financial equilibrium of the Alpine families and so the possibility to guarantee the food for all their members (that is a poor, but decent life). At the same time, the IPE allowed seasonal emigration in the plain or in the main Italian sea-ports, obviously maintaining the workforce needed for the Alpine manufactures and rural activity. The IPE also implied that in the Alpine valleys existed a good number of skilled and pluriactive workers: it is evident they could work in several sectors only if they were disposed to learn more jobs and if they demonstrated to have a relevant ability, in particular in case they had to work out of their native village.

The IPE was very important because it avoided permanent emigration out of the Alpine valleys and it maintained stable the dimension of the Alpine villages. Only a little part of Lombard Alpine people had to emigrate for a long time since for the equilibrium of the IPE the seasonal emigration was normally enough. So, until the second half of the 19th century, these valleys did not become a “factory producing men for the plain” as it happened for other European mountains (e.g. for some valleys of the Pyrenes and of the High Western Alps)⁷.

The members of the Lombard Alpine families worked in a lot of different economic activities: in agriculture, cattle-breeding, forestry as well as in Alpine manufactures and mines. They worked in local manufactures producing goods in iron or brass or wool clothing or raw silk. Besides, there

⁶ About the sources in archives see: ASB, *IRD*P, bb. 3896-3897, 4198-4200; *Notarile di Brescia*, bb. 14558-14650, 15093-15101, 14836, 14992-15009, 15074, 15093-15100, 15429; *Notarile di Salò*, bb. 2558, 2585-2586; *Petizioni d'estimo*, bb. 145-148, 233-236, 239-241, 244-273, 282-291, 331, 337-343, 348, 412-413, 447-448, 451, 454, 457-458, 460-478, 481, 487-488, 490-495, 504-506, 518-521, 526-529, 533-558, 560-562, 588-589, 604, 608-611, 631-632, 651-652, 667-668, 678-679, 686-689, 694-700, 708-710; ASM, *Agricoltura p.m.*, bb. 1-4, 13, 22; *Catasto Lombardo-Veneto*, bb. 9943-9969, 10120-10154, 12157, 12168, 12193, 12199, 12200-12203. Concerning the bibliography see the previous footnotes.

⁷ About the mountains as “factories producing workforce for the plain” and the related debate see Braudel 1966²; Albera, Corti 2000; Lorenzetti, Merzario 2005; Mathieu 2016.

were some manufacturing activities which gave many work opportunities both at home (spinning and weaving) and outside (mining, charcoal production, iron and paper plants, sawmills etc.), as services did (transport of raw materials and products). Some jobs in the Alpine valleys were seasonal: e.g. people working in the local mines were occupied especially in winter, when the cold temperatures reduced the risk for flooding in the tunnels.

This explains why the members of these families worked as peasants and/or workers and/or bricklayers and/or miners and/or charcoal burners and/or woodcutters and/or longshoremen. Excluding the cases of the craftsmen who had very high professional skills and worked in the forges only, all other jobs in the Alpine valleys did not give money enough to maintain all the family. This means it was the sum of all earnings related to the different activities carried out by the members of the Alpine families which allowed them to achieve the economic and financial equilibrium and to guarantee the food for all the family members⁸. When the available jobs in the valley were not enough, in particular in the villages of the high valleys, some inhabitants accepted seasonal jobs in the plain, e.g. in the building sector or in the farms (in particular for the cereal or the grape harvest in the Lombard plain and low hills). The seasonal emigration normally involved the adult males who could work in several different economic branches: on the contrary the women were few and they were occupied in rural works only, in particular in the vines and paddy fields.

The migrants who came from the mountains were very competitive on the labour market both in the plain and the lower hills because they had all the professional skills requested by the farmers and, at the same time, their wages were lower than those demanded by local rural population. In particular in the Eastern plain the lack of peasants allowed workforce to obtain a better remuneration in cash and kind. Migrants from the Alpine valleys had a double advantage: a) they simply had to integrate the other earnings of their families and so they could reduce their wages; b) they were selected by the intermediaries who created the contractual links between the village and the farm, that is they had to show their ability and only the best ones could emigrate. The mountain village always had to show and confirm the high quality skills of its inhabitants because this guaranteed the annual renewal of the contracts with the farmer. This rule obviously existed in the other jobs too, in particular for the bricklayers and longshoremen.

Even if in presence of the IPE, some inhabitants could leave the mountain valleys for a long time or forever. When this happened, it often concerned craftsmen with very high professional skills (who produced iron and steel hand manufactured goods and were invited to other countries where they received fiscal facilitation and high earnings) or people who managed and organised the work

⁸ It is not surprising, then, that on the cereal markets where alpine valleys bought the grain they needed thousands tons of cereals were commercialized. Only on Desenzano market in 1790 were sold almost 9,000 tons of grain for a value of more than three millions lire. See Zalin 1988.

of other Alpine temporary migrants as the bricklayers working in the towns of the Lombard plain and the longshoremen who operated in the docks of the ports of Genoa and Venice. These two professional categories also represented the main cases of Lombard Alpine people who could remain out of the native Alps for more than a year without emigrating forever.

Within the IPE the Alpine family's earnings arrived from different jobs and allowed all family's members to have the necessary to survive (the food, the house, the heating and the clothes). The positive effects of the IPE were also strengthened by two conditions existing in the Alpine valleys. There existed rules which allowed some privileges to the poor families, in particular the right to pick the fruits of the common land, that is the wild berries, the firewood, the hay etc.: these privileges obviously helped poor families to continue to live in their Alpine village. Besides, most of the families owned a plot of land cultivated with cereals or legumes and vegetables (please note that some Alpine families were wary about the cultivation and consumption of potatoes and so their diffusion was limited until the second half of the 19th century)⁹.

The dimension and yields of the cultivated plots of land were limited and so, in a normal season, the harvest was not enough for the family's needs, but in any case it guaranteed part of the food for the Alpine families as well as the possibility to breed a pig, some poultry, some rabbits, and sometimes a cow. The surface of Alpine properties was normally between 3 and 6.50 ha., but most of them did not reach 5 ha., while many plots of land having a good quality soil and a sunny position were between 0.5 and 2 ha. The small surface and the low earnings prevented the landowners from making the investments necessary to improve the productivity: not least because it was very difficult and expensive to improve the quality of land and its yields. Pastures could be more rentable: they granted the food for cows and also the hay for the market. The Alpine pastures in particular guaranteed also the rent paid in cash in the summer by the transhumant cattle-breeders who also left the natural fertilizers of their herd. Forestry obviously gave firewood, timber, hay, walnuts, chestnuts, vegetable coal etc.: however most of the families did not receive by their plot of woodland the necessary for surviving (that is by self-consumption and sales on market).

There were some exceptions in the lower valleys: some land properties were able to produce crops for maintaining a family and there also existed some arable land and vineyards of larger dimension that were worked by sharecroppers or peasants. These latter were inhabitants of the valleys who worked in agriculture out of their plots of land receiving some money or a part of crops. There were also some tenants who rented arable land and/or wood: some members of their families worked in them and, even if they obtained low earnings, these were obviously important

⁹ About the evolution and relevance of the commons in the Lombard Alpine valleys see: Misericordia 2012; Mocrelli 2013, 2015a, 2015b; Tedeschi 2011, 2013b, 2014.

for the survival of the family. Finally, some Alpine families who owned very little land and pastures could take profit for the animal husbandry and home heating thanks to the exploitation of common land. In Lombard valleys, in particular in the Eastern ones, pastures and woods usually belonged to communities who determined by themselves the way for the use and in particular gave the priority to the poorest families.

In general, the main activity of the family depended on its members' skills: when the craftsman working in iron forges or paper mills realized high quality products, his activity became so important that the owned land was entrusted to wives and sons or, if these latter worked with the master, it could also be rented out. Some members of the family in fact worked with the master: in the forges, sons or daughters' husbands learned the secret of forging while in the paper industry the masters' wife and sons had unspecialized tasks inside the paper mill such as the sorting of rags¹⁰. In such cases the whole family worked in the secondary sector and had no time for agricultural works: so the household income strategies allowed Alpine family members to survive even without working in the primary sector. However, they also benefited of the rent and/or fruits of their land (for which they used to receive loans, too): this means that they integrated income sources from different sectors (including the agriculture), but they were not peasants. Moreover, such high skilled workers represented a minority of the workforce and so most families of the Alpine villages belonged to the peasant population and had to resort to the IPE.

All these activities entailed a precise division of labour inside the family: adult males usually worked in manufacturing activities outside home and carried out hard agricultural tasks and wood exploitation; wives and sons were employed in manufacturing activities at home in the textile branch (mainly spinning) and in less demanding works outside the house, as agricultural works, animal husbandry, and the collection of wild grass, firewood, leaves and wild vegetables and fruits.

2. The decline of household income strategies in the Lombard valleys during the 19th century

The household income strategies progressively lost their relevance during the 19th century when some important institutional and technological changes strongly reduced the competitiveness of the products made in the Lombard valleys. The related decrease of jobs obliged a relevant part of the youngest inhabitants of the Alpine villages to accept the permanent emigration in the plain and also in other European countries and in America.

The French invasion and the Napoleonic age strongly modified the political context: Lombard valleys were included in the Cisalpine Republic and the new administrative situation was confirmed during the Napoleon age and, after, by the Congress of Vienna who included the Lombard Alpine

¹⁰ About the cases of craftsman working in iron forges or paper mills see: Mocarelli 2005; Tedeschi 2008b.

valleys in the Austrian Empire. This influenced the productive systems and the rural economy of the Alpine villages and in particular for the valleys of the Eastern Lombardy. French and, then, Austrian governments in fact decided to increase the taxation on the land and to promote the sales of common land and other common real estate linked to the agricultural sector, such as hay lofts, cattle sheds, stock rooms and flour mills. This reduced the total incomes related to the land and also the fruits which the poor families of the village could obtain by the exploitation of common land (Pichler 1996, 35-62).

This evidently increased the relevance of non-agricultural activities for the Alpine families whose survival depended on the IPE. But on the other hand, the Alpine manufactures and mines and sawmills meanwhile progressively became less competitive because of the technological innovations and new fiscal rules. For all the first half of the 19th century the reduction of earnings was in any case tolerable even if some laws (e.g. those establishing the sales of the common land) created some relevant problems to the poorest families (as the public subsidies they received did not compensate the loss of the privileged access to the fruits of the common land). The crisis grew worse from the 1850s when the arrival and diffusion of some relevant technological innovations progressively eliminated all the reasons for the success of a lot of manufactures located in the Alpine valleys, and at the same time strongly reduced the incomes related to some other activities as those of the charcoal burners and the miners.

It is possible to distinguish some main reasons which explain why the crisis became so strong and broke forever the existing equilibrium, as follows.

As first, in times when the communication system was difficult and expensive, the presence of water and iron constituted a considerable advantage for the Alpine villages and allowed to carry out a variety of specialized activities and to produce hand manufactured goods in iron or brass or paper etc. The improvement of the railway connections diminished the price of raw material arriving from better foreign mines and forests, which had also taken profit by the strong reduction of the tariffs protecting the Lombard Alpine productions. A lot of Alpine mines had a small dimension and they were closed in the early 19th century: they were in fact exhausted or their exploitation had become too expensive and difficult for people who did not have much money to invest. For these the competition of the foreign iron provoked the definitive closing, while those which remained active occupied very few people (often two to four miners). Only where the iron was easily extracted the mines remained in function. As far as the forests are concerned, a reduction of available wood caused by overexploitation started with their privatisation and the successive limits decided by the government in order to save the remaining forests. These changes increased the cost of the raw material for the Alpine sawmills, which also had to suffer the negative effects of the reduction of

local demand (because of the crisis of local manufactures), while only a part of them could find new markets in the hills and plain where the competition was very strong¹¹.

Secondly, the birth of new modern enterprises in the plain which could use new factories (and realized some important economies of scale) reduced the market for the Alpine forges. The availability of energy sources (wood and water) became less important in a context where, in addition to the negative effects brought by the improvement of the railways, new innovations concerning electricity and new fuels allowed to create new factories far away from the valleys (where new dams were built). This also favored the transfer in the plain of some rentable activities which previously were diffused in the valleys, in particular the dairy sector. The main producers of cheese and butter created new large factories in the plain while in the Alpine valleys only a small part of the total production remained, reducing the earnings linked to the sales of dairy products in the Alpine villages¹².

As third, the introduction of new agrarian machines and, in particular, the great agrarian crisis of the 1880s reduced the need for peasants and so the need of temporary workforce in the plain for the seasonal works. Besides, in the Eastern Lombard countryside there was no more the lack of peasants which existed before the agrarian crisis. This obviously reduced the wages for people living in the countryside and decreased the competition and opportunities of Alpine workers on the labour market. This trend continued until the foundation of the first catholic and socialist peasant unions. However, their arrival did not create new workplaces for migrant peasants: new agrarian contracts regulated the hiring of temporary agricultural workers (*avventizi*) and gave the priority to the inhabitants of the villages where the farms were located (Tedeschi 2002b, 2008c, 2015).

Fourth, the Italian governments did not modify the Austrian legislation which favoured the progressive sales and privatisation of common land and in general the abolition of most of common rights previously reserved to the people living in the Alpine communities. Besides the taxation on industrial and commercial activities increased. All this implied a strong reduction of the resources available for the Alpine communities and in particular for the poorest families. In the past, these in fact could survive thanks to the rights on the common land as the *erbatico* (the right to pick wild grass, healing herbs and sods), the *legnatico* (the right to collect shrubs, firewood and waste timber which could not be used to produce charcoal), the *pascolo* (the right to put out to pasture their cattle, but there were limitations on sheep and goat grazing was forbidden) and the *spigolatura* (they could collect all seeds remaining after the harvest). They also had the right to collect leaves

¹¹ About the evolution of the iron mining in the Lombard Alpine valleys see: Predali 1980; Piardi, Simoni 1982; Trezzi 1992; Calegari, Simoni 1994; Mocarelli 1997.

¹² About the Lombard dairy sector during the 19th century and the progressive delocalisation of the Alpine dairy factories in the plain see: Rosa 1888, Mocarelli 2009; Tedeschi, Stranieri 2011; Besana 2012.

(used to prepare bedding for cattle), stones (used for building) and wild vegetables and fruits (such as berries, walnuts and chestnuts). Because of the privatisation or rent of the common land all these rights disappeared and they were not entirely substituted by the public subsidies, in particular when the negative economic trend reduced the incomes of the communities. When the Italian government understood that mountains needed special laws and decided to help the valleys (e.g. it established new laws to develop the Alpine pastures and to protect the woods by the excessive exploitation which destroyed them because new trees had no time to grow up) it was too late: a lot of families had already gone to find a better life condition out of the valleys while, at the same time, the earnings linked to pastures and woods needed many years to get back to the previous yields (Tedeschi 2011, 2013b, 2014).

Lastly, the Italian government's decision, in the 1860s, concerning the abolition of most of ecclesiastic institutions and the sales of their assets strongly reduced the loans which manufactures (in particular in the Eastern Lombard valleys) received by the local *luoghi pii* (the ecclesiastical institutions who lent money for Alpine families and workshops): in the better cases these latter only had to pay a new tax which reduced of 30 per cent their patrimony and this obviously reduced their capability for lending money. When the first cooperative banks arrived in the valleys to replace the *luoghi pii* in the economy of the Eastern Lombard valleys, a lot of 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 (Cafaro 2000, 2002, Tedeschi 2015).

All this explains why the IPE was not able anymore to satisfy all Alpine families' needs. Even if people had diversified professional skills, many jobs disappeared and it was not possible to substitute them without the recourse to a long and often permanent migration out of the native valleys.

Only the Alpine villages where the iron or brass or textile manufactures were able to produce high quality goods in some particular market niches (as cutlery, hand tool, etc.): they remained competitive face to the enterprises of the plain thanks to their high quality-price ratio. Such villages could maintain most of their inhabitants who did not have to emigrate and they progressively developed real industrial districts producing for the Italian and international markets (as in the cases of Lumezzane in the Gobbio valley and Premana in Vares valley where all people had a job). The other villages, in particular those situated in the high valleys, were characterized by a progressive decrease of young people who emigrated in the Lombard plain and also in foreign countries in Europe and America (INEA 1935). At the beginning of the 20th century the state intervention tried to reduce the emigration, but it could not call migrants back: the valleys which lost their manufactures remained demographically and economically depressed areas. The demographic balance normally

remained stable, and sometimes positive, only in the low valleys which were closest to the main industrial towns of the plain (making a daily commuting possible) or in the valleys where the local manufactures remained in production¹³.

Conclusions

Until the second half of the 19th century, the households in the Lombard valleys were occupied in a lot of activities beside agriculture, which means they had to resort to different income strategies involving all their members. It existed a real IPE in the sense that the Alpine economy had strong links with the plain and its big cities where there were markets for migrant labour and for manufactured products arriving from the Alpine villages. The strategies followed by the Alpine families to maintain all their members foresaw the exploitation of all different economic opportunities available and in particular: the exploitation of small plots of private land as well as of common land, woods and buildings (as hay-lofts, cattle sheds etc.); the employment in the local centralized manufactures or at home (spinning and weaving); the improvement of the local craftsmen high skills and the related production and sale of hand manufactured goods (in iron, brass, paper etc.) at a very competitive price; the improvement of the other adults' professional skills to guarantee the renewal of contracts for the seasonal migration (jobs for Alpine people were in the farms of the plain for the harvest and in the towns, e.g. as bricklayers).

It is evident that household income strategies in the Alpine area depended mainly from outside opportunities and markets. However this strong dependence from exogenous factors could become a reason of weakness, as the changes in 19th century clearly showed. At that time the household income strategies dramatically changed because of the improvement of the railways, the development of new modern enterprises in the Lombard plain, the introduction of new agrarian machines and the agrarian crisis of the 1880s, the laws which favoured the privatisation of the common lands and strongly reduced the local credit market.

All the strategies followed by the Alpine families in fact depended on the relations and exchanges that Alpine villages were able to develop with the plain. This obviously became very difficult when the best factories of the plain became very strong competitors of the Alpine manufactures and when the best dairy producers decided to leave the Lombard valleys and to create their new factories in the plain. Besides, the success of these strategies was also related to the existence of institutions and laws which helped the economy of the Alpine valleys: the elimination of the common land and fiscal privileges made more difficult to live and produce in a lot of the Lombard Alpine villages.

¹³ About the valleys where local manufactures were able to stay in business see: Rossetti 1995; Besana 2003 Tedeschi 2008b. About the emigration from the Lombard Alpine valleys see also Tedeschi 2002a; Mocarelli 2002.

All this created a strong selection in the Alpine manufactures and reduced the possibility for Alpine people to continue to work in the native valleys and to find a seasonal work outside: so only a few valleys could maintain their economic and demographic equilibrium in the age of industrialization, that is in the early 20th century.