

Malinowski and the Anthropological Study of the Alps: Really a Missed Encounter?

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Abstract

In spite of his familiarity with the mountains of South Tyrol and their peasant population, Bronislaw Malinowski neither engaged himself in anthropological research in the Alpine area, nor did he encourage any of his pupils to do so. This should not be seen, however, as proof of a totally missed encounter between Malinowski and the anthropological study of the Alps. For one thing, Malinowski exerted a direct influence on the ethnographic investigations carried out by the historian Lucie Varga in two Alpine valleys in the 1930s. Indeed, a short piece of counterfactual history of Alpine anthropology suggests that if Varga's works had not been so long overlooked, post-war anthropological studies might have avoided some of the theoretical and ethnographic shortcomings that plagued them. In addition, although a systematic search of the literature reveals that Malinowski is only very rarely referred to by Alpine anthropologists, there can be little doubt that his methodological approach decisively shaped the community studies conducted in the Alps especially by American anthropologists in the second half of the 20th century. It is actually one of the contentions of this chapter that a Malinowskian approach is still badly needed today to counteract a tendency to settle for hasty and fatally superficial short-term research. On the basis of some evidence presented in the chapter, it is also contended that Malinowski's attitude to both history and folklore should be reconsidered.

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1. Malinowski, Oberbozen, and Alpine Anthropology

In October 2006 the Polish journalist and writer Ryszard Kapuscinski visited Bozen/Bolzano to give a public lecture. If we are to believe the local press (Gelmini, 2006), it was during this short stay in South Tyrol that he discovered, much to his surprise and not without emotion, that between 1923 and the early 1930s his compatriot and acknowledged master, the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, had spent with his family large portions of his life in a villa in Oberbozen, in the Ritten/Renon area not far from the city of Bozen. It would seem that Kapuscinski actually already knew about the house in Oberbozen. What is certain is that he insisted on making a pilgrimage to it: “with a camera crew and a group of students from Trento in tow, he paid homage to the compatriot whom he regarded as an inspiration for his own signature brand of journalism, characterized by long-term dwelling among different peoples that informed his poignant, engaged descriptions of them” (Tauber & Zinn, 2018, pp. 16–17).

It is also certain that before Kapuscinski’s visit this close biographical link between Malinowski and South Tyrol was almost completely ignored locally. It had instead been fairly common knowledge among anthropologists for several decades. Reminiscences of summer vacations as Malinowski’s guests in his villa in the Alps are to be found in the writings of two of his first pupils in London, Raymond Firth (1957) and Hortense Powdermaker (1966), and it is mainly on the basis of these reminiscences that in the 1970s Adam Kuper (1973, p. 34) could tell the readers of his bestselling history of British anthropology that when Malinowski “moved to his Tyrolean retreat in the summer some students would go with him”, while John Cole (1977, p. 350) noticed that “Malinowski maintained a villa at Oberbozen in the South Tyrol where he and his students regularly vacationed”. Since then, many more details have emerged from the publication of the correspondence between Malinowski and his wife Elsie Masson by their Bozen-born daughter Helena (Wayne, 1995) and, more recently, from contributions that offer a fine-grained contextualization of the relationships between the Malinowskis and Oberbozen (Tauber & Zinn, 2018; Salvucci et al., 2019).

It has been rightly emphasized that “in order to understand the political context of the 1920s and 1930s, the years in which Malinowski and Masson

lived in Oberbozen, it is vital to consider how the Italian Fascists sought to create a 'total act of submission' (Lechner, 2011, p. 52) in which the German speaking South Tyroleans were to concede that they had been defeated on the Alpine Front during World War I" (Salvucci et al., 2019, p. 7). Glimpses of this oppressive atmosphere are offered by Elsie Masson in her letters to Malinowski, where she frequently refers to such impositions by the Fascist government as the banning of newspapers and schools in German (Wayne, 1995; Salvucci et al., 2019, p. 7). Malinowski himself, according to Firth's testimony, "reacted strongly against local injustices, as he saw them in the South Tyrol (Alto Adige) under Italian fascism" (Firth, 1988, pp. 21–22). In addition, cultural boundaries were clearly visible between the Italian farmers who in those years "were struggling to drain swamplands in the broad Etsch (Adige) valley near the old market town of Bozen/Bolzano ... and the self-sufficient German peasants living up on the Ritten plateau, where Oberbozen was located, [who] worked on dry and often steep land, with family and domestics organized around the head of the farmstead, the *Bauer*" (Salvucci et al., 2019, pp. 7–8).

It is this complex bundle of political, cultural and linguistic differences and tensions that in the late 1950s spurred Eric Wolf to start his pioneering research in two villages only a mile apart but located on the two sides of the linguistic and administrative border that separated Romance-speaking Trentino from German-speaking South Tyrol. Continued and complemented between 1965 and 1967 by Wolf's pupil John Cole, this research led to the publication of Alpine anthropology's first classic, *The Hidden Frontier* (Cole & Wolf, 1974). It is worth noting that Wolf's inquiry sank its roots in a visit he had paid to South Tyrol as a tourist in 1934, therefore in the same years in which the Malinowskis lived, or at least spent their summers, in Oberbozen¹. At that time Wolf was just an eleven-year-old child, but "even a boy could not help but become sensitized to the conflicts of ethnicity and nationalist loyalties left unresolved by the collapse of the Habsburg Empire" (Cole & Wolf, 1974, p. 4). Long before he became an anthropologist Wolf had developed a keen interest in a set of thorny and fascinating questions to which he decided to

1 Malinowski commuted between London and South Tyrol from 1923 to 1929, when the family moved to London and the house in Oberbozen became a holiday home, visited in 1930, 1931 and 1933 (Salvucci et al., 2019, p. 10).

come back as a full-fledged scholar when he selected South Tyrol as a setting to explore them in an historical-anthropological perspective: the local reverberations of long-term processes of nation formation, the wounds left by the two World Wars and by the Fascist period, but also the roles of ecology and ethnicity in moulding local social structures and the cultural salience of the contrasting figures of the German *Bauer* and the Italian *contadino*.

The anthropological significance of these issues seems to have escaped completely both Malinowski and the young scholars he had hosted in his villa, who included, in addition to Firth and Powdermaker, the likes of Edward E. Evans-Pritchard, Isaac Schapera, Meyer Fortes, and Audrey Richards, among others. Nor was their interest apparently caught by the peasant costumes, festivals, and dances that are often vividly described by Elsie in her letters to her husband (Salvucci et al., 2019, pp. 8–9). Yet, Malinowski obviously did not ignore that Alpine peasant communities had long been investigated by practitioners of a discipline that bordered on social anthropology, namely folklore studies. The Alpine region, Adolf Helbok wrote in the 1930s, was “das Dorado der Volkskunde” (Helbok, 1931, p. 102). Nevertheless, Malinowski did not encourage any of his students to do some fieldwork in the surroundings of Oberbozen or elsewhere in the Alps. A disappointed John Cole was forced to conclude that “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” (Cole, 1977, p. 350).

Seen in retrospect by one of the great names of post-war Alpine anthropology, this had been a lamentably missed encounter, probably due to a presbyopic inability by Malinowski and his pupils to focus their professional gaze on the anthropologically highly relevant issues that were so close to their eyes. We now know, however, that Cole’s statement must be at least partly qualified. Peter Schöttler’s painstaking excavations into French, German and Austrian historiography (Schöttler, 1991, 1992, 1993) have unexpectedly brought to light two forgotten articles written in the second half of the 1930s by Lucie Varga, a refugee Austrian historian who had moved to Paris and

become part of the nascent *Annales* group. In 1936 Varga published an article in which she ably combined history and ethnography to reconstruct the economic, social and cultural transformations undergone by the Montafon, a valley in Vorarlberg, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Varga, 1936). This was followed three years later by another article in which she reported the results of a predominantly ethnographic research on witchcraft beliefs in a South Tyrolean valley, the Gadertal/Val Badia (Varga, 1939). What is most relevant, and intriguing, to us is that right at the beginning of the first article Varga expresses her gratitude to “Mr le Professeur B. Malinowski (School of Economics, Londres)” for his useful suggestions in designing the project of the researches she had conducted in the Montafon (Varga, 1936, p. 1).

Both published in historical journals, these two studies went totally unnoticed by anthropologists, suffering the same fate as another article by Varga on the origins of National Socialism (Varga, 1937), which was also mostly based on the use of quasi-ethnographic techniques and could be today cited, according to Schöttler (1992, p. 106), “as a contribution to cultural anthropology”. But they were soon obliterated by historians as well. It was only half a century later that Varga’s name and works first caught the eye of Natalie Zemon Davis, who was then investigating the composition and gender style of two circles of vanguard historians in the period between and immediately after the two World Wars, the social and economic historians of the London School of Economics and the *Annales* group. What she found was that, whereas female historians such as Eileen Power were central figures in the mixed world of the LSE, the interdisciplinary team of the *Annales* had much less of a place for women and appeared to be a sodality of French brothers. Partial exceptions were confined to a footnote where Davis noted that apart from the medieval historian Thérèse Sclafert, who had published an article in the first volume of the *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* (1929), the journal of the nascent group, “the only other woman writing for the *Annales* was Lucie Varga, a refugee from Austria, who contributed an ethnographic study of an Austrian valley (*Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*, 8 [1936]) and an interesting account of the German support for Nazism (9 [1937])” (Davis, 1987, p. 23). The publication of Schöttler’s biographic works on Varga made Davis realize that she had been wrong:

I mistakenly thought only one of them was a historian: Thérèse Sclafert, who contributed an article on medieval trade routes to the first number of the journal. Lucie Varga's two fascinating articles in 1936 and 1937 I attributed to an ethnographer because of their twentieth-century content and Varga's expression of gratitude to Bronislaw Malinowski (of Eileen Power's LSE) for his help in designing the research for her study of the folk culture of Voralberg. (Davis, 1992, pp. 122–123)

Malinowski may not have directly encouraged Varga to do ethnographic research in the Alps, but he certainly gave her advice that Varga deemed methodologically precious. It is therefore not unjustified to say that before the outbreak of World War II at least one, or indeed two Malinowskian studies were conducted in the Alps. It is no less remarkable that these studies were the outcome of an interchange between Malinowski and a professional historian. Moreover, we should not forget that Varga focused her research on "the study of folk culture", to use Davis's phrase. This invites us to briefly reconsider Malinowski's attitude to both history and *Volkskunde*. We will then engage in a small piece of counterfactual history by wondering about what might have happened if Varga's contributions had not been ignored by anthropologists in the post-war period when they started to flock to the Alps.

2. Rethinking Malinowski's Relationships With History and *Volkskunde*

A symptomatic analysis of the reasons why Natalie Zemon Davis mistakenly thought that Varga was not a historian but an ethnographer is instructive. The first one was that both articles had a "twentieth-century content", which points to a surprisingly rigid dichotomy between study of the past and study of the present – precisely the distinction Varga was attempting to overcome in her article on the Montafon, where she advocated for a "history of the present" capable of shedding light on questions of primary historical significance the simple study of the past was unable to answer or properly address (Varga, 1936, p. 1). The second reason was that Varga expressed gratitude to Malinowski for his help in designing a field research, whose aim was to investigate – third diagnostic feature – the "folk culture" of an Alpine valley. In

guessing that Varga must have been an obscure *Volkskundlerin* seeking advice from a prominent anthropologist, however, Davis was forgetting that in the 1930s folklore studies and social anthropology were separated by a boundary whose trespassing was by no means usual, or thinkable.

It would be very interesting to know Malinowski's reaction when a trained medieval historian put forward her intention of using "la méthode de l'ethnologue" (Varga, 1936, p. 1) to study the folk culture of an Alpine valley. What we know for certain is that neither Malinowski nor his direct pupils ever engaged in folklore studies in the Alps. We cannot exclude that Malinowski thought that their orientation was too antiquarian: According to Helbok (1931, p. 102), the Alps were "the Eldorado of folk studies" because they were a sort of reliquary of old customs, sayings and artefacts long disappeared in most other parts of Europe. It is more likely that Malinowski had political reservations and was wary of the risks of nationalist drift to which folklore studies showed a sinister propensity. Indeed, Helbok published his article only a couple of years before joining the Nazi party. Although recent studies have attempted to reassess his role in Austrian folklore studies before and after World War II (Kuhn & Larl, 2020), for younger generations of students of folklore Helbok was "*der nationalsozialistische Volkskundler*" par excellence (Bausinger, 1971, p. 69). Nevertheless, there is a little-known piece by Malinowski which suggests that his view of *Volkskunde* was not utterly negative. It is his short 1938 introduction to *Facing Mount Kenya* by Jomo Kenyatta, the future first president of independent Kenya, who had completed under Malinowski's supervision a Ph.D. dissertation based on anthropological research "at home", in his case among the Kikuyu, the "tribe" of central Kenya to which he belonged. The opening words tell us something one would not expect from Malinowski:

"Anthropology begins at home" has become the watchword of modern social science. Mass-observation and "Northtown" in England; "Middletown" in U.S.A.; the comprehensive studies of villages and of peasant life carried out in Eastern Europe ... all these are directing the technique, method, and aims of anthropology on to our civilization. Even *Volkskunde*, the study of the German people by German scholars, though partly mystical and largely misused, is none the less an expres-

sion of the sound view that we must start by knowing ourselves first, and only then proceed to the more exotic savageries. (Malinowski, 1938, p. vii)²

These words suggest that in the late 1930s Malinowski was approvingly foreseeing the growth of peasant studies in Europe which took place after the end of the war. A growth, however, which was largely fed by studies conducted by American rather than European anthropologists.

As to Malinowski's attitude to history, it is generally described as one of generalized and increasing hostility. To quote one of his pupils: "Malinowski's well-known position on the value of history for anthropological studies was originally taken up in opposition to that of Rivers in whose *History of Melanesia Society* a whole series of past events were assumed to have occurred to account for contemporary social organization" (Mair, 1957, pp. 240–241). Especially after the success enjoyed by his new style of ethnographic fieldwork, this position developed into a tendency to explicitly or implicitly argue that no past event was of interest to anthropologists, and culminated in his well-known statement that for anthropologists it is only "the history surviving either in live tradition or in institutional working which is important" (Malinowski, 1945, p. 37). As Andre Gingrich and Eva-Maria Knoll (2018, p. 29) have rightly noted, "key strands of this established narrative continue to be valid, but certain elements in it require refinement and differentiation if they are to remain useful". In particular, they contend that institutional and political reasons also lay behind Malinowski's strict separation between history and anthropology. The institutional reason was that he sensed that insisting on this separation could favour the establishment of social anthropology within universities. In addition, Gingrich and Knoll (2018, p. 31) suspect that Malinowski had misgivings about the ease with which history (like folklore studies) could be harnessed for nationalist purposes and that he therefore "attempted to keep the dangers of political instrumentalization at bay by keeping history at a distance".

2 "Middletown" is the pseudonym of Muncie, the town in Indiana classically studied by Helen and Robert Lynd (1929), whereas "Mass Observation" was an independent social research organization which at that time was starting to document the attitudes, opinions, and everyday lives of the British people through a combination of ethnographic fieldwork, opinion surveys, and written testimony solicited from hundreds of volunteers (Hinton, 2013).

While these hypotheses are definitely worth exploring, a look at the “mixed world” of the LSE discloses other unsuspected, and relevant, dimensions of Malinowski’s relations with history and historians. From Maxine Berg’s fine intellectual biography of Eileen Power, we learn not only that anthropology was one of Power’s major interests, but also that from 1929 onwards she “co-operated with Bronislaw Malinowski on projects in history and anthropology” and that this co-operation broadened out to larger group discussions on history and the social sciences. Correspondence between Power and Malinowski extending from 1931 and 1937 demonstrates that Power frequently “talked with and wrote to Malinowski about anthropological approaches to her own research on medieval miracles and medieval women” (Berg, 1996, p. 163). And Power was not the only LSE historian to be in friendly terms with anthropologists and to keep anthropology in high esteem. In his 1932 inaugural lecture as newly appointed Professor of Economic History, Richard Tawney emphasized the contribution anthropology could make to economic science. His argument was that economic phenomena cannot be studied in isolation and that the only adequate historical approach appeared to be what he called *l’histoire intégrale*. “Such history is, doubtless, remote”, he was forced to admit. “But there is no reason”, he claimed, “why savages should have all the science. It is possible to conceive economic historians and sociologists preparing the way for it ... in some modern period with the same detachment and objectivity as anthropologists bring to the investigation of similar phenomena in more primitive societies” (Tawney, 1933, p. 20). Although their names are not explicitly mentioned, he was clearly referring to the studies of “primitive economics” recently conducted by Malinowski and Firth³. No less revealingly, a photograph published by Berg (1996, p. 188) in her biography of Eileen Power portrays the distinguished economic historian Michael Postan as a young scholar picnicking with three postgraduate students in anthropology, one of them being that Hortense Powdermaker who had been hosted by Malinowski in his villa in Oberbozen. Written and visual documentation of this kind give an idea of the intellectual and social life at the London School

3 A few years earlier Tawney had applauded Firth’s *Primitive Economics of New Zealand Maori* as an antidote to “a kind of economic fundamentalism [which] regards the institutions and habits of thought of its own age and civilization as in some peculiar sense natural to man”, thereby dignifying “with the majestic name of economic laws the generalisations which describe the conduct of those who conform to its prejudices” (Tawney, 1929, p. 13).

of Economics of the 1930s. It is an atmosphere Varga could herself breathe in 1935 when visiting her second husband, Franz Borkenau, who attended the legendary Malinowski seminars while spending some time in London. It is likely that it was on that occasion that she was introduced by her husband to Malinowski (Schöttler, 1992, p. 120).

Power and Varga, two medieval historians both seeking advice from Malinowski. The crucial difference was that, whereas Power looked for ethnographic inspiration to interpret her historical materials, Varga resolved to throw herself into first-hand ethnographic research abiding by Malinowski's precepts. Her fieldwork in the Alps resulted in two perceptive articles where we find not only theoretical insights which are sadly missing from at least a part of post-war Alpine anthropological studies, but also ethnographic evidence which would have been very helpful to save these studies from some of their shortcomings. One may not help wonder what course Alpine anthropology might have taken if Varga's work had not been so completely overlooked.

3. What if ...

The most interesting tales are often the ones that might have been (Handler 2000). There are many such 'what-if' histories, glimpses of fascinating intellectual journeys not taken. What if Franz Steiner, Czech refugee and author of an influential work on taboo, had not died at the tender age of 44? How might he have influenced the intensely humanistic turn of Oxford anthropology in the 1950s? What if Gregory Bateson, philosophical anthropologist and partner of Margaret Mead, had been offered – and then accepted – the Edinburgh professorship in the 1940s? (Mills, 2008, p. 15).

It is significant that in his study of the political history of social anthropology David Mills refers, when suggesting that "the most interesting tales are the ones that might have been", to Richard Handler's edited book *Excluded Ancestors, Inventible Traditions. Essays Toward a More Inclusive History of Anthropology*. It is even more striking to discover that two of the most engrossing among these essays are devoted to excluded ancestresses, whose field studies subterraneanly predated the arrival of "modern anthropology" in the Mediterranean and in the Alps: Charlotte Gower and Lucie Varga.

Their professional stories were of course very different. Varga was a trained historian and an almost impromptu ethnographer: the inclusion in Handler's book of an essay on her work as an ethnographer of both Nazism and changing communities in the Alps (Stade, 2000) amounts to a disciplinary recognition of a scholar who during her lifetime was neither considered nor considered herself to be an anthropologist. Charlotte Gower had received, on the other hand, a proper anthropological education. Born in 1902, she began graduate work in 1924 in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Chicago and earned an anthropology Ph.D. in 1928, in the same year that Robert Redfield did. Whereas Redfield based his dissertation on fieldwork carried out in Tepoztlán, a village in the Mexican valley of Morelos, Gower's thesis stemmed from a study of Sicilian immigrants in Chicago. This turned out to be the first leg of a research which led her to settle for eighteen months in Milocca, a small town in the south-west corner of Sicily. The two phases of her research are vividly described in 1929 by a famous journalist, Frank Thone, in an article on anthropology female students at the University of Chicago:

For there are young women who have undertaken this arduous but fascinating first-hand study of human beings of other lands. One of the most interesting of these field problems has been tackled by the decidedly attractive Miss Charlotte Gower, who has been appointed to a fellowship of the Social Science Research Council. She has gone up into the mountains of Sicily, to a remote and inaccessible village where railway trains and automobiles are known only by hearsay, and where one gets about either on muleback or on foot. But even before she crossed the Atlantic, Miss Gower had been in Sicily, even in this village. Out in Chicago's crowded South Side, in the heart of Little Italy, lives a close-knit group of the townsmen of this place, held together by ties of blood, language, home memories ... Miss Gower took up quarters among these people, made friends with them, gossiped with the women, played with the *bambini*, learned their particular dialect of Sicilian. (Thone, 1929, p. 203)

While her research in Chicago was pursued by Gower to obtain her Ph.D., she planned that her research in Sicily would become a book, side by side with Redfield's *Tepoztlán: A Mexican Village*, which had been promptly published

(Redfield, 1930). The writing of the book, however, took more time than originally hoped, publication was therefore delayed, and eventually the manuscript became lost just before World War II (Lipowski, 2000, pp. 139–159). It was only thirty years later that “the brittle and yellow pages of a carbon copy”⁴ accidentally re-emerged from the archives of the University of Chicago and at long last went to print as *Milocca: A Sicilian Village* (Gower Chapman, 1971), a book which was saluted as an especially valuable contribution to the then burgeoning literature on the anthropology of the Mediterranean region.

What is most relevant to us is that perhaps the chief reason why Gower’s book was able to rapidly gain its rightful place in this literature is that it looked methodologically akin to the field studies that after the war had marked the origins and growth of the anthropology of the Mediterranean as a new research domain. As Gower writes in her preface to *Milocca*, her own field study was intended to be “the second application of anthropological methods, in imitation of Robert Redfield’s work in Mexico, to the investigation of a semi-literate society” (Gower Chapman, 1971, p. vii). There can be little doubt that by “anthropological methods” she meant the style of field research that only a few years earlier had been successfully pioneered by Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands. We know from Maria Lipowski’s accurate biographical essay on Gower that she actually met Malinowski in 1935 – the very same year in which he met Varga – during a visit he made to Wisconsin, where Gower taught from 1930 to 1938 (Lipowski, 2000, p. 145). Her correspondence reveals that she was not favourably impressed by Malinowski’s manners, especially his propensity to use “language of dubious acceptability”, but they discussed functionalist theory and “if Gower had not been fired”, Lipowski speculates, “perhaps Malinowski’s intellectual influence ... would have survived at the University of Wisconsin”. Gower certainly shared Redfield’s view that Malinowski had established a pattern of ethnographic research which was suitable to be exported from the study of primitive populations to that of peasant communities (Wilcox, 1956, p. 172).

Gower’s research in Milocca was the first “modern” (i.e. Malinowskian) anthropological study to be conducted in the Mediterranean region, twenty

4 This quote is from the back cover of the paperback edition of Gower’s book (1971).

years before Julian Pitt-Rivers (1954) started his fieldwork in Andalusia. The same can be legitimately said of Varga's studies for the Alps. Gower's stay in the field was of course much longer, but Varga's approach was similar and clearly bears the imprint of the methodological advice received directly from Malinowski:

Observer pendant un certain temps, avec les méthodes familières à l'ethnologue, la vie d'un groupe d'hommes relativement simple de notre société contemporaine. ... Tout est à noter et à enregistrer: la structure de la famille aussi bien que le mode d'éducation des enfants, les catégories de la pensée aussi que les modalités de la foi, les idées sur le luxe et la misère, tout comme le rythme du travail et des loisirs... (Varga, 1936, p. 1)

This was basically the methodological recipe that anthropologists from Britain and the United States brought along when they started their ethnographic exploration of the Alps in the 1950s and 1960s. In Varga's work we find, however, an additional ingredient: what we would today call an acute sense for time and temporalities. Post-war anthropologists such as Frederick Bailey (1971) and John Friedl (1974), to cite two representative examples, one from each side of the Atlantic, mostly assumed that for a long and indefinite time mountain communities had been isolated and economically and culturally closed and that they had been left almost intact until World War II, which had ignited a more or less complete transition from a traditional past to a modernizing present. By contrast, Varga (1936, p. 3) reports that in the Montafon change had begun a few years after the end of the First World War and that her conversations with the locals invariably revolved around comparisons between life before and after the war, "das Früher und das Jetzt". Even more important, Varga found that already in the prewar years the Montafon had not been isolated from the surrounding world and that its economy had been prosperous and by no means confined to mountain farming. It had been after the war that the gap had broadened and the village had been forced to resort to a largely autarkic economy (Varga, 1936, p. 17). If Anglophone anthropologists had read Varga's article, they would have perhaps avoided the easy generalizations phrased in the terms of modernization theory that so often distort their interpretations of change. The self-sufficient economies

they came across in the villages they studied were often the recent and paradoxical product of a process of “peasantization” triggered by the interwar crisis (Viazzo, 1989, pp. 117–120). These “changing communities” looked far more closed, traditional, peasant and autarkic than they had possibly ever been before. An obvious question arises: were “native” anthropologists or students of folklore less prone to such mistaken perceptions than their colleagues coming to the Alps from across the Atlantic (or the Channel)?

4. *Amerikaner* in the Alps

Most accounts of the history of Alpine anthropology (e.g., Anderson, 1973, pp. 69–78; Viazzo, 1989, pp. 49–66; Sibilla, 1997, pp. 19–24; Minnich, 2002, pp. 55–60) seem to agree that the anthropological study of the Alps started properly in the 1950s and 1960s, when a number of fieldworkers from the United States headed for the high Alpine valleys. A telling common feature is that all these accounts, when they look for European forerunners, show a definite preference for researchers who cannot be easily lumped together with local folklorists. A favourite ancestor is Robert Hertz, whose study of the cult of Saint Besse, a martyr saint worshipped in a cluster of communities in the Western Alps (Hertz, 1913), had already been commended by Evans-Pritchard (1960, p. 10) as an early example of genuine anthropological fieldwork.

Such an exclusionary procedure is inevitably reminiscent of the distinction between modern and backward varieties of anthropology made by John Davis (1977, pp. 3–4) in his influential book on the Mediterranean, when he remarked that in some southern European countries “the work of providing scientific basis for nationalist claims took on such symbolic significance that anthropology ceased to be a developing academic activity altogether”: it had become so fossilized that “a contemporary ethnographer from France or England or America, carrying the very latest lightweight intellectual machine gun in his pack, may be suddenly confronted by a Tyloorean or Frazerian professor appearing like a Japanese corporal from the jungle to wage a battle only he knows is still on”. As is well known, such vignettes were not taken lightly by many anthropological readers from southern Europe, where this attitude generated resentment and mistrust not only, or not simply, between “native”

and “foreign” scholars, but also between those “native” scholars who were at best diffident about the new approaches coming from “France or England or America” and those who were more inclined to adopt them. It is remarkable that as early as 1953 the opening issue of a new Italian anthropological journal hosted an exchange between Tullio Tentori (1953), who had studied with Robert Redfield in Chicago and advocated the use of the community-study method in southern Italy, and Ernesto De Martino, who was wary of American anthropology and bitterly critical of his own fellow-countrymen who were “approaching Italian ethnology or folklore without knowing anything at all about this tradition, infatuated with American ‘applied anthropology’ and eager to transplant it into Italy” (De Martino, 1953, p. 3). Was it the same for Alpine anthropology?

Signs of tensions are easily detectable also on the Alpine scene. One example is the scathing attack on Bailey’s study of a village in the Italian Alps launched by Dionigi Albera (1988) in his article “Open Systems and Closed Minds: The Limitations of Naïvety in Social Anthropology – A Native’s View”, where he severely criticized Bailey’s disregard for history, which had led him to depict the Alps as an area which had just begun to get out of isolation and backwardness. As implied by the article’s subtitle, this was a trap that conscientious native anthropologists were more likely to avoid.

The initial reaction of many Swiss *Volkskundler* to the methods and theoretical pronouncements of their Anglo-Saxon colleagues was also one of puzzlement, diffidence and, at times, “resented astonishment” (Centlivres, 1980, p. 40). As Arnold Niederer (1991) once recollected, his first meetings with Robert Netting had made him quite suspicious of the American’s ecosystemic models and he could not understand his guest’s excitement about the new vistas opened up by historical demography (Netting, 1981). In Austria, too, perhaps more than in Italy and France, there was debate about the costs and benefits of the research styles adopted by foreign anthropologists in the Alps, as testified by an essay by Norbert Ortmayr entitled “Amerikaner in den Alpen” (1992), and, very explicitly, by Reinhard Johler’s article “The Idea of an ‘Alpine Society’, Or: Why Do We Need the Americans in the Alps?” (1998). It is worth noting that the “Americans” Ortmayr and Johler talk about are by no means all American. Rather, they use it as a label that stays for “modern” anthropology vs. folklore studies and may also cover British social an-

thropologists like Bailey or even anthropologists from Alpine countries like Switzerland and Italy who had been trained or had taught in “Anglo-Saxon” universities

Michał Buchowsky (2004, p. 10) has made reference to Ortmayr’s and Johler’s pieces to suggest that the encounter between foreign and native anthropologist in the Alps produced a “hierarchy of knowledge” which in turn generated “a vibrant discussion on the presence of Anglo-Saxon anthropologists in the Alpine region and the value of their scholarly output”. Although this is undeniable, as we have just seen, there are reasons to believe that tensions were not as strong as in Mediterranean anthropology or, later, post-socialist studies. Although it is significant that he decided to emphasize his status of native anthropologist, Albera’s attack was more on the transactionalist and anti-historical paradigm incarnated by Bailey than on the presence of anthropologists from outside. Indeed, he praises Cole and Wolf’s 1974 book for its ability to combine “history and ethnography as interdependent elements in a single unified analysis” (Albera, 1988, p. 436). Similarly, if one goes beyond the titles and reads attentively the careful assessments made by Ortmayr and Johler, it becomes apparent that their verdict is that on balance the arrival of the “Americans” was beneficial because they helped enliven the stagnating world of Austrian folklore studies and to rescue them from a pernicious tendency towards a celebration of Alpine values and ways of life at times bordering on racism. Volker Gottowik (1997, 1998) went so far as to argue that their arrival had at last allowed the natives to be “othered” by anthropologists from outside. A comparable attitude can ultimately be detected in Switzerland, where Robert Centlivre (1980, p. 43) praised the Americans’ “fresh look at the Alps” and was quick to realize that their studies were filling an “empty niche” in Alpine studies, while Niederer eventually came to recognize the value not only of Netting’s work but also of the “alien” tradition he represented, and to complain that “Swiss and Austrian students of folklore know very little, or nothing at all, about Anglo-American or even French research in the Alps” – adding that “this is a general feature of European *Volkskunde*, which has long been conceived of as a national science” (Niederer, 1996, p. 286)⁵.

5 For a more critical view about the studies conducted by American anthropologists in Canton Valais, and by extension in the Swiss Alps, see Antonietti (2013).

The skein to be untangled is intricate, as attitudes towards the Americans depended very much on the different histories of anthropological studies in the various countries, and also on individual propensities. The German anthropologist Werner Krauß, who in the mid-1980s studied a tiny village in the Canton of Grisons, has recently written that, while many of his Swiss colleagues considered the Americans as intruders, “Niederer’s openness towards ethnographic methods made him the ideal host for the American anthropologists who came to the canton of Valais in the late seventies” (Krauß, 2018, p. 1026). In particular, his collaboration with Netting proved very fruitful since the interests, skills and competences of these two scholars came to nicely complement each other: “Both Netting and Niederer served as a guidance when I started to conduct fieldwork in Switzerland” (p. 1027). This testimony prompts us to conclude that the answer to Johler’s question is that the Americans and their methods, although not always and immediately welcome, proved ultimately innovative and inspiring and were therefore “needed”. There is, however, another partly related and final question to be tackled: do we (still) need “Malinowskian” anthropologists in the Alps?

5. Do We Need a “Malinowskian” Anthropology in the Alps?

References to Malinowski in the anthropological literature on the Alps are few and far between. Interestingly, one of these rare references is to be found in a critical survey of Swiss folklore studies by Werner Krauß, where Niederer is lauded for his use of a functionalist perspective “in Malinowski’s sense” (Krauß, 1987, p. 36). The main reason for such a dearth of references is in all likelihood that Malinowski’s methodological legacy has long been taken for granted. For Anglophone anthropologists, the adoption of a basically Malinowskian approach was axiomatic (and therefore unnecessary to mention) for nearly half a century, from the pioneering community studies started in the 1950s up to the ones conducted in the 1990s by such scholars as Patrick Heady (1999) and Jaro Stacul (2003). A British-trained Italian, Stacul is in no doubt that Malinowski’s legacy “played a central role in ethnographic fieldwork training until very recently” (Stacul, 2018, p. 96). As a doctoral student

in Cambridge, he was given methodological recommendations that are strikingly reminiscent of the advice Varga received from Malinowski back in the 1930s. This may be no longer true today, though. As Stacul himself points out:

whereas “classic” ethnographic research largely involved focusing on groups of people with a connection with a place, with a locality, movements of peoples and the widespread use of electronic communication have had dramatic consequences on anthropological research ... One question that such developments raise is how far the fieldwork style pioneered by Malinowski remains a valuable tool at a time when people, goods, money, and knowledge travel with a speed and frequency that were unthinkable until a few years ago, and the spread of electronic communication has challenged commonly-held ideas about the connections between people and places. (Stacul, 2018, p. 97)

These changing global scenarios certainly contribute to explaining why in the past two decades the Alps have witnessed a sensible decline of community studies based on prolonged and intensive fieldwork⁶. In the Alpine region, however, other factors must also be taken into account. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century the Alps were frequently chosen by Ph.D. students for their dissertations, which involved the use of community-study methods and the classical stay of one year in one place. The use of English as an academic *lingua franca* was instrumental in giving Alpine anthropology an international breath and putting the Alps on the world anthropological map. Since the beginning of the new millennium – at least on the Italian side of the crescent, but probably also in the rest of the Alps – the *Amerikaner* have virtually disappeared and an opposite tendency towards a de-internationalization and “nativization” of research can be observed (Zanini & Viazzo, 2020, pp. 21–22).

Mountains may well be almost conventionally “remote areas”, as Edwin Ardener (1988, p. 41) once suggested in his contribution to a volume on anthropology at home, but the Alpine valleys are close enough to allow “native” anthropologists (mainly working in universities located in nearby cities) to opt for relatively brief visits repeated over time or short-term research spells targeted on specific issues of practical relevance to the territories that

6 There are of course a few notable exceptions: see e.g., Zanini (2015) and Giliberti (2020).

are investigated. Often funded by regional or local governments and public or private institutions, Alpine studies are therefore shifting, or returning, to what Bernardino Palumbo (2018, p. 111) has termed “fieldwork Italian style”. It is noteworthy that this “hit and run” approach – ultimately rooted in the approach to field research favoured by De Martino in opposition to the community-study method supported by Tentori – has been explicitly and unfavourably compared by Palumbo with an alternative, fatally more time-consuming but eventually more fruitful style he calls “Malinowskian”⁷. Spatial (and linguistic) closeness to the field may be an advantage, but it can turn into a serious risk if it lures anthropologists into settling for short-breathed and inevitably more superficial researches⁸. As a corrective to this insidious risk, it would therefore seem that the Alps still need a Malinowskian anthropology.

7 See Palumbo’s recent intervention to a round table on ethnographic research in Italy (Mirizzi, Palumbo, Resta & Ricci, 2019, p. 633).

8 It is only fair to emphasize that this was definitely not the case with *Volkskundler* working in the Austrian and Swiss Alps, where the “Americans”, as rightly noted by Krauß (2018, p. 5), “met researchers who literally inhabited their fields for huge parts of their life” and understandably regarded the studies conducted by their colleagues from across the Atlantic as short, hasty and therefore inevitably superficial. There was, however, a tendentially beneficial trade-off between the intensiveness of the community studies carried out by the Americans and the extensiveness of their Austrian and Swiss colleagues’ long-term investigations. It remains a moot question whether the “classical stay of one year in one place” may be sufficient to solidly combine ethnographic and historical research, especially when the latter is not limited to exercises in historical demography or other varieties of analytical history.

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