

Anthropology and History in the Alps. Intricate Chronologies and References

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Maitland [1899] has said that anthropology must choose between being history and being nothing. ... I accept the dictum, though only if it can also be reversed – history must choose between social anthropology or being nothing. (Evans-Pritchard, 1961, p. 20)

For both disciplines, it is necessary to leave behind those dichotomies that have juxtaposed the objective, material, structural or institutional factors with the subjective, cultural, symbolic or emotional ones. (Medick, 1984, p. 318)

Abstract

The contribution aims to trace the relationship between field research and history in the Alps beginning with Lucie Varga. Varga wrote two texts on the Alpine region – the Montafon in Vorarlberg and the Val Badia in South Tyrol. She was influenced by the French *Annales*, which represented new approaches to historical research, and she was in contact with Malinowski during this time. The main interest is directed towards connections between field research and history in the following decades, which start from different angles. These connections can be established through people who practised both, like Lucie Varga or – albeit with a completely different approach – Hermann Wopfner, through research concepts and methods as represented by the *Annales*, *histoire totale* and microhistory and opposed to the history of events. These links can be found not least in the anthropological studies of villages and regions in the Alps which became noticeably intense in the 1960s and 1970s. These mainly American anthropologists asked different questions, introduced new socio-historical, demographic and ecological approaches and perspectives and, last, but not least, brought the computer into this research.

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) stands for the paradigm shift that made field research the methodological kingpin of anthropology. The focus of analysis was subsequently on the observable and, in particular, on social structures and relationships. History was out of the picture for decades. This paradigm shift was marked by the publication of two books based on field research in 1922: Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown's *Andaman Islanders* and Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Although history is omitted in these publications, this fact was not declared programmatically by Malinowski (Viazzo, 2000, p. 36). And it is important to ask which history did the exclusion refer to? Above all, "contingent happenings" were excluded (Thomas, 1996, pp. 19–21). Historians were also critical of event history at this time, especially Marc Bloch (1886–1944) and Lucien Febvre (1878–1956), who represent the first generation of the *Annales*, founded in 1929. They were much more interested in long-term processes, social and economic contexts, and also mentalities (Schöttler, 2015a, p. 26). Thus, there are potentially lines of connection. Pier Paolo Viazzo, anchored in both disciplines, places anthropology's move towards history in the 1950s (2000, pp. 66–67)¹ – 30 years after the exclusion of history. There is no sign of an influence by anthropology on historical research in the German-speaking world until almost 30 years later. In 1978, a first meeting of a circle of anthropologists and historians took place in Göttingen, in 1980 a second one in Paris, and in 1981 and 1983 in Bad Homburg. The resulting volumes had a pioneering character for the orientation of social history towards historical anthropology: one volume dealt with "classes and culture from social anthropological perspectives" (Berdahl et al., 1982), the other with family research under the aspect of "emotions and material interests"; the volume saw itself as a bridge between social anthropological and historical approaches (Medick & Sabeau, 1984). The third volume (Lüdtke, 1991) treated "governance as social practice".

But that is not the whole story. As early as in the 1930s, there was an Austrian historian, Lucie Varga, whose work was influenced by ethnology. She is, as it seems, one of the few, from whom a connecting line can be drawn to

1 Pier Paolo Viazzo (2000, pp. 66–67) mentions as context a lecture by Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard in 1950, debated and reprinted in several issues of *Man*, the most important journal of British social anthropology, in which Evans-Pritchard argued that a society cannot be adequately understood without knowledge of its history (Evans-Pritchard, 1950).

Malinowski and to the Alps.² The way there led her via the French *Annales*. Hence, this contribution aims to trace the relationship between field research and history in the Alps starting with Lucie Varga. The main interest is directed towards connections in the following decades, which will be worked out from different angles. These connections can be established through people who practised both, like Lucie Varga or – albeit with a completely different approach – Hermann Wopfner, through research concepts and methods as represented by the *Annales*, *histoire totale* and microhistory and opposed to the history of events. They can be found not least in the – in many cases American – anthropological studies of villages and regions in the Alps which became noticeably intense in the 1960s and 1970s.³

1. Lucie Varga: *Annales* and Ethnology – Montafon and Val Badia

Lucie Varga (1904–1941) had gone into exile in Paris at the turn of the year from 1933 to 1934 through the mediation of Alfons Dopsch to work with Lucien Febvre. She had studied with Dopsch at the Seminar for Economic and Cultural History at the University of Vienna where she completed her doctorate (Schöttler, 1991; 2015b, pp. 152–155; Schöttler, 1993; Kunde & Richter, 2019, pp. 424–438). As a group and journal, the *Annales* represented innovative historical scholarship. They were driven, as Peter Schöttler characterises them, by a “boundless curiosity” and “boundless ambition” (Schöttler, 2015a, pp. 24–25). They made problems the central starting point of their research and thus differed from the mainstream, which was oriented towards a positivist-hermeneutic historicism. Lucie Varga combined ethnology with history in an

2 In the first chapter of her book *Pouvoir, identités et migrations dans les hautes vallées des Alpes occidentales (XVIIe–XVIIIe siècle)* Laurence Fontaine (2003, p. 17) refers not only to Bourdieu but also to Malinowski in connection with the question of strategies of groups and individuals against the background of family dynamics and his book *Crime and Custom in Savage Society*, first published in London in 1926. She draws parallels to the “primitive societies” he studied in terms of the logic that rules are broken when it is in one’s own interest to do so but does not refer methodologically to his field research approach.

3 Anthropology and history are closely linked in the books by Pier Paolo Viazzo (1989) and Dionigi Albera (2011); a decisive and comparative historicisation of the Alps is the book by Jon Mathieu (1998/2009).

interdisciplinary way following the *Annales* approach, as in the two texts she wrote on the Alpine region. She was in contact with Malinowski when she stayed in the Montafon in Vorarlberg and in the Val Badia in South Tyrol in the summer months of 1935 and 1936 for her ethnological research (Schöttler, 2015b, pp. 160, 170, n. 100; Varga, 1939/1991b). She explicitly referred to this in a footnote.⁴ Her second husband Franz Borkenau, a historian, philosopher of history, sociologist and publicist, with whom she had gone to Paris, worked “in the haze” of Malinowski and participated in his London seminar. Varga knew him through this connection (Schöttler, 2015b, p. 165). Malinowski himself stayed frequently at his house in Oberbozen between 1922 and 1935 (Tauber & Zinn, 2018; Schöttler, 2015b, pp. 170–171).

The influence of the *Annales* and ethnology is clearly visible in the way Lucie Varga conceived her research subject.⁵ For example, in the introduction to the text on the Montafon, she wrote that it is difficult to shed light on questions such as the “relationships between economy, society and ideas ... on the basis of the past”. She concluded: “That is why we should perhaps turn to the present.” For this, she explicitly proposed “methods of ethnology”, albeit – in the tenor of the time – assuming that she was dealing with “a group of relatively simple people”. Her ethnologically inspired methodological approach sounds astonishingly “modern”: nothing is “natural”, nothing is “self-evident”. In a second step, she also reflected on the generating of material as a prerequisite of such an approach. “Every detail must be noted and recorded: the family structure as well as the forms of child rearing, the thought patterns as well as the forms of belief, the ideas of luxury and poverty as well as the rhythm of work and leisure.” However, this required a certain way of describing: “The ethnologist ... does not translate”, he records what is said without “imposing his own terms” – “as a precautionary measure” to avoid anachronisms (Varga, 1936/1991a, p. 146). Decades later, historical anthropology and, most recently, symmetrical anthropology as well as historical se-

4 She writes: “I would like to take the opportunity to thank Professor B. Malinowski (London School of Economics) for the useful suggestions he made to me in preparing this research” (1936/1991a, p. 169, n. 1).

5 Peter Schöttler calls her article on the emergence of the National Socialist mass movement (Varga, 1937), which was also published in the *Annales*, a “social-anthropological analysis” and thus a “pioneering study of a special kind” (1995, p. 212).

mantics were based precisely on this procedure of making things unfamiliar, even seemingly familiar things.

For Lucie Varga, the path to new insights in history is closely linked to an ethnological approach:

As far as the past is concerned, we can only question documents and interpret texts. In contrast, a good ethnologist who conducts field research and has psychological empathy will never be satisfied with initial findings and the spontaneous statements of his subjects. He will note the accent and gesture that accompany a statement and sometimes the words will even have the least significance among all the epistemological elements. He will not simply conduct direct interviews, but live with his “tribe” and put himself in their conditions of life. (Varga, 1936/1991a, p. 169, n. 2)

For Lucie Varga, history and ethnology were interrelated, complementary.

2. Hermann Wopfner: *Landeskunde* and Historical *Volkskunde*

At about the same time as Lucie Varga, Hermann Wopfner (1876–1963) wandered the Tyrolean valleys, in fact *all* the valleys of North and South Tyrol.⁶ He had first studied history in Innsbruck since 1896. The remark in a lecture that there was still no historical study on Michael Gaismair, the Tyrolean peasant leader of 1525, aroused Wopfner’s interest in the Peasants’ War and later in economic history. In this context he came across the book by the Leipzig historian Karl Lamprecht *Deutsches Wirtschaftsleben im Mittelalter* (*German Economic Life in the Middle Ages*), published in 1885/86, which motivated his desire to continue his studies with Lamprecht. His path led him first to Vienna in 1897/98, especially to the Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung (Institute for Austrian Historical Research). Wopfner had been disappointed by Viennese economic history. Alfons Dopsch was still teaching Austrian history at the time; the Seminar for Economic and Cultural History, where

⁶ As a precursor, Wolfgang Meixner and Gerhard Siegl (2019) name Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823–1897) and his *Wanderbuch* (1869).

Lucie Varga would study, was not founded until 1922. In 1898, Wopfner went to Leipzig to Karl Lamprecht and also heard lectures by Karl Bücher, a representative of the Historical School of National Economy (Grass, 1995, pp. VIII–IX). In Leipzig, Wopfner was “confronted by his fellow students with the view that a student should not just sit in his room”, but that he “must ‘mingle with the people’” (Meixner & Siegl, p. 99). In 1900, he received his doctorate in philosophy in Innsbruck and initially entered the archival service. At the suggestion of Hans von Voltolini, a jurist, historian and legal historian from a noble family of the Italian Tyrol, he also took a doctorate in law. In 1904, he received the authorisation to teach (*venia docendi*) at the University of Innsbruck, and at the end of 1908 he was appointed associate professor there, and in 1914 full professor of Austrian history and economic history (Meixner & Siegl, 2019, pp. 101–102).

After 1919, Wopfner “increasingly included historical *Volkskunde*” – a discipline that dealt with folk life and folk art – in his lectures and subsequently began his hiking tours. There are traces in his estate that he had already begun collecting material before the First World War, but increasingly so from the 1920s onwards (Meixner & Siegl, 2019, pp. 115–116). Comparable to Lucie Varga, he saw this as a way of supplementing written historical sources. He developed a questionnaire for this kind of research and also documented what he saw on photographs (Meixner & Siegl, 2019, p. 105). Unlike Varga, his approach was very immediate. His wanderings were dedicated to the search for “age-old economic forms and economic implements” in order to gain “insight into the economic spirit of past times”. He saw the mountain farmer “as the preserver of old traditions handed down by his ancestors” (1995, pp. 7, 9–10)⁷. His aim was to “describe the economic life of the Tyrolean mountain farmer in the past and present”, to show the “difficulties with which the mountain farmer had to struggle economically and thus also in his whole life and still does” and how “our mountain farmers have led this quiet but hard struggle with the ‘mountain’ in honour”. His guiding princi-

⁷ A total of twelve Hauptstücke or “deliveries” were planned, three of which were published in 1951, 1954, and 1960. Together with a new edition of these first three in one volume the Hauptstücke IV to VI were published in a second volume in 1995 posthumously.

ple was: “If you want to get to know a *Volk*,⁸ you have to go and see them at work.” He himself came from an Innsbruck merchant family.

With his recourse to the “age-old” (*uralt*) and “handed tradition” (*überkommene Überlieferung*), Wopfner represents – in comparison with Lucie Varga and the *Annales* – a completely different approach, an approach that empirical cultural studies decidedly turned against from the late 1960s. Previously, the focus of *Volkskunde* was on “folk realities and traditions – that is, the ascribed simple, constant and natural”, which it contrasted with “the dynamics and supposed destructive energy” of its present. The preservation of tradition, the (traditional) order of things and relationships guaranteed clarity (Korff, 1996, pp. 23, 19–20; Langreiter & Lanzinger, 2003, p. 15). Wopfner’s approach, which is reminiscent of the history of mentality, is also connected with this idea, and he explicitly brought “historical *Volkskunde*” into play as a complement to economic history (Wopfner, 1932, p. 1). One context was his dissertation topic, the Peasants’ War, which he continued to deal with decades later, as he did not consider its causes to have been sufficiently clarified. He drew the following conclusion:

Without knowledge of the mental state of the people, knowledge of their economic, social, political or religious condition cannot fully explain the states of agitation that emerge in each case. ... To ascertain the mental attitude of the German peasants towards the situation of the time, this most difficult task, however, must play a role in the historiography of the Peasants’ War more than it has hitherto.

In his view, historical *Volkskunde* was an “indispensable aid to gaining insight into peasant thinking and feeling”. However, he assumed that thinking and feeling “have changed little in landscapes with little traffic or where a self-confident peasantry has been resident for a long time” (Wopfner, 1936, pp. 97–98).

By emphasising the “people’s soul” (*Volksseele*) and the unchanged, he represented the idea of a “basic psychic structure” and a “collective totali-

8 His “folk-historical” focus, from which he discussed the peculiarity of the German Tyrolean or Alpine Volkstum in various contributions of the 1930s, nevertheless made him “compatible with the emerging National Socialism”, even though he rejected it (Meixner & Siegl, 2019, pp. 106–109, 118). For a critical discussion of the concept of Volk, see the book by Michael Wildt (2019).

ty" that was inseparable from the search for historical "origins" (*Ursprünge*) and "archetypes" (*Urformen*) (Jeggle, 2001, 56). In this way, Wopfner produced precisely the kind of anachronism that Lucie Varga – supported by ethnology – considered necessary to avoid in order to be able to research a society historically. The objections to the history of mentality at the end of the 1980s, as formulated by Peter Burke, for example, also go in this direction: consensus in historical societies can, firstly, easily be overestimated if the historian treats "all sorts of attitudes that are foreign to him as homogeneous parts of a uniform mentality". Secondly, "the problem of change arises", which is difficult to explain on the basis of mentality as a closed structure of thought. Mentalities thus effectively become a "prison" (Burke, 1989, pp. 133–134). Historicising, in the sense of contextual situating, is subsequently the claim and the claim to avoid anachronisms.

3. Interdisciplinarity and *histoire totale*

Hermann Wopfner's approach can be characterised as a "mixture of *Landesgeschichte* and *Volkskunde*" (Meixner & Siegl, 2019, p. 97), with economic history always playing an important role. Wopfner attributes the first attempts to approach thinking and feeling to Lamprecht's school, such as the volume by Franz Arens *Das Tiroler Volk in seinen Weistümern* (*The Tyrolean Folk in its Village Statutes*), published in 1904 in the series *Geschichtliche Untersuchungen* (*Historical Studies*) edited by Karl Lamprecht. Assumptions have repeatedly circulated that bring the *Annales* into close connection with German *Landesgeschichte*. Among others, reference is made to the works of Karl Lamprecht. Peter Schöttler (1995, p. 201) takes a sound look at the argument that Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch "received their most important stimuli at the time from Germany". Bloch had studied in Leipzig for a semester in 1908, where he was particularly impressed by Karl Bücher. He was, however, disappointed by Karl Lamprecht (Schöttler, 1995, pp. 203, 205). The broad interdisciplinary approach may superficially appear to be a common feature between German *Landesgeschichte* and the *Annales*. However, as Schöttler states, the *Annales* historians practised an interdisciplinarity of "a different kind". They worked with terms that they drew "primarily from sociology and ethnology". How-

ever, these terms were unsuitable “for ethnically or racially bound concepts such as ‘folk and cultural soil’ or a vague ‘folk history’” (1995, p. 216).⁹ Likewise, decisive differences lay in the *Annales*’ decided interest in the “innovative methodological way” (Schöttler, 1995, p. 210) and in the *Annales* historians’ problem-oriented approach as opposed to the very descriptive *Landesgeschichte*.

Interdisciplinarity was also characteristic of the *Annales* in the form of a *histoire totale*. Conceptually, it goes back further, for example to Émile Durkheim, and was taken up by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre. It entered a new dimension in the 1970s, when the technical prerequisites for quantifying methods were available, offering entirely new possibilities for analysing serial source material (Schöttler, 2015a, pp. 25–26). Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie took a pioneering path in this sense.¹⁰ His book *Montaillou, Village Occitane de 1294 à 1324*, published in Paris in 1975, is also considered a classic of early *ethnohistoire*, “historical field research” (Hohkamp, 2021, pp. 151–152). The focus is on the Cathars, who were interrogated and persecuted as heretics – and were also already an important topic in three essays by Lucie Varga. Le Roy Ladurie, a student of Fernand Braudel and thus member of a younger *Annales* generation, stood for *histoire totale*; in a biography published in 2018, he is treated as “historien total” (Lemny, 2018). Sections of Le Roy Ladurie’s book are concerned with ecology, archaeology, sociology, ethnology and psychology. Robert Fossier (1977, p. 196) states in his detailed review at the beginning: the book demonstrates: “L’histoire totale est possible” – *histoire totale* is possible.

In the context of the *Annales*, *histoire totale* did not mean simply dealing with everything, but with everything that contributes to the understanding

9 As an example, Schöttler cites Lucien Febvre’s discussion of the Rhine in the 1930s and thus in a politically very tense period of Franco-German relations: Febvre questioned the concept of the “natural border” and thought of the Rhine as “a product of human history”. He deconstructed “the historical and historiographical myths” and opposed “any retrospective identification of Germans and Germanic peoples, of Germany and the Empire” and saw the history of the Rhine primarily as “a history of cities”. He thus implemented the concept of a “comparative social and mental history” that had no equivalent in German *Landesgeschichte* of the time (Schöttler, 1995, pp. 217–219).

10 In other respects, there are clearly also points of criticism to be noted, methodologically, for example, insofar as Le Roy Ladurie assumes the immediacy and authenticity of the statements in his work with court records. More refined analytical tools were only formed over time.

of the subject under investigation, starting from research questions. *Histoire totale* represents an interdisciplinary and broadly contextualising method. On the blurb of the American edition, *Montaillou* (Le Roy Ladurie, 1979) is accordingly praised by Keith Thomas as a “wholly successful demonstration of the historian’s capacity to bring together almost every dimension of human experience into a single satisfying whole” and, with reference to the *London Times Literary Supplement*, described as “a masterpiece of ethnographic history”. In this broad perspective, Le Roy Ladurie basically also coincides with a concept of field research advocated by Malinowski. Montaillou lies at 1,399 metres, but in the Pyrenean highlands – not in the Alps.

4. Anthropology and History: Between Field and Archive

The image of the Alps as traditional – Alfred Helbok (1883–1968) had characterised them in an article of 1931 as “one of the most important European and the most distinctively German relic landscape, the strongest preserver of old forms” (p. 102) – was enduring beyond the Second World War. Historians and *Volkskunde* academics still saw the Alps primarily as a “tradition-preserving relic landscape” in the first post-war decades (Johler, 1995, p. 420). In a sense, the counterpart to such an approach is the work of the anthropologists John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf: their book *The Hidden Frontier* (1974) on two neighbouring places – the German-speaking St. Felix in South Tyrol and the Romansh-speaking Tret in Trentino – and the articles they published on them in the years around 1974. Their research was conducted in the context of anthropological studies on peasant societies, which were now perceived as complex societies. Their history thus became an integral part of anthropological research. William A. Douglass, for example, took some local studies on southern Italy in a commentary as an opportunity to “raise questions about the methodology of conducting fieldwork in Europe, as well as the relationship between anthropology and history”. He pleaded for the complementarity of anthropological and historical approaches (1975, pp. 620, 625). A corresponding mission statement can also be read in the first lines of Cole and Wolf’s preface, where they declare, “we believe that anthropology cannot do without

history" (1974, p. XI). However, this also confronted anthropologists with the question of how to use historical sources.

Pier Paolo Viazzo sees working with archival sources as a key moment in the encounter between anthropology and historiography, requiring an engagement with the concepts of the "others", the historians. From an anthropological perspective, however, the archive is often a *locus horribilis*, a daunting, dark and dangerous place that can easily lead one astray from the "right" path. He writes this at the very beginning of his introduction to historical anthropology (p. VII) published in 2000. *The Hidden Frontier* by John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf is still a fascinating book today (Lanzinger & Saurer, 2010; Lanzinger, 2018). On a closer look archival sources remain very undefined in Cole and Wolf's book, although in their acknowledgements they thank "many archivists who allowed us to examine the documents in their charge, notably P. Tito on the Capuchin monastery in Cles and Don Alessandro Sartori" (Cole & Wolf, 1974, p. XIII). In the introductory first chapter they state: "In addition to interpersonal interviews, we also worked to some extent with archival records." The following is very vague about what exactly was involved:

Wolf consulted the church records in St. Felix and Tret and the archives in Fondo, Unsere Frau, and Trento. He also worked in the holdings of the Ferdinandeum and the University of Innsbruck. Cole consulted the registry offices in Fondo, Meran, and Cles, as well as the library of the Capuchin monastery in Cles. Both of us made extensive use of the holdings in the library of the Südtiroler Kulturinstitut in Bozen. (Cole & Wolf, 1974, p. 16)

In the fifth chapter, in the section on rentals, payments and services that the peasants had to provide since the Middle Ages, the authors mention at one point "documents" from the years 1396 and 1495, "in which the head of the monastic establishment at Gries grants" a specific "homestead" to a peasant (1974, pp. 105, 108). In chapter 7, in the section "Rights in Estates", there is mention of "property deeds to land" with the explanation that "the deeds registry office for all the Upper Anaunia villages was located in Fondo until the mid-1960s, when records for the German villages were transferred to Meran" (1974, p. 155). There are no footnotes with references to sources, how-

ever. It is therefore not clear which material the two anthropologists actually used and what kind of information came from where.

Nevertheless, *The Hidden Frontier* impressively documents the process of historicising anthropology. As a result, it was history that provided important explanatory potential for differences between the two villages, especially for the question of how interethnic complexity is achieved and organised. In its consequences, the formation and practice of the legal-political status of peasants in German-speaking Tyrol since the late Middle Ages and the beginning of the early modern period proved a particularly effective historical process – in contrast to the neighbouring Romansh-speaking area. Cole and Wolf see the striking “connection to the political sphere” in the fact that the peasantry in the German-speaking Tyrol, which had been represented in the regional assembly (*Landtag*) from the end of the Middle Ages, secured various privileges and showed loyalty over the centuries. Cole and Wolf interpret this in terms of state integration. In contrast, Italian communities were primarily oriented towards the city: “the state is weak. It is the social network that is real.” In between there would be “an army of middlemen, go-betweens, brokers – especially lawyers –” who would represent the interests and claims of certain “parties” vis-à-vis the state and lend emphasis to them (Cole & Wolf 1974, p. 267).

From the very beginning, the St. Felix pauer has a dual role: he is the patriarch within the domestic realm, and public representative of an organizational unit within the community. That is, he plays a certain role within the juro-political domain because of his private status in the social and economic sphere. (Cole & Wolf, 1974, p. 265)

Cole and Wolf establish a connection between the “patterns of authority within the domestic group” and “the wider political field”, which was taken up decades later also in historical kinship research. “Not long ago, anthropologists tended to treat questions of kinship quite separately from questions of political organisation, and to interpret kinship structure as divorced from the political matrix. More recently, however, there has been greater interest in tracing the effects of political ordering upon kinship organization” – and vice versa, we would add from a historical perspective since the late 1990s.

The segmental family organisation in Tret, on the other hand, “bears no regular relation to the political field”. The position that “all social relations are private” (1974, pp. 264–265) would not be supported by historical kinship research today – based on a broad concept of politics. The boundary between the disciplines that Cole and Wolf crossed with their study was one already breached by anthropology – conversely, permeability was not yet widespread to the same degree, especially at the “margins”, especially in social history.

In their approach, Cole and Wolf (1974) set themselves apart from a history consisting of an accumulation of facts: “We are not interested in history conceived as ‘one damned thing after another,’ but in a history of structures relevant to the Anaunia, in their unfolding over time, and in their mutual relationships.” (p. 21). Eric Wolf, in an interview published in 1998, positions history as a complement and alternative to functionalism, which “assumes that there is such a thing as stable structures or cultural organisms in which everything is connected to everything else,” but it sidesteps the question of “in what way and to what extent the individual parts are interconnected” (p. 256). In their retrospect (*Rückblick*) in the German translation of *The Hidden Frontier* (1995), Cole and Wolf cite a specific point at which “anthropologists who were concerned with complex systems came into contact with historians who were in turn researching them”: namely, where researchers had to “deal not only with the facts of social or but also with the ways in which this complexity is achieved and organized”. First and foremost, these were “social historians or historically oriented sociologists whose interest was less in the history of events than in the history of social trends [*Strömungen*] and structure”. They explicitly refer to representatives of the *Annales*, such as Marc Bloch, and to English Marxist historians, such as Eric J. Hobsbawm.

They raised questions about relations of dominance and dependence in society, about the ways in which property relations regulated access to land, the role of classes in socio-cultural complexity, class formation and conflicts between classes, and the role of the state in organising society into classes. (Cole & Wolf, 1995, p. 14)

When Eric Wolf, for example, writes about inheritance practices – a key theme of the study – the point is not to establish that different patterns have a long history. In the Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic as well as the western, Rhaeto-

Romanic influenced parts of Tyrol, division of real estates among children prevailed. In contrast, in the more eastern German-speaking parts of Tyrol, the estates were transferred undivided to the next generation. In most cases, one child was designated as the successor, not infrequently the eldest son. It is rather about the “how”, the logics behind it, and these logics are conceived as adaptive and changeable. The two different, historically determinable inheritance models are only the starting point, not the explanation, because:

The story is, however, more complicated than this. ... Patterns of inheritance are ... historically variable, and not laid down once and for all in some original germ plasm. They constitute adaptive responses to a variety of conditions ... I like to think of them less as customs, frozen into some template which replicates itself generation after generations, than as strategies employed by peasants and their masters towards the realization of certain ends. They are therefore variable as those ends themselves are variable. This is best seen in historical perspective. (Wolf, 1970, p. 104)

He thus places history and change at the center.

5. Microstoria and the Villages

An approach that focused on the implications of differences in inheritance practice on social relations made anthropology and explicitly the book *The Hidden Frontier* an important reference for Italian microhistory that had been forming since the late 1960s. In a programmatic contribution to the debate on the relationship between microhistory, social history and anthropology, which he wrote in the late 1970s, Edoardo Grendi locates two important impulses: one came from those anthropological studies that attributed relevance to history, the other from historical local studies in Europe.¹¹ The interest in

11 In 1972, Grendi edited a volume with important articles from social anthropology with an economic focus: P. Cohen: “Analisi economica e uomo economico”; P. Bohannan-G. Dalton: “Introduzione a Markets in Africa”; E. R. Wolf: “Tipi di comunità contadine latino-americane”; M. D. Sahlins: “Sociologia dello scambio primitivo”; R. Firth: “Capitale risparmio credito in società contadine”; M. Nash: “Contesto sociale della scelta economica in piccola società ...”; S. Epstein: “Efficienza produttiva e sistemi di retribuzione nell’India rurale del Sud”; T. F. Barth: “Circuiti economici in Darfur”.

the “how” is methodologically the connecting factor to Cole and Wolf. From Grendi’s point of view, two results of Cole and Wolf’s study are particularly relevant: the modes of inheritance between ideology and practice and social relations (Grendi, 1977, p. 511).

Social relations as an essential anthropological topic came into greater discussion in social history in the wake of E. P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) – not, however, in the sense of structures, but as a counter-concept to structures that were increasingly seen as schematising. This was above all a reaction to the confrontation with quantifying historical-social scientific, historical-demographic and family-historical research, which experienced a boom in the wake of the new technical possibilities, created typologies and ultimately wrote a history without people. The limits of quantitative approaches were at the same time linked to theoretical-methodological as well as conceptual problems, especially with regard to the classifications of social groups and strata through quasi-automatic allocations – according to age, gender, wealth, occupation, place of residence, choice of partner, etc. – and the abstraction that inevitably resulted from this. In contrast, microhistorians, as Edoardo Grendi wrote in his commentary, raised the call for case studies (1977, pp. 505–510). Such an approach can make social relations visible in their dynamics and logics by analysing processes in specific situations and their specific contexts and by relating different sources to each other: church records that identify married couples, parents and children, witnesses to marriage, godparents, files on notarial negotiations of property and assets, on conflicts and criminal cases, on taxes and administration, purchases and sales, loans and debts, etc. Inspired by social and cultural anthropology, Grendi names a whole series of topics that should be dealt with in a microhistorically and historically anthropologically informed social history: family and kinship – beyond household typologies –, all forms of social relations including patronage and clientage relations, the socially and always also legally shaped practice of inheritance and bequest, dowry, kinship marriages or credit relations.

To be able to historically examine the network of interpersonal relationships and social and legal practices from a perspective of proximity – which is a central criterion of Italian microhistory – Grendi (1977, p. 518) considered the peasant village (*villaggio contadino*) a particularly suitable field of inves-

tigation. This was undoubtedly also anthropologically inspired. As a result, microhistory was often equated with the study of villages. Giovanni Levi opposed this in a twofold sense. On the one hand, he made it clear: “Historians do not study villages” – meaning in their totality – “they study *in* villages” (Levi, 1992, p. 96). He took over this sentence from Clifford Geertz (Levi, 1992, p. 98), who was otherwise heavily criticised with his approach of thick description, above all because of the ethnologist’s unlimited interpretative authority and power. Geertz already stated in 1973: “The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods ...); they study *in* villages.” (Geertz, 1973, p. 22) There were thus convergences on this central question. Basically, this is also a certain demarcation from *histoire totale*.

On the other hand, Levi repeatedly and resolutely opposed the equation of microhistory with village and local history. This was “certainly not it, and above all: a course of life, a document in need of explanation, a ritual, a street, a house, an event – all these can be microhistory” (Levi, 2017, p. 115). According to Giovanni Levi in the introduction to the special issue of *Quaderni storici* on the topic of villages (*villaggi*) with the subtitle *Studi di antropologia storica – Studies in Historical Anthropology* –, working in a village is an artifice that brings with it practical research advantages in terms of the reconstruction possibilities and contextualisation of a thematic complex in the densest possible network (Levi, 1981, p. 9). The special issue is introduced as the publication of a first group of research on communities (*ricerche di comunità*) in connection with a micro-analytical approach. Levi opposes a history that a priori assumes certain causal connections and then finds them in the result – in this way, no new explanations can be arrived at. A micro-historical study, on the other hand, does not yet know “the name of the murderer” and examines the manifold relationships – horizontal and vertical. The relationships worked out in this way can provide very helpful explanations about social logics and how a society was organised. Explicitly, the problem of the structural-functionalist interest in the rule-like is also addressed here, while microhistory is interested in the contradictoriness of rules and norms, in the adopted strategies and in choices at the personal level or of certain groups.

Grendi sees a direct connection between a holistic approach and fieldwork: the latter enables him – but he probably sees this too simply and too

optimistically – to grasp the connections between different phenomena very quickly – *immediatamente* – whereas historians have to put series of analyses side by side (Grendi, 1977, p. 511). In any case, Cole and Wolf (1974, p. 12) present their fieldwork quite differently. “Though we have talked to all the people in both communities and participated in many different events during more than three combined years of fieldwork, we shall be quite content if we can explicate the more formal and structural aspects of village life.”

With a view to the formation of *microstoria* and, somewhat later, of historical anthropology, Pier Paolo Viazzo (2000, p. 17) comes to a conclusion that may seem paradoxical at first glance: now even the “enemies of history”, above all Malinowski and Claude Lévi-Strauss, would be appointed precursors. But the new orientations of the time, which defined themselves as counter-concepts to mainstream history, are comparable to those of Malinowski at the point where he defines the goal of the ethnographer as “to grasp the natives’ point of view” (1922, p. 25). Thus, Edoardo Grendi (1977, p. 520) sees the task of microhistorical social history as establishing the cultural distance to contemporary society, grasping it through its relational content and reconstructing the dynamics of social practice¹². This was also the aim of the approach of a history of mentality which had great significance for the first *Annales* generation.¹³ The central issue was, “not to rashly reduce the foreign to the familiar” (Schöttler, 1991, p. 71). This can be made equally useful methodically for societies that are spatially as well as temporally “distant”.

Malinowski’s diary (1967, p. 114) contains an extensive entry from 13 November 1917 in which he ruminates on the relationship between (diary) writing and observing and on the fact that what is observed changes in trained writing: “experience in writing leads to entirely different results even if the observer remains the same”. This led him to the conclusion that there were no “objectively existing facts”, instead “theory creates facts”. And further: “There is no such thing as ‘history’ as an independent science. History is observation of facts in keeping with a certain theory; an application of this

12 For the term translated here as “practice”, he uses *comportamento*, which means behaviour, conduct, and in any case includes the level of action.

13 The history of mentality brings with it the problem that mentality intended in terms of prefigured attitudes and viewpoints ultimately has the effect of putting people in a “prison” and that change cannot be explained. This approach was therefore criticised in the context of the New Social History and the cultural turn in the 1980s and 1990s.

theory to the facts as time gives birth to them.” Such a constructivist and theory-guided approach was to shape German-language historical scholarship only one or two decades later, and only in some fields.

6. Anthropologists in the Alps

It was a distinctive and innovative feature of the approach in *The Hidden Frontier* that Cole and Wolf grasped ethnicity not only as a political category in the narrower sense, but as an anthropological category, for the understanding of which aspects such as the organisation of social relations – labour, family and kinship relations – inheritance practices and ecology became the focus of attention. In this respect, in the 1960s and early 1970s, they asked very “different questions ... than *Volkskunde* academics and historians from Europe have done” (Ortmayr, 1992, p. 133). The disregard for *The Hidden Frontier*, which stimulated and helped to shape Anglo-Saxon discourse, “in the place of the investigations, in South Tyrol and in Trentino itself” is evidenced not least by the fact that it was not translated into German and Italian until twenty years later (Johler, 1995, p. 420; Kezich, 2020). Thus, it was mainly anthropologists who conducted innovative research on villages in the Alps in the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁴

Fifteen years after Edoardo Grendi’s programmatic contribution, Norbert Ortmayr (1992) took stock under the title *Americans in the Alps*. Although, as Pier Paolo Viazzo notes in his contribution to this volume, not all of the authors mentioned by Ortmayr were Americans, they were nevertheless influenced by Anglo-Saxon research approaches. In contrast to the historians of the time, anthropologists in the Alps analysed, as Ortmayr states (1992),

not local customs in the course of the year, but asked about the social function of ritual acts, they did not reconstruct local historical details, but asked how open or closed local societies in the Alps were, nor were they content with research-

¹⁴ Just published Philipp S. Katz’s, „Du, Forscher, du!“ Ein Amerikaner im Bergdorf Stuls. Über den sozialen Wandel der 1970er Jahre [„You, Researcher, You!“ An American in the Mountain Village of Stuls. On Social Change in the 1970s], based on his unpublished dissertation *Social and Economic Change in a South Tyrolean Community* (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 1975), which he did with John Cole.

ing the number of inhabitants of Alpine settlements over the decades, but asked about the relationship between natural resources and population size, developed ecosystemic models that depicted this relationship, investigated those regulatory mechanisms that peasant societies had developed to maintain a balance between ecosystem factors, population and environment.

He attributes the fascination of the Alps to cultural diversity and refers to Eric Wolf's view of a "magnificent laboratory" (Ortmayr, 1992, p. 134; Wolf, 1972, p. 201). Note 5 in Ortmayr's text includes a page of references to American or American-inspired anthropological studies from the late 1960s and the 1970s on French, Swiss, Tyrolean and Styrian villages and valleys in the Alps. Ecological anthropology is very well represented with several contributions; others are devoted to social processes and changes, local and familial organisation, property and property transmission. Overall, a wide range of approaches, topics and theoretical-methodological reflections is evident. Malinowski does not appear in the references of the articles viewed.

Ellen Wiegandt (1977), for example, deals with the type and composition of inheritance shares in the Swiss mountain village of Mase in the Canton of the Valais, where real division among all children was common. She calculates the Gini coefficient based on a sample for the period between 1850 and 1875. The aim is to gain insights into the (in-)equality effect of inheritance divisions among siblings. Robert McC. Netting (1979, pp. 195, pp. 201–205) explores the economic and political background of "permanent patrilineal kinship groups" in Törbel, whose existence he comments as "surprising": 12 out of 21 patrilineal kinship groups were able to continue from 1700 into the 1970s. Unlike the others, he published his text in German and in a historiographical journal. George R. Saunders (1979), in his study of a village "in the Maritime Alps of northwestern Italy", focuses on "psychocultural aspects of family life" and addresses particularly conflictual configurations in his field research: father and son, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law.

Ortmayr also lists essays by Eric R. Wolf and John W. Cole, which they published on Tret and St. Felix. Among other things, Eric Wolf (1962, 1970) concentrates on the foundations of property and inheritance law since the Middle Ages and discusses the logic and consequences of inheritance law and real division, especially the relationship between norm, ideology and

practice. As in *The Hidden Frontier*, he refers to Alfons Dopsch's *Herrschaft und Bauer in der deutschen Kaiserzeit – Rule and Peasant under German Emperors* – of 1964 and emphasises the concept of “mutual dependence between lord and peasant” (1970, pp. 106–107). He also refers to Hermann Wopfner's *Bergbauernbuch* (1970, p. 105). The historical approach includes extended periods of time and, above all, focusses on change. From John W. Cole's point of view, “the social analysis of change appears to be a central concern of modern anthropology. The question is not whether change can be analysed, but rather how to do it.” In the article on Tret and St. Felix, Cole (1973) is interested in social process – here in the singular – “instead of structures” and how “social process in the communities we study are interwoven with their ‘biological, ecological, and social environments’” (p. 784). In addition, there is the integration “into larger scale political-economic processes” which, among other things, help to determine inheritance practices. He describes inheritance practices as “intermediate patterns, with some degree of division of estates and varying degrees of inequality of shares ... in seemingly endless variations” (Cole, 1977, pp. 123, 131).

Eric R. Wolf (1972) also includes law as a flexible instrument: “The property connexion in complex societies is not merely an outcome of local or regional ecological processes, but a battleground of contending forces which utilize jural patterns to maintain or restructure the economic, social and political relations of society” (pp. 201–202). What is striking and important here is that the focus is not only on change but also on “maintain”. Not everything can be grasped through social change and maintain does not happen by itself. Maintain also does not mean the “age-old” of the *Landesgeschichte* and *Volkskunde*, the question is rather: How can something be kept in the status quo in a constantly changing world? Who does it, how and for what interest? Equally important is the notion of “restructuring” as a form of change that relates new demands or possibilities to what already exists.

Looking at the references, a discursive field of anthropologists in the Alps becomes clear, since the authors refer to each other in their texts. They discuss at symposia – for example on the topic of “Dynamics of Ownership in the Circum-Alpine Area”. This resulted in a special issue of the *Anthropological Quarterly* in 1972. The symposium took place in New York City in November 1971 as part of the 70th annual meeting of the American Anthropologi-

cal Association. Gerald Berthoud,¹⁵ the editor of the special issue, comments: “The emphasis was on one or several aspects of the complex relationship between property rights and social organisation.” In the introduction he refers to Marx – and also to Marc Bloch and his book *Les caractères originaux de l’histoire rurale française*, published in Paris in 1952, with regard to “common lands” and “seigneurial rights” (Berthoud, 1972b, p. 120). In his own contribution, he draws on court records from the period between 1883 and 1967 for his study in Vernamiege, an Alpine community of the Swiss canton Valais. Gérald Berthoud wanted to find out “different kinds of social change, based on the type and frequency of conflicts related to the use, possession and transmission of landed property”, which are considered as indicators. He chose three different time periods for his study in order to be able to show clear shifts: possession-related court cases are decreasing, from 63 per cent in 1883 to 1930, to 57 per cent in 1931 to 1950 and finally 20 per cent in 1951 to 1967. At the same time, the percentage of “inheritance and joint property disputes” is increasing in comparison to “damages to real estate and encroachments upon landed rights disputes” (Berthoud, 1972a, pp. 178, 180, 185–186, 193–194). Wolf (1972, p. 202) mentions the “rules governing the distribution of decision-making power in the family” as another important aspect in his commentary on one of the contributions. John W. Cole wrote about cultural adaptations in the Eastern Alps, including “the organisation of village resources”, the community lands and high pastures in some Nonsberg communities.

The comments also identify points of criticism: John J. Honigmann (1972) mentions the anthropologists’ preference for “rural cultures” in his commentary with a critical undertone. Although they make the interdependencies with “national societies” visible, “we still frequently leave field study of the urban or actively urbanising scene to sociologists” (pp. 196, 199).¹⁶ And he

15 He came from French-speaking Switzerland, studied in Paris and spent time in Berkeley and Montréal before becoming professor of cultural and social anthropology at the Faculté des sciences sociales et politiques of the Université de Lausanne in 1972. <https://www.unil.ch/ssp/fr/home/menuinst/formations/enseignantes/professeures-honoraires/berthoud-gerald.html> (10 February, 2022).

16 John J. Honigmann and Irma Honigmann themselves examined, for example, contracts in the Styrian Altdörfing: labour contracts of farmers, rental contracts and intergenerational property transfer or retirement contracts, for which they use the German terms *Übertragung*, *Übertrag* – transfer.

missed “knowing what the Alpine people themselves think and feel about farming, work in factories, tourism, inheritance, litigation, and other subjects” (p. 200). For historians, this again raises the question of whether sources exist that can provide an answer like diaries or letters? For historical anthropology and social history oriented to contemporary history, oral history offered an approach to such questions from the beginning of the 1980s. Lucie Varga already had a special sensitivity in this field in the 1930s and at the same time an open approach. She addressed seemingly paradoxical situations resulting from the overlapping of rural space and urban “modernity”, which already met in Alpine valleys in the 1930s and resulted in mutual appropriation processes, but also dependencies. Thus, she stated: “The wives and daughters of tourists dress peasantly, while the peasant youths adopt urban fashion.” And even then, “the folkloric expectations of foreigners are increasingly disappointed.” She asked the women why they exchanged their traditional costumes for “city dresses”. Not stopping at their arguments that they were more hygienic and cheaper, she went deeper in her analysis and showed that fashionable dress also had something to do with the expectations of young men towards young women (Varga, 1936/1991a, pp. 156–157). In the 1970s, the transformation of communities was an issue, but rather subordinate and mainly economically defined.

The historicisation of anthropological research in a historical perspective since the 1950s had the effect of bringing to the fore surprisingly long periods of time from the point of view of historiography, which was dissected into epochs: The Hidden Frontier goes back to the Middle Ages and so do various articles published by Cole and Wolf in its setting; Robert K. Burns Jr. places it in the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages (1963, pp. 133–134). This was also common practice in *Landesgeschichte*. Hermann Wopfner (1951/1995) begins his explanations in the *Bergbauernbuch* with the history of settlement in the third millennium BC. However, anthropologists were always concerned with specific questions.

One important voice is still missing: In his article, Pierre Centlivres (1980) spoke of a “new ‘rush’” of American anthropologists towards the Alps, especially the Valais valleys, from the mid-1960s onwards (p. 35), taking a critical look at a number of studies from the perspective of an anthropologist trained

in Switzerland.¹⁷ He states that the American scholars worked with different approaches, but that often unquestioned assumptions about Swiss federalism, liberalism and the autonomy of the communities were also in play. He points out that the search for a model uniting pluralism and political consensus was at stake – for example, in wide-ranging comparisons with regions of what was then called the “third world” (pp. 40, 43–44). This, however, did not take into account local and regional differences, resulting in a random picture, for instance when comparing different levels of adaptation (p. 54). Critically Centlivres notes, among other things, that these American studies explored the villages in a manner too detached and isolated from the broader political-administrative environment. On the positive side, he credits the Americans in Valais for introducing theoretical and conceptual frameworks that had not been applied to research on the Alps before. Furthermore, they contributed to renew the methodological and technical toolbox by processing documents that covered long periods of time and by using computers, especially in the field of historical demography (p. 53).

7. Conclusions

After reading texts on villages in the Alps from the 1970s by American or American-inspired anthropologists, it is clear that German-language historical scholarship was very sluggish and cumbersome. The anthropologists who researched the Alps posed questions, applied concepts and presented empirically innovative, methodologically reflective and problem-centred research. In the mid-1980s, everyday history, historical anthropology and microhistory still had to fight for recognition of all this in the German-speaking world: the historians’ dispute between the historical social science of the Bielefeld School on the one hand and everyday history and historical anthropology on the other at the *Deutsche Historikertag* – German historians’ main conference – in 1984 may suffice here as an indication. The dispute flared up over a paper by Hans Medick (1984) entitled “Missionare im Ruderboot” – “Missionaries in the Rowboat” –, in which he addressed methodological ap-

¹⁷ I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this volume for this important hint.

proaches of ethnology as a challenge and stimulus for social history (Lindenberger, 2003). And historians first had to laboriously develop the vocabulary necessary to adequately express a new way of thinking about history in a historical-anthropological approach. This had long been common in America, opening up exciting research perspectives.

In the 1980s and 1990s, it was representatives of different fields of research and approaches in social history – the history of the family, the history of everyday life, historical anthropology – who focused on historical actors and their perceptions as well as social groups, social logics and processes, and who also oriented themselves towards anthropological themes, questions and methods. As the spotlights of this article have shown – starting from Lucie Varga and her reference to Malinowski – social, economic and cultural history as well as social and cultural anthropology have their own internal dynamics and chronologies. There were various moments of a certain rapprochement, which were also shaped by the textures of the time, but decisively by certain personalities who were open to “other” approaches, who sought exchange, who were internationally networking, who read and discussed the studies of the ‘others’ and drew inspiration for their own work from them and who saw themselves as belonging here and there. However, important debates and orientations in anthropology and in social, cultural and economic history have been and continue to be mostly time-delayed and were and are at the same time always anchored in the history of their own discipline. Thus, the question remains whether and how a transdisciplinary dialogue on approaches, concepts and topics could be organised and established in the long term. In this context, it is not “the” history that can be addressed, but subfields – such as social history and historical anthropology. Personal exchange as well as joint projects and research cooperations are probably the best way.

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