

Malinowski and the Alps: An Elusive Historical-Ethnographic Footprint

Introduction

Elisabeth Tauber and Dorothy Zinn – Free University of Bozen-Bolzano

The initial impetus for this book, as with all of the work conducted by the Malinowski Forum for Ethnography and Anthropology, lies in the fact that South Tyrol – precisely Oberbozen-Soprabolzano and Gries, Bozen-Bolzano – was a home to Malinowski and his family between the 1920s and 30s, and the family connection to the area remains to this day (see the prologue by Burke and Ulrich). However, we were intrigued not simply by the presence of Malinowski in the Alps, but to think about how he might have left a mark on Alpine anthropology. At first glance, the idea of a collection of essays on Malinowski and Alpine anthropology would appear to be rather paradoxical. We might have been tempted, indeed, to save a load of paper and gigabytes by simply noting that, despite all the time he spent in South Tyrol, Malinowski never made the Alps an object of study, and therefore never really had an impact on the Alpine anthropology: The End. Yet, as we considered the question more carefully, a number of subtle traces emerged that suggested the value of reconsidering Malinowski's presence in the Alps, both as a part-time inhabitant and as a disciplinary master, a scholar whose work is necessarily to be reckoned with by any up-and-coming anthropologist.

It remains unclear why Malinowski never actually conducted research in the Alps, though Gingrich and Knoll (2018) as well as Viazzo and Colajanni (in this volume) offer some conjectures. The Malinowski-Alps missing link is all the more intriguing if we consider the importance he attributes to his early experiences of an Alpine area in Poland. In his prodigious biography of Bronislaw Malinowski, Michael Young (2004) relates how, in various self-presentations, Malinowski would invoke his childhood experience in the

Part of

Tauber, E. & Zinn, D.L. (Eds.). (2023). *Malinowski and the Alps – Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. bu.press.

<https://doi.org/10.13124/9788860461940>



mountains of Southern Poland. In a first example from a fragmentary autobiographical note, Malinowski writes:

Brought up in the R.C. faith and owing to early illness, in Tatra Mountains age fr. 4–10. From child[hood] Polish, French & and their dialects. A double life, at least ... Mixed with the mountaineers, speaking their gwara (dialect) looking after sheep & cows, running away for days, learnt fairy tales, legends of good old days of banditry. (Malinowski, as cited in Young, 2004, p. 14).

In a second example that Young (2004, p. 15–16) presents, in the context of the introduction to a textbook on anthropology he was commissioned to write in the 1930s, Malinowski recalls this early experience in the Polish mountains in greater detail. In this case, however, he connects this childhood memory to the sort of experience of diversity that ignites sociocultural anthropological reflection. To cite an excerpt from the text of the introduction reported by Young:

By the time I was eight I had lived in two fully distinct cultural worlds, speaking two languages, eating two different kinds of food, using two sets of table manners, observing two sets of reticencies and delicacies, enjoying two sets of amusements. I also learned two sets of religious views, beliefs and practices, and was exposed to two sets of morality and sexual mores (see *Sex and Repression* [sic]).

Young observes that Malinowski produces such representations of his early years as a justification for his calling as an anthropologist. We see a similar pattern in yet another autobiographical text by Malinowski written in the third person:

After graduating his health gave way and the next three years he spent on the shores of the Mediterranean, visiting North Africa, Asia Minor, and the Canary Islands. With the practical gift for languages of his countrymen, he spoke from childhood, in addition to Polish and its various peasant dialects, German, French and Russian. During these three years he acquired Spanish and Italian & was thus everywhere in his travels able to study the peoples among whom he lived. He had, moreover, like his distinguished countryman, Joseph Conrad, whose ac-

quaintance he was afterwards to make, an enthusiasm for the exotic that led him at this time to desert the sober sciences of mathematics, physics and chemistry for the humanistic study of anthropology. It was not altogether a new interest; in his childhood, spent in the Carpathian mountains, he had lived among the rude mountaineers and shepherds who ... (as cited in Young, 2004, p. 43)

The seeming contradiction between Malinowski's precocious "participant observation" among the Tatra peasants and shepherds – one that purportedly helped spark his anthropological capacity for reflecting on cultural difference – and his later disinterest for South Tyrolean *Bauern* begs reflection.

So far, this absence remains a conundrum, as the contributions in this volume also show. Yet this contradiction manifests itself in the rather hidden traces Malinowski has left behind in the Alps: for example, in the work of the young historian Lucie Varga or in the community studies conducted in the Alps in later decades, often without explicitly referring to his method of participant observation. Thus, Malinowski's somehow hidden presence in the Alps is reflected in the following chapters. We encounter female researchers who were rediscovered late and methodological reflections that preoccupy historians and folklorists, while American and British anthropologists in the Alps rarely made a methodological treatise with explicit reference to Malinowski. Of course, Pier Paolo Viazzo (in this volume) is right when he says that Malinowski's methodological canon was such an established, so to speak, core business of the discipline that anthropologists did not need to refer to it explicitly.

In his essay, Pier Paolo Viazzo works through the history of Malinowski's epistemological legacy in the Alps, which is not always straightforwardly visible. The enigma surrounding the lack of interest shown by Malinowski – but also by the illustrious guests from anthropology who visited him in Oberbozen – for the differences between the German *Bauer* and the Italian *contadino*, which were so plainly evident, and which were brought into view in a groundbreaking contribution by Cole and Wolf (1974) four decades later, also surprises Viazzo. The previous assumption about Malinowski's skepticism towards folklore, its closeness to nationalist ideas, as well as his strategic demarcation from historical scholarship, is somewhat relativized by Viazzo through his description of the rich, interdisciplinary exchange at the

London School of Economics (LSE) of his time, in which historians are equally involved. So, although Malinowski did not inspire any of his students to work ethnographically in the Alps, Viazzo sees Lucie Varga, (re)discovered by Peter Schöttler – the editor of her essays – as the real pioneer of ethnographic research in the Alps. Varga – who has remained unforgivably unnoticed not only by historians but also by anthropologists for decades – and Cole and Wolf, whose work, in contrast, has made the Alps known as a valuable ethnographic research region – could then be seen as the true pioneers in Alpine anthropology.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that Hortense Powdermaker, Eric Wolf's mentor from his days as her student at Queens College, herself studied under Malinowski at LSE, and she was among the group who would spend summers in Oberbozen with Malinowski and his family (Powdermaker, 1966). Powdermaker remained a family friend long after Malinowski's death and continued to visit the Oberbozen villa in the 1950s and 60s, even spending time there for her writing (Powdermaker, 1966; Malinowski grandchildren, personal communication). Powdermaker, who died in 1970, had remained friends with Wolf and his second wife, Sydel Silverman. It is difficult to know if and how her own connection to South Tyrol through Malinowski may have influenced Wolf, who would go on to publish *The Hidden Frontier*, together with his own student, John Cole.

In any case, Paolo Viazzo wonders widely what would have happened if Varga's work had been familiar to the anthropologists who began researching in the Alps after World War II. And he explores the question of how Malinowski might have reacted to this unusual woman with her modern questions. Finally, he reflects on "what if" two women – historian Lucie Varga in the Alps and anthropologist Charlotte Gower in the Mediterranean – had been given the place in academia they deserved for their modern methodologies during their lifetimes. Both women adopted the Malinowskian approach in their research. In Viazzo's text we continue to read how the tension between local researchers and outside researchers was articulated – *Amerikaner in den Alpen* were welcomed as innovators and skeptically viewed when they disregarded the historical dimension or ignored local sensitivities. For Viazzo, this raises the question of whether there is still a need for a Malinowskian anthropology in the Alps: one that stays on the ground, familiarizes itself

by learning the language, grasping the inside point of view, a method that has been somewhat neglected in the light of developments in the last twenty years, but which, according to Viazzo, still has its say and relevance for doing research in the Alps.

Historian Margaret Lanzinger likewise addresses the scientific significance of Lucie Varga's work. In her chapter, Lanzinger encompasses in a broader sense the questions and methodological approaches that historical science has taken over from cultural anthropology and, on the other hand, those that anthropology has taken from historical science. She highlights how Lucie Varga, inspired by Bronislaw Malinowski, differs from, for example, an author like Hermann Wopfner, for whom historical folklore with its focus on collective identities and the idea of a "folk soul" that historically has changed little, is paramount. Lanzinger directs her focus to the developments of modern historical research, which is increasingly interdisciplinary and, for example, appropriates fieldwork in Varga's sense in order to be able to comprehensively deal with research questions. She shows how anthropological research in the Alps has influenced social and microhistory with its questions referring to social practice and change. Using the example of the work of Cole and Wolf (1974), who also adopted a historical perspective, she illustrates that historical research in the archive follows a completely different practice for anthropologists than that of historians. Nevertheless, Lanzinger considers *The Hidden Frontier* a central work that started the process of historicizing anthropology, since historical data provided the basis for explaining the two different cultural-ecological systems in the same environment. At the same time, this work asked questions that were not the focus of folklorists and historians of its time. Thus, this work, and anthropology as a whole, has revealed the tension between cultural ideology and social practice, stimulating and leading historical research – especially microhistory – to look more closely at the contradictions between rules and norms. Lanzinger shows how it was only through ethnographic questions that the historical research could be opened up to non-linear complexity. According to Lanzinger, Malinowski did not directly influence historical research in the Alps, but his methodological plea "to grasp the inside point of view", his influence on Lucie Varga, as well as his critical reflection in his diary entries on the subjectivity of data, anticipated the discussion in historical science by decades.

In her contribution, Daniela Salvucci focuses on the traces of the Malinowski family in Bolzano and Oberbozen – the very reason for the existence of the Malinowski Forum and the publications that emerge from it. As part of her research project, she delves into the historical circumstances of these places, all in South Tyrol, whose historical fate at the time of the Malinowski family's stay in Bozen and Oberbozen was determined by the trauma of the 1919 Saint-Germain Peace Treaty, which established the new border between Italy and Austria along the Brenner Pass and determined the separation from Austria. In this context, Salvucci looks at the family's networks of social relations, and their cosmopolitanism expressed in a context of liberal intellectuals equally interested in art and science and attracted as travelers by "exotic" places and a certain standard of living. In her descriptive essay, Salvucci goes into detail about places of residence, flats, and houses occupied by the Malinowski family. According to Salvucci, the Malinowskis' residences in Bozen and Oberbozen contributed to a cosmopolitan culture in South Tyrol.

Finally, Peter Schöttler introduces the two essays by Lucie Varga (1936, 1939), widely discussed in this volume and translated here, one for the first time from French into English and the other newly translated. It should be noted that George Huppert made a first translation of the 1936 essay available. However, in accordance with Peter Schöttler, the editors have decided to present a new translation of the essay in order to adjust some finer points of the previous translation, especially with regard to the ethnographic subtleties. The importance of Varga's work also becomes clear in Huppert's introduction, where he writes full of respect for Varga:

The article presented here speaks for itself. No other historical journal would have published anything like it. It took someone like Febvre, an aging rebel who had thundered at the timidity and the lack of imagination of his colleagues since before 1914, to see that "Madame Varga-Borkenau" represented an astonishing assault against traditional scholarship and a successful demonstration of what could be achieved when the methods of the historian were combined with those of the ethnographer. To be sure, it took an exceptional mind and an exceptional personality to get the results described in the pages that follow. (Varga, 1936/2006, p. 253)

Moreover, Varga's immersion in the respective local contexts of Vorarlberg and Gadertal, her descriptive and narrative style, and her detailed observations came together in a holistic analysis that can be seen in direct connection with Malinowski's methodological and stylistic legacy. In this volume, Schöttler takes an in-depth look at Malinowski's influence on Varga. For Schöttler, there was most likely more than one encounter between Bronislaw Malinowski and the young, unknown historian Lucie Varga. However, a detailed documentation of their (mutual?) inspiration is hardly possible due to a lack of data. Lucie Varga – whom he discovered in an unpublished correspondence between Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch as part of his research on the *Annales* (Schöttler, 1991, p. 13) – is a pioneering author of historical anthropology on totalitarian movements before Malinowski and others. Her now-acknowledged importance for opening up new historiographical avenues (p. 78) is also underlined by Margaret Lanzinger and Pier Paolo Viazzo in this volume.

This promising historian, the only woman of the early *Annales* to die very young and be forgotten for many years, turns to the current issues of her time through a historical and ethnographic perspective. Varga exchanges ideas with Malinowski on this new method, which is becoming established in scientific discussion: She thanks him for it in a footnote that has since become famous among anthropologists (see Varga "In a Valley in Vorarlberg", 1936, here p. 111); and she opens her essay on the Montafon valley with a plea for the interaction between historiography and ethnology. Schöttler assumes that Varga saw Malinowski frequently and was also influenced by his ethnographic ideas through her husband Franz Borkeu, who attended Malinowski's LSE seminars in London, mentioned also by Viazzo in this volume. For her research in contemporary history, which Schöttler considers to be her most important, this Jewish woman travels in the 1930s to National Socialist Germany and to two Alpine valleys to talk to people on the ground. According to Schöttler, Varga can be seen as a precursor for later research on both National Socialism and women's studies because of her novel questions and methodological approach. Is it any coincidence that also her writing style resonates with Malinowski's work? Her contributions seem at first glance like light travelogues and only on closer reading turn out to be careful analyses of the emergence of modernity (Schöttler in this volume): light travelogues that

resemble Malinowski's genre, which in turn was significantly influenced by his first wife, Elsie Masson (see Salvucci, 2021, Tauber & Zinn, 2021).

The volume concludes with an afterword by Antonino Colajanni, a fine connoisseur of British anthropology, who recently published an article on Malinowski, applied anthropology, politics and colonialism in the anthropological journal *Anuac* (see Colajanni, 2022). As Colajanni comments on the various contributions to this volume, among other things he recalls the figure of Leopold Pospisil, an anthropologist who conducted work in an area adjacent to South Tyrol. Pospisil is another example of an anthropologist who could hardly escape engagement with Malinowski's work, especially since he also conducted research in Papua New Guinea, the area of Malinowski's first, groundbreaking fieldwork.

Finally, by way of our conversation with Pier Paolo Viazzo, we would like to respond to the criticism of an anonymous reviewer who was struggling with Malinowski's thin scholarly presence in the Alps: Asking why, for example, Lucie Varga's acknowledgement of Malinowski should play such a major role, and why finding out that Malinowski lived in South Tyrol should be the reason for his scholarly interest.

It was known from the beginning that Malinowski did not do research in South Tyrol or in the Alpine region, but to explore in a volume on Malinowski and the Alps the direct or indirect relations between Malinowski and Alpine anthropology did not seem and does not seem to me to be an idle undertaking. (Viazzo, personal communication, 2022)

One might think that the repeated reference to Varga's gratitude to Malinowski made in each chapter is exaggerated. But if one considers that Varga's article was ignored by historians as much as by anthropologists and thus had no concrete impact, the reference takes on a different meaning:

Personally, I believe that this "hint", which is not even too "thin", helps to provide insights and stimulate reflections on the relationship between anthropology and history, or on the history of Alpine anthropology, which are not entirely vain and useless. (Viazzo, personal communication, 2022)

This points to a problematic described by Cole (1977):

Malinowski even maintained a villa at Oberbozen in the South Tyrol where he and his students regularly vacationed. An entire generation of British anthropologists experienced invigorating walks in the mountains and enjoyed what Malinowski is said to have regarded as the finest scenery in all of Europe ... But the discussions on these vacations were of research conducted far afield, and while all enjoyed the scenery, their professional gaze was across the seas, among the black and brown inhabitants of the dominions and colonies of the British Empire. (p. 350)

Cole's remark is taken up again by Viazzo in his reflection on the reviewer's criticism:

Malinowski and his students, on holiday in Oberbozen ... kept their eyes fixed firmly on the "black and brown inhabitants of the dominions and colonies of the British Empire" ... without noticing what was literally happening before their eyes and was anthropologically relevant. I think that Cole might retort – to take the comparison to its extreme – that it would be surprising and regrettable for a twenty-first-century Malinowski to holiday on Lampedusa, for example, and not notice barges of migrants arriving on the island, or to deliberately ignore this (and not recognise its anthropological relevance) because his professional interests lie elsewhere in the world. (Viazzo, personal communication, 2022) ¹

Even though Malinowski never made the European Alps his field of research, it would be difficult to regard his stay in South Tyrol as a purely private affair. It makes sense to ask about what impressions, observations, comments and reflections he and his visiting scholars gathered and made while they were in South Tyrol. After all, this region was described forty years later (Cole & Wolf, 1974) as exemplary of the fact that the same environmental conditions do not necessarily produce the same cultural models.

As noted above, this book has drawn on the continued efforts of the Malinowski Forum for Ethnography and Anthropology (MFEA), founded by the editors in 2016 at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano not only to promote

¹ For a broad and controversial discussion on Malinowski and colonialism see Colajanni (2022) and Bassi et al. (2022).

knowledge about the Malinowskian presence in South Tyrol and create conversations about ethnography and anthropology that foster critical reflection and innovation, but also to serve as a reference point for Alpine anthropology. Indeed, we have conceived this volume as a concrete contribution in terms of one of the Malinowski Forum's missions: to draw attention to Alpine anthropology, with its fascinating history within the discipline. A companion volume is currently underway (Schneider & Tauber) that will highlight the vibrancy of Alpine anthropology today by presenting a number of contributions on doing ethnography in the Alps.

Acknowledgement

As always, an editorial project relies not only on the work of the editors and contributors, but also on that of many others. We are grateful to our press for their excellent collaboration: Director Gerda Winkler received the initial idea for the Alpine Anthropology volumes enthusiastically, and Astrid Parteli followed the production process meticulously and patiently every step of the way. We would also like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers of the chapters for their constructive critiques and suggestions. Finally, we would like to express a word of thanks to the Malinowski family and the Scientific Committee of the Malinowski Forum for their continued support on this and our other projects.

References

- Bassi, M., Ribeiro Corossacz, V., De Lauri, A., Delgado Rosa, F., Pia, A., Piasere, L., Salvucci, D., Severi, I., Sorgoni, B., Stacul, J., Tateo, G., Tauber, E., Zinn, D., Viazzo, P. P., & Colajanni, A. (2022). Commenti a "Bronislaw Malinowski, l'antropologia pratica, la politica e il colonialismo" di Antonino Colajanni, con una risposta dell'autore [Comments on "Bronislaw Malinowski, l'antropologia pratica, la politica e il colonialismo" by Antonino Colajanni, with a response from the author]. *Anuac*, 11(2), 67–112. <https://doi.org/10.7340/anuac2239-625X-5397>

- Colajanni, A. (2022). Bronislaw Malinowski, l'antropologia pratica, la politica e il colonialismo [Bronislaw Malinowski, practical anthropology, politics and colonialism]. *Anuac*, 11(2), 3–66. <https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/anuac/article/view/5395>
- Cole, J. W., & Wolf, E. R. (1974). *The hidden frontier. Ecology and ethnicity in an Alpine valley*. Academic Press.
- Cole, J. W. (1977). Anthropology comes part-way home: Community studies in Europe. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 6, 349–378.
- Gingrich, A., & Knoll, E.M. (2018). Pilots of history. Ethnographic fieldwork and anthropology's explorations of the past. *Anuac*, 7(2), 27–48. <https://doi.org/10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3521>
- Powdermaker, H. (1966). *Stranger and friend: The way of an anthropologist*. W. H. Norton.
- Salvucci, D. (2021). Incorporated genre and gender: Elsie Masson, her writings and her contribution to Malinowski's career. In E. Tauber, & D. L. Zinn (Eds.), *Gender and genre in ethnographic writing* (pp. 189–218). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schneider, A., & Tauber, E. (manuscript in preparation). *Alpine ethnographies: Experiences, new questions and challenges*.
- Schöttler, P. (1991). *Lucie Varga. Zeitenwende. Mentalitätshistorische Studien 1936–1939* [Lucie Varga, Turning Points: Studies in the History of Mentality, 1936–1939]. Suhrkamp.
- Tauber, E., & Zinn, D. L. (2021). The graphy in ethnography: Reconsidering the gender of and in the genre. In E. Tauber, & D. L. Zinn (Eds.), *Gender and genre in ethnographic writing* (pp. 7–44). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Varga, L. (1936). *Dans une vallée du Vorarlberg: d'avant-hier à aujourd'hui* [In a Vorarlberg valley: From yesterday to today]. *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 8, 1–20.
- Varga, L. (1939). Sorcellerie d'hier. Enquête dans une vallée ladine [Yesterday's sorcery : A study of a Ladin valley]. *Annales d'histoire sociale*, 1, 121–132.
- Varga, L. (2006). In an Alpine valley (G. Huppert, Trans.). *Journal of The Historical Society*, 6(2), 251–274. (Original work published 1936)
- Young, M. (2004). *Malinowski: Odyssey of an anthropologist, 1884–1920*. Yale University Press.