

**Zeitschrift:** Histoire des Alpes = Storia delle Alpi = Geschichte der Alpen  
**Herausgeber:** Association Internationale pour l'Histoire des Alpes  
**Band:** 30 (2025)

**Artikel:** Dialogue and controversy in historical-anthropological family research on the Alps since 1974  
**Autor:** Mathieu, Jon  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1091258>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 07.03.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**



# Dialogue and Controversy in Historical-Anthropological Family Research on the Alps since 1974

Jon Mathieu

## Riassunto – Dialogo e controversia nella ricerca storico-antropologica realizzata sulla famiglia nelle Alpi dal 1974

19

A cinquant'anni dalla pubblicazione di *The Hidden Frontier. Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley* (John W. Cole, Eric R. Wolf), che ha segnato l'inizio della ricerca sulla famiglia in area alpina, cerchiamo di fare un bilancio. I ricercatori che si sono dedicati a questo campo di studi provengono da diversi ambiti e si sono posti obiettivi diversi. Come hanno interagito tra loro? Come si percepivano a vicenda? Hanno imparato gli uni dagli altri? Il contributo approfondisce questi aspetti, prendendo in considerazione una serie limitata di interazioni, col presupposto che non tutti i dialoghi hanno risvolti positivi e non tutte le controversie sono negative.

The Alps are one of the pioneering areas of historical family research. This is due to the special relationship with anthropology, which focused on the Alps as well as on family and kinship. For quite a while, the two perspectives were much less present in historical research. In this article I want to highlight the obvious fact that research is both a collective and an individual enterprise. The individual actors enter the field at a certain point for certain reasons, stay with the topic for a longer or shorter period of time. They maintain this or that relationship with the available publications and their authors and publish one or the other work themselves, which then takes on a life of its own in this network, or not.<sup>1</sup>

The elements of my article may be familiar to many readers who have dealt with family history in the Alps before. I will simply approach the topic in a particular «interactionist» form. However, a real research history has yet to be

written and I don't feel very qualified to do so. I am a historical witness of the period under consideration, but also an actor and, as such, rather biased. The prefaces and introductions to the publications discussed usually contain historical retrospectives. They are informative, but also guided by particular interests and cannot be used one-to-one for a future professional research history.

In 1974, exactly fifty years ago, John W. Cole and Eric R. Wolf, two US anthropologists, published the book *The Hidden Frontier. Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley*.<sup>2</sup> A second edition with a new introduction followed in 1999. In the meantime, an Italian and German translation had already been published. The book examines two neighbouring villages (St Felix and Tret) on the border between Trentino and Tyrol and focuses on the «hidden» social and cultural border that separates the two villages – in addition to the obvious language border. One village belongs to the German language area, the other to the Romansh-Italian one. With this emphasis on diversity, the book has hit a sensitive point that has been taken up by many scholars. For a while, a real cult developed.

I was working on my doctoral dissertation in the Grisons at the time and felt magically drawn to this book and its place. Full of curiosity about the *genius loci*, I travelled with my wife to the non-identical twin villages in Spring 1982. Later, a «Seminario Permanente di Etnografia Alpina» (initially focused on *The Hidden Frontier*) was set up in Trentino under the direction of Pier Paolo Viazzo and Giovanni Kezich. And in 2010, Margareth Lanzinger and Edith Saurer published a report about a historical-anthropological «search for clues» (*Spurensuche*) at this location.<sup>3</sup> In my view, there are good reasons to start with this book – though of course there are much earlier studies on family themes in the Alps. One need only think of the students of the French social reformer Frédéric Le Play, active in the Western Alps in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or of the geographers in Innsbruck who carried out historical-demographic studies in the post-war period.<sup>4</sup>

## Two samples of Alpine literature

First, we will look at two samples and genres of literature on the subject: a dozen articles from the journal *Histoire des Alpes – Storia delle Alpi – Geschichte der Alpen* and a selection of a dozen independent monographs. *Histoire des Alpes* is the annual multilingual journal of the scholarly Alpine history association that you hold in your hand or see in your digital tool. It has been published since 1996 and has since put out a good 420 articles. Approximately twelve of them deal with family topics. That means, surprisingly, a mere three percent, which makes our current choice of research issue, the family, all the more necessary: There is obviously some catching up to do.

1998	Giorgio Ferigo: «La natura de cingari». Il sistema migratorio dalla Carnia durante l'età moderna, no. 2, pp. 227–246.
1998	Sabine Schweitzer: «... und dann sind wir herausgekommen ...». Zur Wahrnehmung von Option und Umsiedlung der SüdtirolerInnen, no. 2, pp. 351–364.
2001	Dionigi Albera: Oltre la norma e la strategia: per una comparazione ragionata dell'organizzazione domestica alpina, no. 6, pp. 117–132.
2007	Sandro Guzzi-Heeb: Parentela e sviluppo economico: un modello alpino? Il Vallese occidentale fra il 1750 e il 1850, no. 12, pp. 29–47.
2007	Margareth Lanzinger: Kirchliche Macht, antiliberaler Allianzen und ziviles Aufbegehren mit Grenzen. Zur Ehedispenspraxis in Tirol und Vorarlberg, no. 12, pp. 49–68.
2007	Paolo Tedeschi: Marché foncier, crédits et activités manufacturières dans les Alpes. Le cas des vallées de la Lombardie orientale (XVIII <sup>e</sup> –XIX <sup>e</sup> siècles), no. 12, pp. 247–259.
2007	Peter Michael-Caflisch: «Wer leben kann wie ein Hund, erspart». Bündner Zuckerbäcker in der Fremde, no. 12, pp. 273–289.
2007	Loretta Seglias: Die Bündner Schwabengänger. Kinderarbeit und saisonale Emigration nach Oberschwaben, no. 12, pp. 291–305.
2009	Cinzia Lorandini: Famiglia e impresa a cavallo delle Alpi. Capitale economico, umano e sociale in antico regime, no. 14, pp. 131–147.
2011	Maria Papathanassiou: Sennerinnen. Zur Geschichte ländlicher Frauenarbeit in den österreichischen Alpen vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis in die Zwischenkriegszeit, no. 16, pp. 297–317.
2013	Christine Tropper: Die Bedeutung von Frauen für den Geheimprotestantismus in Kärnten. Eine Annäherung, no. 18, pp. 91–103.
2022	Aleksander Panjek: La famiglia contadina nella Stiria slovena nel 1527 e il dibattito sul «tipo alpino orientale», no. 27, pp. 263–281.

Tab. 1. Family-related articles in *Histoire des Alpes* since 1996.

Table 1 lists all family-related articles I found in this journal: twelve authors (six women and six men) from five countries. Most of the articles refer to particular Alpine regions; one deals with the entire Alpine area (Albera 2001). The subjects are very diverse: commercial and forced migration, dispensation from marriage impediments, land market and credit with reference to family relationships, etc. The field of family and kinship is difficult to delineate. Sometimes I hesitated whether to assign or exclude an item. So, the selection is rather subjectively coloured. Perhaps more articles could have been included from the two volumes of *Histoire des Alpes* (1998, 2009) on migration. On the other hand, migration and family are simply not the same thing. There may be some interest in pondering the difference between studies that consider the Alps as a problem and a scientific question (e.g. Papathanassiou 2011) and studies that

do not, but only use the Alps as a background not as the main object of inquiry (e.g. Tropper 2013). I think both types are important. If we want to interpret the Alpine references properly and rigorously, we also have to accept that there are aspects without this reference.

As can be assessed from their bibliographies, there are not many connections between the authors listed. They speak more to regional and same-theme authors, especially when it comes to established discussions such as the politically enforced emigration or «option» in South Tyrol (Schweitzer 1998). Despite all the bibliographic coincidences, however, one can perhaps observe a certain effect of the establishment of an Alpine-historical field through the initiative of the association and the annual journal. In any case, two articles at the end of the list draw intensively on Alpine-wide references (Papathanassiou 2011, Panjek 2022). Some time ago, when I was commissioned by a publisher to write a history of the Alps for a broader audience, I was able to refer to this sample as well. It was very useful to have such a choice in one place.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the authors listed in Table 1 have published an article in *Histoire des Alpes* because they were working on a major project on the topics in question: Dionigi Albera, Sandro Guzzi-Heeb, Margareth Lanzinger and, more recently, Aleksander Panjek. The latter has also published an article in the international journal *The History of the Family*, to which I return later. The others opted for a monograph. They appear again in Table 2, in which I have brought together a dozen monographs on the subject. I have included only one book per author. Some have published a whole series. We are interested in those that are most directly related to the debate surrounding the development of an Alpine family history. Needless to say, this sample is even more subjective than the previous one – there would of course have been many other possibilities. Incidentally, only two of the authors grew up in the Alps (Margareth Lanzinger and Luigi Lorenzetti). The others come from the surrounding regions and from the United States.

I am primarily interested in the dialogues and controversies in this group. Dialogues don't always have to be good, and controversies don't always have to be bad. I treat these expressions fairly neutrally. But there are limits. Excessive rigidity as well as excessive elasticity in argumentation are problematic, in my view. I remember a dilemma I faced as editor of *Histoire des Alpes*. One of the contributors was particularly valuable for an issue, but also very behind schedule, and when the text finally arrived, the tone was sharp against another author, whom we equally appreciated. What to do? I tried it with a reminder to be lenient, because an apodictic style is not really scholarly, even if the theses put forward are interesting. It didn't work; so, a conflict was unavoidable.<sup>6</sup> In another case, however, elasticity became a problem. An author had been work-

1974	John W. Cole/Eric R. Wolf: <i>The Hidden Frontier. Ecology and Ethnicity in an Alpine Valley</i> (New York; Italian and German editions 1993 and 1995).
1981	Robert McC. Netting: <i>Netting: Balancing on an Alp. Ecological change and continuity in a Swiss mountain community</i> (Cambridge; Italian edition 1996).
1981	Raul Merzario: <i>Il paese stretto. Strategie matrimoniali nella diocesi di Como, secoli XVI–XVIII</i> (Turin).
1983	Alain Collomp: <i>La maison du père. Famille et village en Haute-Provence aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles</i> (Paris).
1983	Hermann Rebel: <i>Peasant Classes. The Bureaucratization of Property and Family Relations Under Early Habsburg Absolutism, 1511–1636</i> (Princeton).
1989	Pier Paolo Viazzo: <i>Upland Communities. Environment, population and social structure in the Alps since the sixteenth century</i> (Cambridge; Italian edition 1990).
1998	Jon Mathieu: <i>Geschichte der Alpen 1500–1900. Umwelt, Entwicklung, Gesellschaft</i> (Vienna; Italian and English editions 2000 and 2009).
1999	Luigi Lorenzetti: <i>Économie et migrations au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les stratégies de la reproduction familiale au Tessin</i> (Berne).
2003	Laurence Fontaine: <i>Pouvoir, identités et migrations dans les hautes vallées des Alpes occidentales, XVII<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle</i> (Grenoble).
2008	Sandro Guzzi-Heeb: <i>Donne, uomini, parentela. Casati alpini nell'Europa preindustriale, 1650–1850</i> (Turin).
2011	Dionigi Albera: <i>Au fil des générations. Terre, pouvoir et parenté dans l'Europe alpine, XIV<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles</i> (Grenoble).
2015	Margareth Lanzinger: <i>Verwaltete Verwandtschaft. Eheverbote, kirchliche und staatliche Dispenspraxis im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert</i> (Vienna; English edition 2023).

Tab. 2. Selected Monographs on Family History in the Alps.

ing on his project for years. As soon as the book with interesting theses had been published and the first feedback had arrived, he changed his mind and now held almost the opposite position. However, only a few people took note of this revision because it appeared in not easily accessible publications. Everyone quoted his earlier views, and it would probably have been better if he had thought things through carefully before publishing the book.<sup>7</sup>

In order to relate the monographs to each other, we should categorise them in more specific research currents. I suggest the following labels:

- *Political Ecology* (with an emphasis on diversity): John Cole/Eric Wolf, Jon Mathieu, Dionigi Albera.
- *Household/Demography* (related to ecological factors): Robert McC Netting, Pier Paolo Viazzo, Luigi Lorenzetti.

- *Kinship and Feminist* (a new generation): Sando Guzzi-Heeb, Margareth Lanzinger.
- *Independent* (motivated by other contexts): Raul Merzario, Alain Collomp, Hermann Rebel, Laurence Fontaine.

### Anthropology and history: different trajectories

I use this categorisation to bring the authors into the conversation in the form of dyads. Interestingly, the two anthropologists we start with did not really talk to each other about the Alps. They came from US research traditions and of course had things in common. But they found their way to the Alps for very different reasons. Eric R. Wolf (1923–1999) grew up in Vienna and the Sudetenland and, as a Jew, experienced the nationalist-fascist period at first hand. The family fled to the United States. During the Second World War, Wolf returned with the American army and fought in the Italian Alps, which he had gotten to know as a tourist in his youth. As a postdoc in 1957, he submitted a project to investigate national cultures in this area. He later engaged his student John W. Cole as a co-researcher and co-author.<sup>8</sup>

Robert McC. Netting (1935–1995) was an Africanist who was interested in the relationship between population and agricultural development, but had no old demographic data in Africa. Through a series of coincidences, he found the Valais village of Törbel, which until the early 1970s appeared to be a primeval place. His book entitled *Balancing on an Alp. Ecological change and continuity in a Swiss mountain community* was published in 1981. «Balancing» alludes to the equilibrium thesis that Netting advocated at the time. He described the village as an «island in the sky», that is: as a subsistent system that was cut off from the outside world, handled its own resources carefully, limited its population growth and thus did not tend towards overpopulation and emigration, as one might have thought. Households were relatively small and showed a «flexibility within limits» when adapting to the economic and demographic conditions.<sup>9</sup>

As an Africanist, Netting had little experience of the intricacies of historical demography and had his data post-processed at Peter Laslett's Population Studies Group in Cambridge. Shortly after, the Italian anthropologist Pier Paolo Viazzo joined the Group as an associate researcher. In the 1980s, he completed his dissertation and turned it into a publication. It is anchored in his field research on a village in the Italian Alps: Alagna, not far from Törbel, but separated by the high Monte Rosa massif. Viazzo's book is entitled *Upland Communities. Environment, Population and Social Structure in the Alps since the Sixteenth Century*. It is not least a dialogue with Netting and Törbel. The author

is quoted far more often than any other author, and there are many of them: Viazzo made an effort to look at the entire Alpine area. First of all the book was about his own field research in Alagna; secondly, it was about the counterpart village on the other side of the high mountains; and thirdly it was about the entire mountain range. This was something new and daring. No anthropologist had ever done this before.<sup>10</sup>

Netting was a stroke of luck for Viazzo, but also a challenge. A stroke of luck, because *Balancing on an Alp* was the first anthropological monograph with quantitative historical-demographic data. In addition, Alagna had originally been settled by the German-speaking Valais; hence it had cultural links to Törbel. But the two were also quite different. While Törbel appeared as a closed system in Netting's depiction, Alagna was clearly an open system in which temporary migration had long played a major role. In terms of the Alpine area as a whole, this created a dilemma: was the area historically closed or open to the outside world? Viazzo's very last sentence in *Upland Communities* allows for both possibilities. In later writings, he tended more towards the open side, thus increasing his distance from Netting – at least from his first version.<sup>11</sup> For Netting was the aforementioned author with a high flexibility index. He wrote «falsification is fun» and also found pleasure in refuting himself and proposing different positions at short intervals. I am not sure what to make of that.<sup>12</sup>

Another conversation took place between the Italian-French anthropologist Dionigi Albera and myself (the author of this text). Albera is a little younger than Viazzo and has occasionally worked with him. I met him at a conference and we realised that we had similar views when it came to the different family patterns in the Alps. We thought there should be a distinction between three principal regional forms. The inspiration came mainly from the diversity concept of Cole/Wolf, whose ecological premises we also looked at critically. Albera was ahead of me. He had already presented a comprehensive ethnohistorical thesis at the Université de Provence in 1995. However, it was not until sixteen years later that a heavily modified version of the thesis came out in book form. After so many years, I had almost given up hope of ever seeing it in my lifetime. In English, its title reads *Through the Generations. Land, Power and Kinship in Alpine Europe, 14<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1990s, Albera's unpublished thesis was a lucky charm for me. I was working on a study of the history of the Alps and could use it to support my regional approach. I wanted to bring together the forms of household and inheritance with the regional state-building processes and had chosen Savoy, Grisons and Carinthia, each with a centralist, communalist and aristocratic variant. As Albera's approach had not been published yet, I summarised it by way of introduction. Albera spoke of regional ideal types and distinguished between

an agnatic, a bourgeois and a peasant or *Bauer* type.<sup>14</sup> These ideal types were intended as orientation aids and had no direct claim to reality on the ground. They were social constellations that corresponded to certain domestic relationships. At the centre were forms of inheritance and succession (male divisibility; male and female divisibility; indivisibility, for the three types respectively). But contextual factors such as settlement patterns, form of residence, stratification and kinship were also important. The tripartition was inspired by local anthropological studies, mainly those by Cole, Wolf and Netting.

I learned a lot from Albera. It became clear to me that the Alpine area can be regarded as a European border region in terms of family constitution. For the most important types, there are clear connections to the surrounding area as far as the Baltic Sea and the Mediterranean. The subtitle with the unusual expression «Alpine Europe» is therefore justified. Despite these parallels, we have also criticised each other. I commented on his unpublished versions in personal letters, and he replied to me. The decisive difference was probably of a professional nature. As a historian, I am interested in temporal processes: continuity and change. Typologies – even if they are formulated relationally and openly – create orientation, but also new problems. What do we do with the borders and transitions between regions? And how does one type transform into another?<sup>15</sup>

### Historians among themselves: a new generation

An expression I picked up from Albera, and which leads us on to another topic here, is the expression *vallées des femmes* – valleys of women. On the southern side of the Alps, near the early urbanised *pianura*, there were valleys in which the craft and commercial migration of men produced very unbalanced gender relations. Agricultural work placed a heavy burden on the female population and women might even hold political offices. My favourite picture in this regard is from the 1920s. It shows women in Sant’Omobono, north of Bergamo, a tough crew who seemed to run the place themselves with their hoes, spades, forks and baskets (see the opening picture of this article). In the 1980s and 1990s, many researchers also said to themselves: «It’s up to the women». It was the great dawn of feminist studies and with it, an aspect of the family that had previously been the preserve of anthropology became a historical topic: kinship. More and more people began to refer to this as a «network».

In our sample of monographs, this generation is represented by Swiss historian Sandro Guzzi-Heeb and Italian-Austrian historian Margareth Lanzinger. I have selected two of their books. In English, the titles given in Table 2

are: *Women, Men, Kinship. Alpine Houses in Pre-Industrial Europe, 1650 to 1850* (2008) and Lanzinger's: *Administrating Kinship. Marriage Impediments and Dispensation Policies in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (2015, English edition 2023). Both books were habilitation theses, both were sensitive to women's issues, and in both cases the memory of the mentioned Alpine pioneer generation had faded. Lanzinger read an enormous amount, but only cited half of the monographs selected here. The fact that their research was based in the Alps was not a central theme for either author. The mountainous terrain was more of a backdrop, which (as I said at the beginning) is no criticism, but probably suited the chosen questions.<sup>16</sup> This lent the studies a certain generality.

The work of Guzzi-Heeb and Lanzinger had a common point of reference in microhistory and above all in a model of long-term kinship history, which David Warren Sabeau and Simon Teuscher had proposed at a conference in 2002. It assumed that kinship grew in importance up to the First World War and changed its character in the transition to modernity: in marriages, endogamy gained ground against exogamy, and in general the dimension of alliances became more relevant over inheritance.<sup>17</sup>

Guzzi-Heeb investigated western Valais. The first part of his study deals with the fortunes of an upwardly mobile family and the role of kinship in this process. The second part explores kinship in the population at large, using many sources from two villages. The author took an affirmative stance towards the Sabeau/Teuscher model and touched on a topic that would later occupy him greatly: namely the question of illegitimate reproduction and how it can be interpreted in political and cultural terms.<sup>18</sup> Lanzinger took note of Guzzi-Heeb's remarks with interest,<sup>19</sup> but she examined a special topic that no one had previously considered to this extent and in such detail: the Church and State practice of dispensing with marriage impediments, which became increasingly important due to the rise in endogamy. With this administrative history, she detected an unexpected new factor. She expressed critical reservations about Sabeau/Teuscher, and she was clearer than others about forms of matrimonial property law.<sup>20</sup> Later, she used her knowledge of legal history in this area to criticise Dionigi Albera's Alpine-wide typology. The typology focuses on the form of inheritance as the central criterion and does not include matrimonial property law, ignored by most anthropologists. It is therefore incomplete in this respect.<sup>21</sup>

At this point, we are left with the last category of our monographs: the «independent» ones. In my view, they had different biographical and thematic trajectories. They were tied to Italian microhistory, French ideas about the *history of private life*, US-American peasant studies, and the general evolution of the pedlar's trade. Historical fields are usually open and hybrid. As valuable

and interesting as each of these monographs is for Alpine research, I am not treating them individually here. I would just like to show the connection to the Alpine community in one particular case, which is out of competition, so to speak. After Swiss historian Luigi Lorenzetti completed his dissertation on family reproduction in Ticino in 1999 (Table 2), he turned his attention to a larger southern Alpine study area. And six years later, a joint work was published with Raul Merzario, the pioneering explorer of *Il paese stretto* (Table 2). The new book was called *Il fuoco acceso*, or in English: *The lighted fire. Alpine Families and Migration in Early Modern Italy*.<sup>22</sup> The main title alludes to the fact that migrants' homes had to have a kitchen with a warm stove in order to protect their rights. Someone – usually women – had to be at home and fulfil their duties to the community and neighbourhood.

How do you co-author a book? Who of the two writers/scholars involved creates the concept, who takes on which tasks and completes them, by which deadlines? These are very serious matters. I experienced a little of the genesis of *Il fuoco acceso* because I was a colleague of Luigi Lorenzetti at the Università della Svizzera italiana, in Ticino. If I remember correctly, he was often one or two steps ahead. The volume was structured as follows: the first three chapters were by Merzario, the other three chapters by Lorenzetti. The latter dealt with the economic and social significance of farmland and the demography and formation of families. The general theme of the book was the balancing act between life at home and abroad. At 150 pages, the text section of the book was not very long, but it is followed by 44 pages of bibliography. There has never been such a compilation for this part of the Alps before. As far as I understand it, the undertaking was based on a great deal of trust. The two authors knew each other well and learned from each other.

Lorenzetti thus became a leading historian of family and kinship in the southern Alpine region, from Piedmont to Friuli. In 2013, we organised a workshop at the Laboratorio di Storia della Alpi in Ticino on Dionigi Albera's long-term project, which was finally published. On this occasion, Lorenzetti examined the alpine agnatic type of Albera. He showed in detail that, according to the literature available, there were regional and local variations in each of the criteria used for the definition, and that certain characteristics linked the different types together rather than separating them. It therefore depended on the «degree of coherence» and the «degree of transversality».<sup>23</sup>

## The challenge of Slovenia

Similar issues of categorisation recently occupied Slovenian historian Aleksander Panjek for his homeland during the early modern time. Slovenia is a real challenge. Too few of us are familiar with the language. Some people don't even know that it is a country with alpine regions and a unique alpine history. When it comes to family history, Slovenia was a *terra incognita* for most people. Panjek has provided a detailed article that could be the starting point for a monograph: *Land will tear us apart: family-farm division and real estate market in Slovenia (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries)*, published in 2022,<sup>24</sup> parallel to his article listed in Table 1.

*Land will tear us apart* draws on many primary sources and source editions, brings together various local studies and surveys the available scholarly literature. The main question concerns the form of inheritance, the divisibility or indivisibility of peasant properties. In contrast to the literature, Panjek emphasises the divisibility and the importance of the land market in many, but not all, regions of today's Slovenia and beyond. These regions are not only in the Alps. Southern Styria, included in the study, is located at the foot of the Alps and in the lowlands. It had an important viticulture in the early modern period. Here the peasant properties were usually divided upon inheritance.

In the mountainous region north of Ljubljana, however, there were also manorial estates with undivided farms. The domain of Skofja Loka in particular has been well studied. Further south and on the current border with Italy, Panjek interestingly encounters another form of divisibility: divisibility of property among men and women provided with a dowry. In Albera's approach, Slovenia belongs to the East-Alpine *Bauer*-type. Panjek largely rejects this classification<sup>25</sup> – which is an important advance in knowledge. Dionigi has reviewed numerous anthropological and historical studies and summarised them carefully, but Slovenia is very thinly represented in his sample. Not much was available. But perhaps it would be possible to merge the two approaches. Bringing together indivisible farms further north and divisible farms with dowry further south could be seen as a combination of the Bauer type with the Alpine Agnatic type as conceived by Albera. So, perhaps Slovenia is one of these interesting transition regions between East and South, like Tyrol in particular.

The non-Alpine wine-growing regions mentioned by Panjek do not belong to Albera's grid, which is focused on the Alps only. Here one could take a cue from Michael Mitterauer, who mapped the Austrian landscapes historically with three ecotypes, namely livestock farming, grain cultivation and viticulture. His ecotypological approach has been criticised in terms of explanation, but in my opinion, it still has a lot to offer for empirical analysis.<sup>26</sup> For me personally,

Mitterauer was one of the most important references. I might not have dealt with such topics in the first place if I hadn't known his prolific work.

In general, the question arises as to what we want to do with typologies. Albera's distinctions are conceived as ideal types without any direct claim to reality. You can't really pinpoint and depict them on a map. For cartographic localisation it is advantageous to use a specific single criterion. But the agnatic-bourgeois-Bauer trinity is described by constellations of several criteria. Of course, one could consider whether we shouldn't start all over again and design a completely new model based on all the insights we have gained so far. We could sit around a table and everyone could present their ideas and say which criteria are important enough to be included at which level. Margareth Lanzinger could defend the matrimonial property law and rightly point out that it has so far been neglected in these modelling efforts. I would probably support the patterns of settlement. I have repeatedly tried to bring into play the importance of spatial variables for questions of Alpine social and legal history.<sup>27</sup>

All other researchers who have recently joined us should also be granted a seat and a say. We wouldn't want to make it look like a class reunion of elderly colleagues and friends. That would certainly be a nice plan but I am not sure we could really reach an agreement. If the project *Recategorising the domestic organisation in the Alps* were actually to start, it could also lead to an endless typological loop: one refinement calls for the next, this for the one after that, and so on. So perhaps there are currently more important and interesting research avenues to pursue. We should not expect too much from typologies. In my opinion, Albera has done well by making many people think and discuss.

## Conclusion

As we have seen from the dialogues and controversies on Alpine family history selected here, the micro-macro problem is a main methodological challenge in this research. Historical studies on family matters are very labour-intensive and can often be carried out only on a small, local or regional scale. It is only at the micro level that the relationships can be truly examined. But how do we get micro-investigations to communicate with each other? In isolation, they are interesting for those locally affected, but not so much for researchers looking for an overview and connections. *The Hidden Frontier* by John Cole and Eric Wolf contrasted two villages and placed each in a wider context. That is one reason why it has inspired so many over the last fifty years. I think we should try – in the future, too – to think small and big at the same time.

In historical family research, we cannot exclude aspects that are generally relevant to human societies and their histories: demography, economy, ecology, politics, culture. The ecological aspect is most closely associated with the Alps as a geographical phenomenon. What role do environmental factors play? This is always an important question for Alpine research. It should help us achieve greater differentiation, but the result is anything but self-evident. There were, and are, social areas in which environmental factors hardly play a role. Therefore, family studies in the Alps, which pay little attention to the alpine environment, are also important.

And finally, we should think about periods. For various reasons, most historical studies refer to the period between the late Middle Ages and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Generally speaking, anthropologists who have travelled to the Alps since the 1960s also had history and tradition in mind. Less is known about the most recent period up to the present, although much more information and statistics would now be available. Is the Alpine area still a European border area of family constitutions today, or have the various historical development paths converged? That would be another topic for our round table. Perhaps we should also give family sociology a seat at the table.

In opening: Women with farming tools in Sant'Omobono near Bergamo, 1927. Photo: Paul Scheuermeier. AIS Archive, no. 2065 (Institut für Romanische Sprachen und Literaturen und Jaberg-Bibliothek, Universität Bern).

- 1 The article is a revised version of my keynote lecture at the Ljubljana conference on «Families in the Alps» in August 2024, but I am retaining the colloquial tone.
- 2 For the publications listed in Tables 1 and 2, see the references there.
- 3 G. Kezich, «Il 'Seminario Permanente di Etnografia Alpina' (S.P.E.A.) presso il Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina», *Storia e Regione – Geschichte und Region*, 1, 1992, pp. 137–141; M. Lanzinger, E. Saurer (eds.), *Ungleichheit an der Grenze. Historisch-anthropologische Spurensuche im alpinen Raum: Tret und St. Felix*, Bolzano 2010.
- 4 Albera 2011 (as Table 2), pp. 335–339, for the French Le Playists; V. Weiss, «Die Innsbrucker Schule der Historischen Demographie», in: Id., K. Münchow (eds.), *Ortsfamilienbücher in Deutscher Bücherei und deutscher Zentralstelle für Genealogie*, Neustadt/Aisch 1998, pp. 104–112.
- 5 J. Mathieu, *The Alps. An Environmental History*, Oxford 2019, first in German 2015.
- 6 That was a long time ago; no need for details.
- 7 The case is referenced below (note 12).
- 8 E.g. C. P. Kottak, *Eric R. Wolf 1923–1999. A Biographical Memoir*, Washington 2012.
- 9 Netting 1981 (as Table 2), pp. 202–220.
- 10 Earlier anthropological accounts on the Alps were far more general and unreliable; see e.g. Albera 2011 (as Table 2), pp. 71–73, for Robert Burns' 1963 essay on the «Circum-Alpine area».
- 11 Viazzo 1989 (as Table 2), p. 296; for a later statement e.g. P. P. Viazzo, *Comunità alpine. Ambiente, popolazione, struttura sociale nelle Alpi dal XVI secolo ad oggi*, San Michele all'Adige 2001, pp. 339–356 (Postfazione).
- 12 R. McC. Netting, «Links and Boundaries: Reconsidering the Alpine Village as Ecosystem», in: E. F. Moran (ed.), *The Ecosystem Approach in Anthropology. From Concept to Practice*, Ann Arbor 1990, pp. 229–245; J. Mathieu, «Auf dem Gipfel der Erkenntnis», *NZZ Geschichte*, 26, February 2020, pp. 88–95 [short research history of Törbel].
- 13 Albera 2011 (as Table 2).
- 14 J. Mathieu, *History of the Alps 1500–1900. Environment, Development, and Society*, Morgantown 2009, pp. 162–163 (first in German 1998, as Table 2).
- 15 J. Mathieu, «Transitions in the Domestic Organisation of the Alpine Area, from the Late Middle Ages to Modernity», in: D. Albera, L. Lorenzetti, Id. (eds.), *Reframing the History of Family and Kinship: From the Alps towards Europe*, Berne 2016, pp. 21–32.
- 16 Correspondingly, there is no entry «Alps» in the index of Lanzinger 2015 (as Table 2); Guzzi-Heeb 2008 (as Table 2) includes no index, but deals with environmental variables in a similar way.
- 17 D. W. Sabeau, S. Teuscher, «Kinship in Europe: A New Approach to Long-Term Development», in: Idd., J. Mathieu (eds.), *Kinship in Europe: Approaches to Long-Term Development (1300–1900)*, New York 2007, pp. 1–32.
- 18 Guzzi-Heeb 2008 (as Table 2), pp. 239–241; illegitimate reproduction became an important topic in: Id., *Passions alpines. Sexualité et pouvoir dans les montagnes suisses (1700–1900)*, Rennes 2014.
- 19 Lanzinger 2015 (as Table 2), mainly pp. 22, 59.
- 20 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 12, 51, 272–278, 342.
- 21 M. Lanzinger, «Patterns of Domestic Organisation: The Transfer of Goods and of Relatives», in: Albera/Lorenzetti/Mathieu (as note 15), pp. 95–113.
- 22 L. Lorenzetti, R. Merzario: *Il paese stretto. Famiglie e migrazioni alpine nell'Italia d'età moderna*, Rome 2005.
- 23 L. Lorenzetti, «Regional Spaces and Domes-

tic Organisation. Homogeneity, Transversality and Trans-Cultural Diffusion in the Agnatic Alpine World (Sixteenth-Nineteenth Centuries)», in: Albera et al. (as note 15), pp. 73–94.

**24** A. Panjek, «Land will tear us apart: family-farm division and real estate market in Slovenia (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries)», *The History of the Family*, 27, 1, 2022, pp. 54–81.

**25** *Ibid.*, p. 24: «It is quite clear there are not enough common features to reasonably extend the Bauer ideal type to Slovenia as a whole, not even limited to its Alpine area.»

**26** M. Mitterauer, «Formen ländlicher Familienwirtschaft. Historische Ökotypen und familiäre Arbeitsorganisation im österreichischen Raum», in: J. Ehmer, Id. (eds.), *Familienstruktur und Arbeitsorganisation in ländlichen Gesellschaften*, Vienna 1986, pp. 185–324.

**27** E.g. J. Mathieu, «Diversity of Family Practices in Mountain Societies: Why?», in: B. Derouet, L. Lorenzetti, Id. (eds.), *Pratiques familiales et sociétés de montagne, XVI<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Basel 2010, pp. 173–187.