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Danaé Leitenberg

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Navigating tourism: mobility, uncertainty and inequality in the Swiss Alps

Danaé Leitenberg

Institute of Sociology, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland

ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine the links between mobility and uncertainty in a village located in the German-speaking Swiss Alps, an attractive destination for international tourists as well as migrant hospitality workers and home to 'native' mountain dwellers. Based on the experiences of migrants, who represent the majority of the tourism workforce locally and nationally, I firstly discuss how for them cross-border mobility to wealthy Switzerland was a hopeful fix to address situations of existential immobility encountered in their home countries. After their arrival, however, I show how the highly stratified tourism economy, interlocking with restrictive regimes of mobility, exacerbated their sense of precarity. Following recent calls for a mobility perspective that includes both migrants and non-migrants, I secondly argue that such an experience of migrant uncertainty needs to be understood against a global background of instability, which is particularly visible in the context of international tourism and the environmental and social transformations this industry brings about. To do so, I compare and contrast the modes of navigation – such as externalizing or embodying – adopted by various locals (migrants or not) when faced with the upsetting paradoxes of tourism and the uneven consequences of such strategies for their lives.

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Introduction

Rachid was hopeful when I met him. He had just arrived in the Swiss Alpine valley after having spent a decade as a seasonal worker in European resorts.[1] With its 4,000 inhabitants, this village in the Bernese Highlands was the first tourist resort of this size and importance he had stayed in, and it gave him his first chance of permanent work. Now he finally had a place of his own, he believed it was only a matter of time until he would meet someone, marry and build a family. Rachid even dreamed of becoming 'his own boss', like his father and his brother, who had 'made it' in France and in Tunisia, his homeland, before moving to Austria and acquiring citizenship there almost 20 years ago. Although far from Rachid's present reality, his dreams were all 'normal' wishes, if not needs, at the age of 40, he said.

Over the next weeks, I witnessed Rachid's hope progressively disappear. Most of our conversations revolved around his current position in the hospitality industry – an industry based

CONTACT Danaé Leitenberg danae.leitenberg@unibas.ch Institute of Sociology, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland
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on attending to guests' needs by providing services such as waiting on them and making them feel welcome in restaurants and hotels (Zampoukos and Ioannides 2011). The job was hard, the team dynamics complicated, the food he was given at work unhealthy and his days off were scattered during the week. The difficulties Rachid encountered were not new but they had become unbearable. 'I am fed up with it', he said, throwing his hands up in the air in irritation. Rachid felt caught in the temporary, necessary but exploitative fix of hospitality work. No wonder these were 'foreigner jobs', he said, hinting at the stratified nature of the industry (Janta et al. 2011; Ladkin 2014), carefully avoided by Swiss locals in favour of more secure and better-paid jobs. A small plastic bag filled with medication, left by Rachid on his night desk, symbolized his difficult situation. Because of the stress, the work and the bad food, Rachid had developed a stomach ulcer, although he had never been sick in his whole life. 'Something is wrong with this industry, you can't grow old there …', he said, explaining how few people over 50 were still employed in it. 'I have given up everything for this job but it has not given me anything', Rachid concluded bitterly. Yet leaving his job or the village would mean giving up on his dreams. To try and make them come true, to pay the rent, to help his family at home with remittances, Rachid explained that he had to go back to work in a hotel.

Rachid's story exemplifies how human mobility has long been a complex and ambiguous response to uncertainty. Moving away from places where futures are foreclosed to those where they are foreseeable has, in many ways, constituted the norm in human history. Rachid's experience also reflects how cross-border movement – particularly from the so-called Global South to the Global North – within an uneven mobility regime (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) often deepens uncertainty, especially when combined with experiences of discrimination and exploitation. But in the current context of accelerating humanitarian, health, environmental and financial crises (Eriksen 2016), uncertainty can no longer be regarded as the sole burden of the marginalized or excluded. In the Swiss Alpine resort where Rachid lived and where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, nearly all inhabitants expressed unease and overwhelm as they witnessed the local impacts of global crises, be it vanishing glaciers, rising housing costs or overtourism. How, then, should we interpret Rachid's tale of precarity against this backdrop of growing uncertainty?

Approaching this question, in this article I propose to examine the changing and dialectical relationship between mobility and uncertainty in the context of stark power differentials between migrants and non-migrants. Doing so, I build on a growing scholarship on movement as an existential endeavour that responds to uncertainty, as people often move *from* contexts of instability *to* places of normality or security (Jansen 2015; Kleist and Jansen 2016; Tošić and Lems 2019). For Hage, often one moves physically when feeling stuck existentially, when feeling like 'going nowhere' or 'too slowly' in a particular context (2005, 470; 2009). Moving is thus connected to the idea of 'going places' and 'somewhere in life' (2009, 97; see also Narotzky and Besnier 2014).

I focus here on what happens in what may be described as the 'destination': where existential mobility should be realized, once the physical border has been crossed. I am interested in how people like Rachid apprehend and navigate a new or different precarious situation long after they have first physically moved to Europe and/or Switzerland. At a more structural level, I examine the relationship between uncertain living conditions and Swiss migration policies for Rachid and his colleagues in the hospitality industry. Zooming out from the migrant workers' positions, I also seek to explore how their uncertainty contrasts with that experienced by more privileged populations, who are regarded as 'natives' within their own nation and place of residence. As such, this article responds to recent pleas of mobility scholars to address both migrants and non-migrants using the same analytical lens (Dahinden 2016; Glick Schiller 2021; Ramsay 2020).

My argument begins with a brief overview of the academic discourse on mobility and uncertainty, followed by an analysis of how cross-border mobility, driven by precarious conditions, also often exacerbates uncertainty. I then demonstrate how mobile labour has been used as a flexible economic 'fix' in Swiss history to date, while enhancing migrant precarity. Third, I situate

the migrant experience of uncertainty in the broader context of international tourism and the Swiss Alps – a region shaped by the uncertain business of tourism, where locals depend on the unpredictable mobility of others (tourists) to stay put in their home valley. Their 'immobile' position is fraught with tensions and paradoxes between tourism's promises of stability and threatening consequences for their lives. In a fourth step, I sketch a comparison of different modes of 'navigation' (Vigh 2009) employed by various villagers (migrants or not) so they could live in environments or situations of instability and precarity. Here I differentiate between Swiss locals' strategies of division and externalization and migrant hospitality workers' embodiment of the tensions of tourism for lack of a better choice. I conclude with a reflection on common yearnings among my interlocutors, such as staying put in a world of movement as the expression of a dignified life.

The findings cited in this article are based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2023 among migrant workers, Swiss or 'native' locals and tourism actors in this valley of the Bernese Highlands, as part of my doctoral and postdoctoral research on tourism dependency. I conducted participant observation in multiple tourist settings, stayed in hotels as a guest and supported a team as a hospitality worker for a few days, went on numerous guided tours, attended more or less formally organized tourist events, and used the local touristic infrastructures on a daily basis. Next to the many informal discussions I had on these occasions, I conducted seventy recorded interviews.

Moving forward and against uncertainty

Uncertainty has been described as one of the necessary conditions enabling one to hope or imagine progress (Kleist and Thorsen 2017; Koselleck 2004). Yet uncertainty nowadays evokes a negative, upsetting reality, positioned against positively valued ideas of stability and security and what seems to constitute the 'normal' course of life or the normative evolution of history (Carey and Pedersen 2017, 20). At the same time, crises and instability are far from exceptional: they drive the processes of creative destruction structuring late capitalist modernity (Harvey 1989).

Beyond concerns regarding its structural or contextual manifestations, uncertainty undoubtedly also constitutes an existential, intimate experience. Zygmunt Bauman has spoken of ours as an age of endemic insecurity (Bauman 2013). It is one of 'realization of uncertainty … and the realization that uncertainty is here to stay', in which we 'develop an art of living permanently with uncertainty' (Bauman in documentary by Dziadosz (2013)). Protesting or demonstrating in response to the upsetting feeling of seeing one's life, one's community's development interrupted by crises has indeed increasingly marked life in the 21st century (Narotzky and Besnier 2014). And while physical movement does not constitute a political practice per se, mobility surely constitutes yet another response to or 'art' of living with uncertainty.

For Rachid, like many of my migrant interlocutors in the Alpine valley, coming to Europe or Switzerland meant moving forward existentially, as well as an attempt at mitigating the uncertainty encountered back home. As Frances Pine has put it, 'migration … can be both a symbol and an enactment of hope and of faith in the future and an act of or a reaction to hopelessness, despair, and acute loss in the present' (2014, S96). The motivations for such movement varied but they all related to uncertainty and crisis, in more or less chronic forms (Vigh 2008): for Rachid, the aftermath of colonization in Tunisia, coupled with the Ben Ali dictatorship, economic hardship and familial problems shaped the context he left behind; for other migrants from Southern Europe, moving away from their precarious home economies following the 2008 financial crisis was an act of despair and normality, given the importance of Switzerland as a historical destination for many compatriots before them. Ines and Andrea, hotel workers from rural Portugal, explained that Switzerland represented the future when 'home' lacked stability due to low industrialization after WWII, Salazar's dictatorship and recent austerity (Fibbi et al. 2010). Expectations of betterment via cross-border movement were shaped by relatives and

friends, many of whom had themselves migrated to Western Europe or Switzerland. Such transnational ties interlinking Switzerland and Portugal often helped to reduce and face uncertainty during migration, by facilitating the journey or providing support with accommodation, employment and administrative matters (Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2021). And such individual forms of existential mobility, supported by these transnational networks, in turn shaped the support system itself: Rachid explained that he, like other diaspora members, enabled his family to live better, via remittances.

For my interlocutors, relocating to the Alpine village or Switzerland was not a deliberate decision based on evaluation of the pros and cons of each destination – 'push and pull' factors in simplifying migration jargon. Instead, moving was the product of a transnational context of uncertainty or disappointment 'back home' and the historical demand for migrant labour in Switzerland, especially in the hospitality industry (Kuhn 2019). A century ago, migrants in the valley had mostly been Italian, followed by nationals of other European countries such as Yugoslavia, Portugal or, more recently, Slovakia. Back then, working in the hospitality industry was no more of a choice than for Rachid, Ines and Andrea. Taking positions in hotels and restaurants played a prominent role for my interlocutors' pursuit of existential mobility, not because of the nature of the job, but rather because of what it enabled: entering the Swiss economy 'from below', in a sector providing little financial security and in constant need of additional, un- or 'dequalified' workers, as we shall see. Although partly driven by luck and external factors, the intimate pursuit of a better life via cross-border movement was not always, or not just, disappointing. Rachid for instance remembered that moving seasonally from resort to resort gave him a feeling of accomplishment, of moving 'forward in life' and belonging in a cosmopolitan world that he saw embodied by European tourists visiting his homeland when he was a child. Tourism sometimes provides those who sustain this business with their labour with opportunities to enjoy leisure mobilities (Bianchi 2000).

The experiences of the migrant hospitality workers I met in the village revealed how both physical and existential mobility served as intertwined expressions of hope and responses to crisis situations 'back home' in a hyperconnected world (Pine 2014). As an industry based on hospitality infrastructure and its reliance on unqualified mobile labour (Ladkin 2014), tourism had brought many of my migrant interlocutors to the valley. In contrast to tourists seeking a temporary escape from everyday life, Rachid, Ines and Andrea engaged in tourism as a means to access employment opportunities and to (re)construct their own daily lives and those of their families.

Mobile labour: an economic fix and catalyst of migrant uncertainty

The existential mobility entailed in migration is an intimate and affective pursuit for those who undertake it, but it is also an endeavour that is subjected to the judgement of others. This is particularly the case in contexts that both rely on a mobile workforce and marginalize it because it is deemed threatening. In the valley, many of my Swiss interlocutors assumed that migration from abroad into their country – which they presented as a wealthy, safe and stable place, according to a Swiss national myth of exception (see Eberle and Imhof 2007; Purtschert, Lüthi, and Falk 2012) – could result in an improvement to the migrants' personal quality of life and to their home countries, automatically framed as deficient (see also Jensen and Loftsdóttir 2021). A local tourism official even presented the situation shaping Switzerland and the valley's labour market as 'win-win': 'I think that we Swiss are well served because we can count on this [migrant] workforce. On the other side, it [work in Switzerland] helps these people to go back to their countries with good wages and to make a living on their own there. For me, this is a win-win situation'.

The idea of migrants 'winning' by setting foot in Switzerland, or even 'profiting' from its infrastructure, could be seen as an acknowledgement of their legitimate pursuit of social and

existential mobility. Yet this rationale also echoes a historical narrative of *Überfremdung* (foreign alienation), based on perceptions of migrant otherness and disposability. This discourse continues to shape Switzerland and informs its migration regime – one of the most restrictive in Europe, particularly concerning citizenship acquisition (Schmid 2023).

The idea of *Überfremdung* emerged at the end of the 19th century, after a period of intense industrialization in which Switzerland actively encouraged the mobility of workers from abroad to its territory for economic reasons – particularly from poorer, neighbouring regions such as Northern Italy. From the 1910s migrants, especially from Italy, became increasingly perceived as aliens whose presence threatened Switzerland's 'cultural integrity' and had to be regulated (Kury 2003). Following these concerns, the idea of a temporary permit for migrant workers took shape in 1931. By limiting the presence of migrants to a maximum of nine months a year, this system guaranteed the Swiss state the flexibility to respond to economic demands for cheap labour (especially in the construction and hospitality industries), while also responding to the deeply xenophobic fears of cultural alienation among growing sections of the population (Arlettaz 2012). The uncertainty of the global conjuncture further legitimized an explicit 'politics of non-integration' (Niederberger 2004, 41), spatially and socially segregating migrants to avoid their potential burdening of the Swiss state in case of a recession and unemployment. Such pre-emptive attempts to mediate, govern and speculate with uncertainty framed migrant presence in Switzerland as tolerable on condition that it remained temporary, requested and limited to the economic sphere.

Variations of the *Überfremdung* discourse have continued to shape everyday narratives and migration policies in Switzerland, coexisting with an important migrant presence (Riaño and Wastl-Walter 2006; dos Santos Pinto et al. 2022). In 2023, 40% of the permanent resident population (from age 15) had a migration background[2] and, in the Swiss hospitality sector, 50% of the workforce were migrants as of 2021, a number increasing in lower-tier positions (Nathani et al. 2022, 10–11). In a tourist resort like my field site, the seasonally fluctuating hospitality industry employed an overwhelming number of people with temporary residents' permits. Despite the importance of migration in Switzerland, the tourism official's quote above highlights how the presence of migrants is still largely perceived as one of non-belonging, and of remaining outside the fabric of Swiss society. Work is performed in Switzerland, for now, but existences, futures are realized elsewhere.

Although the temporary guest-worker regime was abolished in 2002 following the bilateral agreement on freedom of movement,[3] many of my Swiss interlocutors in the valley continued to perceive migrants as radical others, particularly threatening when it came to non-European refugees. Migrant hospitality workers', the overwhelming majority of whom were from EU contexts, were not deemed as disturbing as these refugees. Many Swiss locals nonetheless referred to their provenance from crisis-ridden contexts to legitimize their occupation of the lowest positions in the economy, performing hospitality work (Leitenberg 2024). Similar to what Torres, Jeffrey Popke, and Hapke (2006) describe as the 'silent bargain' in the context of labour migration to rural South Carolina, Swiss locals tolerated these migrants' presence and the difference they posed if they accepted occupying the lower sectors of the job market. In the Swiss Alps, this tolerance also grew out of necessity. As a local once put it, the village could not welcome as many guests with only a local workforce. However, this also implied a form of downplaying of the historical role of migrants. Another Swiss local expressed that the village's multicultural atmosphere came 'from the tourists but not from the (migrant) workers', unlike in Swiss cities, where, as she imagined, their influence was greater.

This brief historical overview of the developments of the *Überfremdung* narrative casts a different light on the win-win situation described by the tourism official. Switzerland has largely profited from a mobile workforce while rarely acknowledging the exploitative, dehumanizing and precarizing nature of such policies. The exact extent to which the temporary migration regime has benefitted Switzerland remains scarcely calculable but it follows a logic of 'systematic

separation of the exploitation of labour-power from the sites (and costs) of its reproduction' common to many Western contexts (De Genova 2019, 435). Rachid's profound dissatisfaction with an exploitative hospitality industry and the radical contradiction this created with his aspirations of stability and normality show how migration does not easily equate with life enhancement.

Although the temporary guest-worker regime had been abolished almost twenty years prior to my arrival in the village, a sense of migrant precarity, uncertainty and even segregation seemed to have outlived it. New regulations guaranteed the right of migrant workers to family reunification and unemployment benefits (absent in the temporary guest-worker programme), but Rachid and many workers I met described experiences of exclusion and precarization. More precisely, they felt existentially 'stuck', in Hage's words (2009), at an impasse in their lives and sometimes regretted having ever entered a tourist industry with no prospect of upwards mobility or legal protection offered by unions (Baum 2007). So much so that they considered them as futureless jobs reserved to foreigners with 'no other choice'.

While Torres, Jeffrey Popke, and Hapke (2006) highlight that South Carolina's 'silent bargain' offers Latino migrants rural *tranquilidad* in exchange for exploitative labour conditions, the reality was different for Rachid and many of his colleagues: there was no such meaningful trade-off for them, but rather they were constrained by necessity, although living in 'paradise' sometimes helped to endure the everyday, as Rachid expressed. As migrants, they were legally required to be economically active to be able to stay in Switzerland and to send remittances home. However, the only positions they could access were precarious, badly paid and similarly exploitative. Rachid described a life reduced to its minimum, of working and recovering from work. 'How am I supposed to meet someone here?', he asked himself, thinking of his future wife.

Such existential stuckedness did not manifest in physical immobility, quite the contrary: being socially and existentially stuck as a migrant meant being highly physically mobile. It implied moving between one's flat and workplace, waiting and attending to customers, or travelling 'home' to visit and provide support to their families. This movement, like that undertaken by the transmigrants studied by Alain Tarrius (1996), was characterized by high circulation across places and territories but only laterally or horizontally socially speaking, rarely vertically. It meant going everywhere without 'going somewhere in life' (Hage 2009, 97). If hospitality work promised a possibility to enter the Swiss economy 'from below', it also maintained migrants at the fringes of society.

Rachid also complained about the interpersonal tensions permeating his workplace. The emotional labour involved in the service industry (Anderson, Chappel and Provis 2002), the tensions within his team and the humiliation inflicted by his superiors weighed on him. Other hospitality workers expressed similar discontent with their colleagues, where rivalry and mistrust were common, exacerbated by the feeling of being replaceable as a 'deskilled' workers (Seiger et al. 2020). At the same time, contact with the local population was limited, as Swiss villagers rarely worked in or visited the hotels employing migrants. Relationships were especially difficult to form because migrant workers felt ignored or, more rarely, openly rejected by the Swiss locals. 'They live in a bubble', Ines once remarked, a sentiment echoed by many Swiss villagers about the Portuguese workers and their perceived reluctance to 'integrate'. Working in the hospitality industry was marked by a sense of loneliness and exclusion while being surrounded guests and colleagues, whom one had to please or compete with, even if trusting relationships, of understanding, friendship and solidarity, sometimes also developed.

Adding to such conditions, migration policies also recast migrant presence as revocable if the conditions of economic and cultural integration were not met – in line with the *Überfremdung* and temporary workers regime. For Italian worker Clara, state scrutiny was particularly destabilizing. 'What happens if I lose my job?', she asked me one day after she had heard of an entire hotel team being laid off by a new owner. Jobless and with insufficient knowledge of German beyond the few words she used during her shifts as a waitress, she believed she and her family

could be deported in spite of the decades spent in the village. Becoming Swiss in one of the most restrictive European countries in this regard seemed impossible: like most migrants I met, Clara did not have sufficient integration markers (such as language proficiency) nor did she have the money or time to apply for citizenship.

The interplay between an integrationist framework that persistently reformulates border-crossers as migrant aliens (Çağlar 2018) and the systemic 'deskilling' (Seiger et al. 2020) of their prior work experiences abroad—rendered irrelevant in the host context—compelled many migrants to enter and remain in the hospitality sector, with few prospects beyond the precarious goal of barely making ends meet. This short-term and relative stability was thus often realized at the expense of long-term security. Such entrapping experiences produced spirals of uncertainty that affected these migrants' lives and their families, who relied on their support, in Switzerland or abroad.

For many hospitality workers, the interconnected migration regime and labour market gave rise to new, often unexpected forms of uncertainty that were all-encompassing, as we will see below. While migration can be seen as a response to uncertainty – an expression of hope or a reaction to hopelessness – it is also frequently tied to further layers of uncertainty in a world marked by global interconnectedness and the increasing problematization of human migration.

The volatile 'business of foreigners'

Until now, I have examined the dialectics of mobility and uncertainty on multiple levels: first, looking at mobility as an art of coping with uncertainty; second, examining how migration policies interlock with economic concerns in treating cross-border mobility (migration) as disposable; third, by looking at how mobility often exacerbates migrants' experiences of uncertainty in such contexts. Here I consider the general backdrop of uncertainty, shaped by a context of accelerating crises (Eriksen 2016), of ecological, social and financial precarity, as well as structural capitalist instability (Harvey 1989), against which migrant uncertainty can be understood. I focus on tourism as a vector of instability globally but also regionally, in an Alpine context where there is no viable alternative to tourism. In doing so, I respond to the recent pleas of mobility scholars such as Janine Dahinden (2016), Georgina Ramsay (2020) or Nina Glick Schiller (2021), who have called for the examination of both migrants and non-migrants through the same analytical lens to address the general processes of dispossession that (unevenly) impact these populations. Such a focus is crucial, as the experiences of populations who stay put (i.e. who do not migrate) in wealthy, Western parts of the world have been largely overlooked. Instead, the literature has mostly examined the links between mobility and crisis in the context of African migration to the West (Cooper and Pratten 2015; Kleist and Thorsen 2017; Vigh 2008). I suggest that focusing on both those who migrate (or have migrated) and those who do not allows us to understand the concrete yet distinct manifestations of insecurity in a world shaped by different regimes of mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

At first glance, the Swiss valley where I conducted fieldwork may not conjure up the social and environmental issues of our time. One the earliest examples of touristification in the European Alps, the resort steadily developed from a poor, farmers' village in the 19th century into a wealthy, global tourist resort. In 2022, the resort welcomed more than 1.4 million tourists, better than most resorts of comparable size. Acknowledging the importance of tourism across the region, locals repeatedly told me that they would be 'nothing without it', referring to both the history of the place and the current importance of the tourism sector. However, my research among Swiss locals was marked by a sense of instability and crisis in spite of such signs of success.

When I arrived in the valley, what appeared most destabilizing and uncertain was paradoxically what also seemed the most firmly anchored in the place's history, infrastructure and economy: the industry of tourism. Tourism had progressively enabled the firm and continuous emplacement of the valley's inhabitants and their ancestors in their homeland in spite of an

Alpine context of widespread outmigration.[4] Yet, tourism also dominated all aspects of life and to such an extent that it was also capable of undoing everything. The resort's reliance on the unmanageable wanderlust of guests from increasingly far away was the object of many tourism lobbyist meetings and at the core of most locals' preoccupations as tourism dependents. If tourists no longer felt like or could afford to visit the village, in the wake of financial, humanitarian and ecological crises, locals would struggle and potentially 'go back in time', to poverty, farming and outmigration, as many of them explained to me. The leisure-driven mobility of tourists in a situation of increasing global volatility was thus deeply problematized by locals who depended on tourism to stay put in their home valley.

Continuous investments to stay in the race within the competitive global tourism market, to reinvent and break new ground were thus required from the locals, who felt the need to 'sacrifice' for the sake of tourism development as the only viable future (Azcárate 2020). Emblematic of such efforts was the construction of a very divisive new cable car, which tourism lobbyists believed would secure the valley's touristic future, by transporting tourists faster to the slopes and sightseeing platforms. Although believed necessary by a large part of the population, many locals expressed a feeling of deep unease at the sprawl of new infrastructure and the growing power of a few important touristic players.

'The village is no longer for us locals', lamented one man after learning about the disappearance of yet another local shop in favour of an expensive sports shop. He, like many others, expressed feeling increasingly pressured and side-lined by tourism actors and complained about gentrification and the scarcity of services for the local population (as opposed to tourists). Another local, Beat, stated that 'us locals no longer profit from tourism' as his private property was about to be crossed by the new cable car project. While Beat was personally impacted by the new infrastructure, he was also very worried about the increasing presence of so-called 'mass tourists' (i.e. organized groups of tourists travelling to the valley for short trips) – a concern shared by the large majority of locals. While such issues were already present when I arrived in the village in 2017, they had become central following the pandemic and what seemed to be the outside world's regained interest in mountain regions, for instance leading to rising rental prices. The global problem of overtourism was so real that it even became part of local everyday talk, and conflicts between locals and tourists even motivated the local tourism office to issue a behaviour guide for the latter.

I do not have space to examine such tensions in more detail here, but it is crucial to note that the processes unfolding in my field site are not unique. They are processes of capitalist creative destruction, where 'continuous innovation … devalue[s], if not destroy[s], past investments and labour skills' (Harvey 1989, 105–106). This particularly applies to the extractive tourism industry, in which dependents have to reinvent themselves and behave in accordance with a shifting, global tourism market based on growth (Bianchi and Milano 2024). Innovation coexists with people's affective attachments to what is being transformed or destroyed – values, relationships, investments, environments. Rural areas situated at the periphery of urban centres of power, such as the Alps, are especially vulnerable to the paradoxes of tourism: both a vital guarantor of their future and a force that threatens heritage (Leitenberg 2024).

Although non-migrants, the valley's Swiss locals experienced a sense of uncertainty emerging from their dependency on the dominant but fragile tourism industry. Exemplifying the dialectical relation between mobility and immobility (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006), this situation highlights how locals could stay put in their valley thanks to the mobility of travellers from elsewhere to their village. Yet the unpredictability of this tourist mobility, the sacrifices and conflicts that tourism imposed, as well as the lack of alternatives caused doubts, conflicts and confusion among locals.

Uneven navigation of tourism uncertainty

How, then, to account for the uncertainty experienced by someone like Rachid within the context of polycrisis and the volatile tourism industry? While all of my migrant and non-migrant

interlocutors shared a state of dependency on tourism to make a living in the valley, in this section I shed light on how people navigated the paradoxes of tourism, as an industry producing un/certainty. Comparison plays a crucial role here: in a global context where instability seems to prevail, I agree with those who have argued that experiences of precarity need to be approached along axes of inequality (e.g. Butler 2012).

Using the verb 'navigating', I here follow anthropologist Henrik Vigh's work (2009), and his understanding of the term as 'motion within motion', referring both to 'how people move and manage within situations of social flux and change' (420). While the idea of navigation encompasses a multitude of practices, actors and institutions, the motion I describe here operates both at the symbolic and practical levels. It is embedded in the experiences and views of the two populations I have worked with in the valley, namely migrant and non-migrant residents of the village. Crucially, the different experiences and opportunities of mobility and immobility in uncertain contexts played a key role in shaping the categories of 'migrants' and 'natives'. For hospitality workers, this meant cross-border migration to move forward in life, while for Swiss locals, it involved staying rooted in their country or village of origin in spite of difficulties.

Externalizing the boundary

Visiting my Swiss interlocutors in the valley often turned into an expedition across one of the country's largest municipalities (more than 150 km^2). When meeting locals who emphasized their 'authentic' nativeness (*Einheimischsein*) in the valley – demonstrated, for instance, through their local family names and spoken dialect (see Leitenberg 2023) – I often had to travel to the outer edges of the village's scattered settlement *(Streusiedlung*) to meet them. From their (usually inherited) homes overlooking the village centre, these native villagers often pointed down it, highlighting its problems, such as invasive crowds of mass tourists or new infrastructure.

For native local woman Franziska, the centre had become a cosmopolitanized, overbuilt and messy place. This contrasted with her own home, decorated with objects and pictures portraying the valley's farming past and its pristine glaciers. Franziska explained that she avoided the main road at certain hours of the day, travelling earlier/later to avoid the crowds or the traffic, and she sometimes went to great lengths to circumvent it. The valley's gentrification had forced other locals to go out of town to find goods or even to move out and to the urban lowlands to find affordable housing (see also Lems 2023). The crowds of tourists that went through the valley and the absence of other locals had contributed to a sense of 'anonymity', as Franziska described. If, like her, many native locals were proud to live in and belong to the valley, they most definitely did not feel at home everywhere. For Franziska and many of those I met, their houses on the outer edges were slices of *Heimat* – a German word that denotes home(land) in both its material, social and affective elements (Leimgruber 2019) – and places of integrity and continuity with the farming past and values. But with the growing number of tourists, locals explained that they were regularly subjected to unwanted trespassing by guests onto their properties, misdirected by GPS services and spontaneously showing up and subjecting locals to their 'tourist gaze' at home (Urry and Larsen 2011). Many Swiss locals decided to fence off their properties, in order to maintain their privacy and 'cope' with tourism (see Boissevain 1996).

But locals did not perceive all tourists as invaders. Some European guests, especially German, British or Swiss, described as long-term and returning guests (*Stammgäste*), were welcomed in many of my interlocutors' houses, in rentals adjacent to their own homes. Locals, however, often avoided hosting non-European guests, from Asia or the Middle East, because of 'cultural misunderstandings' and the additional workload they represented. They hierarchized and divided between those to whom they could easily be hospitable, returning and individual Western guests, and the newer, more challenging and less profitable non-European 'masses'.[5] I understand such efforts by my Swiss interlocutors as a navigation of tourism, as both a necessary and disturbing business. From their properties or *Heimat*, the centres of their world (Cole and Wolf

1999), they traced a clear boundary between what was safe, agreeable and profitable and what was threatening, bothersome and disorientating. They materialized and externalized the tension between the certain and uncertain: the 'homely', as the location of familiarity and stability, to which they returned and retreated, in opposition to the disorientating, volatile 'outside', which they ordered and avoided (Samanani and Lenhard 2019).

Swallowing tensions

In contrast to the overwhelming majority of my local Swiss interlocutors, all migrant workers I met lived in the centre of the village, in the direct vicinity of the hotels and restaurants that employed them. Rachid and his colleagues regularly explained how tourism labour, the pressure to do more and faster (while being friendly), as well as state scrutiny of their existence as migrants felt overwhelming. The physical, mental and emotional labour involved in speaking several languages, managing people's expectations, running around, serving and carrying extended well after working hours, into their private lives. Furthermore, a pernicious sense of restlessness manifested in their bodies and minds. In spite of their different life stories and positions in the industry, all hospitality workers I met showed signs of chronic suffering – a global reality in this sector (Sánchez-Rodríguez et al. 2022).

Contrasting with the experiences of Swiss locals, I suggest that such pain points to an inward, embodied form of social navigation, shaped by a lack of alternatives. Take Rachid's ulcer, which he attributed to his stressful life. Years of 'swallowing' (*schlucken*) humiliation, tensions, pain and bad food had shaped his precarious social but also bodily condition. He was absorbing the injustice of the job into his body and repressing a response in order to make it easier to go back to work the next day because quitting felt impossible. Swallowing difficulties, pulling oneself together, numbing one's pain were all indicative of how Rachid and many of his colleagues internally and often individually navigated the tensions of tourism, between its potential for existential mobility and its entrapping consequences. Far from passive, I take this navigation as a way of coping with the tension of tourism, by moving inside one's body and mind to draw on one's inner resources. For Rachid, the navigation through tourism's paradoxes could not be that of an act of circumvention, avoidance or externalization – he did not own anythingin the village to support such a practice of navigation, unlike his Swiss native counterparts. My migrant interlocutors embodied the tensions of tourism in order to navigate them. However, Rachid's story reveals that this navigation had a painful cost. Next to chronic bodily pain, he evoked the effects of such navigation in making him become 'alien' not just as a migrant in Switzerland but to himself (Hochschild 2003). He no longer recognized himself, now sick, lonely and far from achieving his dreams of independence.

Conclusion

In this article, I have proposed to apprehend mobility both as response to and catalyst of uncertainty in a global constellation of hyperconnectivity *and* uneven regimes of mobility. I have also discussed the necessity of considering migrant precarity in light of a global situation of instability, particularly manifest in the touristic Alps, as rural yet transnationally connected areas. Responding to recent calls in mobility and migration studies, I have begun to approach the experiences of migrant and non-migrant populations together in this article. Understanding these uneven experiences in relation to each other is, I believe, a crucial first step towards understanding the challenges that new forms of crises have brought for populations until recently considered spared from uncertainty (Knight and Stewart 2016). At the same time, this should not prevent us from seeing these alongside long histories of dispossessions that shape the lives of many. As scholarship on capitalism urges us to do (e.g. Bear et al. 2015),

one of the next necessary steps of a 'demigranticizing' agenda (Dahinden 2016) would be to apprehend how differences are not simply consequences but also features of an economic system that thrives on inequality. Tourism's segmented labour market makes for a case in point here.

My findings also speak of the unequal freedom of movement that characterizes the current global situation and the increasingly diverse meanings attached to immobility. Those framed as immobile or native populations often enjoy a greater ability to move and navigate the uncertain world – what has also been described as motility – both physically and figuratively speaking. Those who are continuously labelled mobile – i.e. migrants, particularly but not only from non-EU contexts, as the cases of Portuguese and Italian workers show here – on the contrary, often find themselves stuck and/or waiting. When speaking of immobility one needs to 'keep in mind the analytical distinction between negatively valued immobility (as a constraint) and positively valued immobility (as a conscious choice)' (Salazar 2021, 4).

As different as the experiences between migrant and non-migrant populations were in the village, I would like to conclude with a feature shared by all villagers. Both the Swiss locals and the migrant hospitality workers yearned for a form of existential mobility rooted in physical immobility. While the former celebrated rootedness as a traditional Alpine value, the latter yearned to stay in the village without feeling exploited and entrapped. Rachid and many of his colleagues wished to live and realize themselves *in* the village, contrary to what many Swiss locals thought. If they contradict much of the postmodern, placeless vocabulary of flow used to describe migration, such yearning for moorings (Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006) are increasingly common in a world of uncertainty.

Notes

1. I have anonymized both the name of the valley and its inhabitants in order to protect their privacy and their activities. I refer to the location as 'the village', 'the valley', 'the municipality', 'the resort' or the 'field site' interchangeably, unless otherwise specified.
2. https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/population/migration-integration/by-migration-status.html (last accessed 16/04/2025).
3. https://www.eda.admin.ch/missions/mission-eu-brussels/en/home/key-issues/free-movement-persons.html#:~:text=The%20bilateral%20Agreement%20on%20the,national%20territories%20of%20the%20contracting ((last accessed 16/04/2025).
4. Outmigration is a common problem in Alpine areas. The village was one of the few places in the Bernese Highlands that did not have a negative net migration rate.
5. I have shown elsewhere how this is imbued with racializing discourses (Leitenberg, 2025).

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Research ethics statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines outlined in the 2019 Code of Ethics of the German Anthropological Association. Research participants were recruited based on the principle of informed consent.

Data availability

Given the sensitive nature of the data and in order to protect the anonymity of research participants, the original materials cannot be made publicly available or shared through repositories.

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