

<b>Zeitschrift:</b>	Itinera : Beiheft zur Schweizerischen Zeitschrift für Geschichte = supplément de la Revue suisse d'histoire = supplemento della Rivista storica svizzera
<b>Herausgeber:</b>	Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Geschichte
<b>Band:</b>	24 (2002)
<b>Artikel:</b>	Introduction
<b>Autor:</b>	Pfister, Ulrich
<b>DOI:</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1078032">https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1078032</a>

### **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:** 10.01.2026

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

# Introduction

---

Ulrich Pfister

From the late nineteenth century onwards, the Alps were discovered by the social sciences as an economically and socially marginal area which, in contrast to modern ways of life cultivated in urban centers, were essentially static and preserved traditional modes of economic and social practice. Even where links to the outside world were obvious, such as in the case of migration, they were usually considered as an outgrowth of a marginal situation — namely overpopulation and low productivity in the agrarian sector. The role of the Alpine societies in shaping such processes was presumed as entirely passive. To repeat Braudel's famous phrase: Mountain areas were held as “fabriques d'hommes au service d'autrui”. Research conducted over the past few decades has, however, produced the insight that the Alps had an own history that followed a distinct logic. Indeed, some areas have experienced rapid development during certain periods and displayed quite “advanced” or “modern” features by European standards. A recent monograph even advances a direct antithesis against the Braudelian statement by arguing that marginal regions made an essential contribution to European history.<sup>1</sup>

The present volume attempts to further develop this perspective by focussing on the emergence of economic regions in the Alpine area between the end of the middle age and c. 1800. An economic region can be defined as a spatial unit with a specific structure of market-oriented value creation that distinguishes it from its surroundings. The emergence of regions is the result of labor division between different geographical areas. A useful starting point for the analysis of the structure of an economic region as it presents itself at one particular point in time is the theorem of comparative advantage. It argues that the specialization in products for whose inputs, such as labor, capital, land and raw materials, a particular geographic unit has a relative cost advantage (i.e., relative to the input prices of other goods it produces), creates economic welfare.

1 Braudel's statement in Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, Paris, 1966, vol. I, p. 46; the antithesis is Sidney Pollard, *Marginal Europe: the contribution of marginal lands since the middle ages*, Oxford, 1997; the classic anthology published during the early stage of modern research is Paul Guichonnet (ed.), *Histoire et civilisation des Alpes*, 2 vols., Toulouse, Lausanne, 1980; the congresses whose proceedings were published in earlier volumes of this collection document the emergence of what is termed as the new consensus in the text: Markus Mattmüller (ed.), *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft in Berggebieten* (=Itinera 5/6), Basel, 1986; Jean-François Bergier and Sandro Guzzi (eds.), *La découverte des Alpes* (=Itinera 12), Basel, 1992. For a historiography of the economic and social history of the Alps, see Jon Mathieu, *Eine Agrargeschichte der inneren Alpen: Graubünden*, Tessin, Wallis 1500–1800, Zürich, 1992, ch. 1.

For the early modern period, a special case within this more general framework has gained wider currency. Studies in proto-industrialization and long-distance migration have argued for a typical pattern of regional development in Western Europe during that period: Areas whose climatic and soil conditions rendered them little suited for grain production specialized in labor-extensive grazing and pastoral activities. The labor released as a result of this transformation engaged in temporal emigration and non-agricultural side-activities, such as the production of textiles or ironware. The development of commercial grain production in fertile lowlands located nearby occurred at least in part as a response to heightened demand for grain and rising supply of temporal labor from the former type of regions.<sup>2</sup> A major task of the present volume is to explore to what degree this model of complementary specialization between highlands and lowlands can be applied to Alpine areas.

The theorem of comparative advantage abstracts from information, transaction and transport costs. Given the Alpine context, where traffic barriers are formidable and urban centers providing information and transaction services remain rare, this assumption is not very realistic. Therefore, it was considered important from the outset of this project to study the development of a commercial infrastructure that mediates exchange between the mountain areas and a wider geographical area as well as to document how this institutional factor might influence the development course of economic regions. The term commercial infrastructure as it is used here comprises a wide spectrum of phenomena, including the organization of transport, market infrastructure (such as fairs and their legal framework), as well as commercial and entrepreneurial networks that actually organize exchanges of products or factors of production such as labor.<sup>3</sup>

2 Eric L. Jones, "Agricultural origins of industry," *Past and Present* 40, 1968, 58–71; Franklin F. Mendels, "Seasons and regions in agriculture and industry during the process of industrialization," in Sidney Pollard (ed.), *Region and Industrialisation*, Göttingen, 1980, pp. 177–195; on migration Jan Lucassen, *Migrant labour in Europe 1600–1900: the drift to the North Sea*, London, 1987; for a recent discussion Ulrich Pfister, "Protoindustrialisierung und Landwirtschaft," in Dietrich Ebeling, Wolfgang Mager (eds.), *Protoindustrie in der Region: europäische Gewerbelandschaften vom 16. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert*, Bielefeld, 1997, pp. 57–84, esp. pp. 76–80. For a survey of the historiography on economic regions in Europe, see Maarten Prak, "Regions in early modern Europe" and Sidney Pollard, "Regional and inter-regional economic development in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," in *Proceedings of the Eleventh International Economic History Congress*, Milan, September 1994, Milano, 1994, pp. 19–55 and 57–92, respectively.

3 In fact, most chapters concentrate on personal networks among entrepreneurs and merchants. Only Pickl's contribution focuses on transport organization; a stimulating study on the relationship between transport techniques and local agrarian systems in another sector of the Alps is Jon Mathieu, "Transports agricoles et transports commerciaux dans les Alpes: quelques remarques sur les Grisons (XVIe–XVIIIe siècle)," in Pierre Dubuis (ed.), *Ceux qui passent et ceux qui restent: études sur les trafics transalpins et leur impact local*, [Orsières], 1989, pp. 101–113. Likewise, only Beonio-Brocchieri's paper deals with the significance of nearby market places and fairs for regional development; on this topic, see also

The studies collected in this book address these two connected issues in different ways. Pickl, drawing on extended research into the economic history of the eastern Alps, discusses east-west and north-south routes of long-distance trade in Habsburgian Austria about c. 1500. Apart from presenting a wealth of information on the organization of trade and transport, he demonstrates how distant regions with complementary economies were linked in practice. In particular, his material suggests that the use of water routes made possible the communication between distant areas so that complementary specialization was not limited to neighboring regions in mountains and plains. At the same time, Pickl highlights the great role that some towns located in the perimeter of the Alps played in mediating these trade connections.

The essay by Fontaine opens a series of contributions that address the theme of regional specialization by way of a discussion of migration. By comparing three contrasting regions in the central and western Alps, Fontaine develops a perspective that strongly deviates from the earlier interpretation of emigration as being a result of population pressure and economic underdevelopment. Instead, she argues that emigration constituted an element in a regional economy that was characterized both by specialization and pluri-activity. Emigration, particularly if practiced by members of the local commercial elite, was essential for linking the Alpine world with wider markets and was part of a way of life that exploited economic opportunities that extended over several geographic spheres. The capacity for such a pattern of integration into supra-regional markets was contingent upon a specific type of social organization, which was fairly common in the central and western Alps: An ownership structure where smallholders were predominant; a considerable degree of social inequality; and the existence of extended elite clans who used kinship networks and clientage ties in order to mobilize and control the local work force.

The chapter by Head-König can be read as a concrete case study backing these general ideas. The small valley she studies (the Canton of Glarus, Switzerland), while laying at the margin of major transport routes, nevertheless became integrated into wider economic circuits already from the sixteenth century onwards. Mercenary service was certainly the oldest and the most important form of integration into international labor markets and over the course of time it provided valuable information for the development of other activities in distant lands. These consisted in part of peddling, partly of itinerant craft trades and partly of commercializing and exporting local resources transformed into highly special-

Stephen R. Epstein, "Regional fairs, institutional innovation, and economic growth in late medieval Europe," *Economic History Review* 47, 1994, pp. 459–482, esp. pp. 463–466 and 472–473.

ized products. In the eighteenth century, all these activities constituted an important basis for the transformation of the valley into a center of cotton manufacture. Head-König demonstrates that pluri-activity was often practiced within extended kinship networks that, beyond serving as labor pools for the family enterprise, provided pools of information that constituted an important basis for shifts between activities.

Mathieu looks again at several Alpine regions but limits his study to one particular phenomenon, namely, migration. His review of a number of recent studies on this topic essentially lead to a number of cautionary conclusions not only with respect to the older perspective that considered out-migration as a consequence of population and poverty, but also with respect to an approach that views emigration as an element of regional specialization within labor markets spreading over a wider geographical area. In particular, Mathieu stresses that the lack of quantitative data with respect to migration renders it difficult to consider Alpine areas as being characterized by a strong integration into supra-regional labor markets. At the same time, the overlap between intra-regional, inter-regional and long-distance migration, which is observed by many studies, makes it difficult to delineate spatial spheres of labor markets. Finally, the long persistence of local traditions of particular types of itinerant trade or ambulant crafts makes cultural factors appear more important in shaping the economic structure of a particular locale than market factors.

As the last contribution focusing on migration, Beonio-Brocchieri provides a comparative discussion of three micro-studies on mountain areas located near the northern border of the Duchy of Milan. An important aspect of the study consists in the demonstration that, despite similar agrarian pre-conditions (a predominance of smallholders, large commons, a deficit in grains and a considerable level of out-migration), the pattern of specialization differed markedly between the three areas. The availability of mineral resources, the situation along a major transport route, which rendered possible certain activities of transformation and the commercialization of local resources, or the proximity to a textile center with a demand for labor were each decisive factors shaping the economic profile of a particular micro-region. Beonio-Brocchieri's contribution is also distinguished by a detailed analysis of the relationship between household structure and emigration. In particular, he demonstrates that different types of out-migration were linked to different phases in the male life course and the family cycle, respectively. He also discusses the relationship between the stem-family structure found among many households (however, this did not imply a stem-family organization linked to imitable inheritance of land) and the pooling of family resources engaged in

different sectors.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the study provides strong support for the thesis that pluriactivity, documented also in other contributions, was structurally linked to patterns of family organization.

The study of the Bresciano by Mocarelli does not consider migration but addresses the issue of complementary specialization between different geographical zones and between town and country, respectively. The original contribution of the paper resides in the demonstration that a complementary factor endowment among adjacent geographical zones and the town-country differential did not inevitably lead to the development of commercial relationships between the two. Rather, the economy of the centrally located town of Brescia remained largely limited to the consumption of agrarian rents and the artisanal activities that emanated from it. Instead, the commercial organization of the territory lay in the hands, first, of merchant-manufacturers in the mountain zone, where ironware and paper manufacture were located, and, second, in the hands of merchants from outside the province, particularly from Bergamo and Milan. The lack of economic prerogatives of the town of Brescia, which was part of the Terraferma subjected to Venice, over the surrounding countryside seems to constitute a major explanation of this pattern. The study, therefore, highlights the role of institutional factors and the decisions of merchants that follow from them in shaping the pattern of economic integration in the Alpine sphere.

In my own concluding chapter I try to develop a simple framework for the systematic comparison of different experiences of regional development in the Alpine context. In a first step, the paper presents a simple typology of specialization within supra-regional markets based on two dimensions. The first relates to market type, that is, it distinguishes as to whether a region specializes in labor or product markets. The second dimension refers to the economic sector in which specialization takes place, that is, agriculture, the crafts and manufacture sector, and trade. This typology makes it possible to establish an inventory of patterns of regional specialization. In the second main step of the analysis, I investigate the role of comparative advantage with respect to factor endowments, of the local presence of groups of merchants and entrepreneurs, and of state institutions as determinants of specific patterns of regional specialization. In particular, I argue that the local character of networks created by Alpine merchants and entrepreneurs explains the frequent subdivision of regions into small areas such as a valley or a community with distinct development patterns. In addition, the nature of

4 On the relationship between life-course and type of emigration in the Alps, see also André Schlüchter, "Die 'nie genug zu verwünschende Wuth in fremde Länder zu gehen': Notizen zur Emigration der Tessiner in der frühen Neuzeit," in Gerhard Jaritz and Albert Müller (eds.), *Migration in der Feudalgesellschaft*, Frankfurt a. M., 1988, pp. 239–262.

the relationship of local elites to the state apparatus are found to bear heavily on entrepreneurial decisions. Finally the degree of state and seigneurial interference into the peasant economy circumscribes peasants' capability to develop family strategies which include the engagement in non-agricultural trades and the temporal absence of individual members.

The chapters of this book highlight several points that partly constitute relevant findings and partly problem areas that require future research. In particular, while they demonstrate an early integration of a number of Alpine areas into wider economic circuits, they suggest a limited importance of comparative advantage based on relative factor costs as a major explanation for the specific development course taken by a region. This finding needs to be stressed, since the complementarity of areas within and adjacent to the Alps suggests the easy availability of possibilities for specialization according to comparative cost advantage, at least at first sight. Beyond this general finding, the studies in this book point to several additional elements in the pattern of regional specialization of Alpine areas.

Firstly, the institutional development of a commercial infrastructure, including transport facilities and merchant communities, plays an important role for the emergence of specialization according to comparative cost advantage. This point, while relatively trivial, needs to be stressed because the commercial infrastructure is far from being a free good in the Alpine context. As Pickl's contribution demonstrates, the geographical context forces a concentration of trade on a few passages, and Beonio-Brocchieri's description of the upper Varese along the Lago Maggiore illustrates the great importance of being located close to a major trade route and to places of exchange (markets, fairs) for the pattern regional specialization. Both, the role of the ducal state of Milan in creating a network of channels connecting the various parts of its territory at low freight costs and the lack of economic prerogatives of the town of Brescia suggest a considerable importance of the state as an institutional force. Mocarelli's discussion of the economic role of Brescia also points to the fact that local commercial elites are by no means natural agents for the mediation of exchange deriving from comparative advantage. Additional factors, such as the location near an urban industrial center (as, for instance, in the western parts of the Comasco) or the widespread practice of peddling, which may provide a base for the rise of rural entrepreneurs (as in the French Alps), are of great relevance for the emergence of a commercial infrastructure on the regional level.

Secondly, the studies in this book stress the prevalence of pluri-activity in many Alpine regions. If non-agricultural activities oriented to distant labor and

product markets appear to have been frequent since the late middle ages, the specialization of a whole region on one or a few activities remained little pronounced before the textile boom, which reached some areas from the eighteenth century onwards. Rather, most areas specialized in several different activities that, at least at first sight, were only partly connected, such as different itinerant craft trades and peddling or different manufacturing activities, such as metalprocessing, textilemanufacture and paper milling. While the occupational structure of a particular locality is hard to establish given the widespread lack of detailed census data before the nineteenth century, it appears that pluri-activity occurred on different levels: It could involve the level of an area as a whole and imply a specialization between small valleys or villages, but it could also involve a specialization between households within the same locality. Even individual members within a household could engage in different activities, implying that even the domestic unit was characterized by pluri-activity.<sup>5</sup> The prevalence of pluri-activity renders it difficult to delineate empirically regional units and suggests that the principle of comparative advantage strongly overlaps with principles that govern the clustering of particular activities. These concern not only information flows between producers engaging in different stages of production and the transfer of skills, but also strategies of risk spreading which act against excessive clustering. This argument may provide a rationale for the stress that several studies in this volume — on a general level this is done in particular by Fontaine and Mathieu — place on local social structures and networks as forces that shape the patterns of integration into wider economic circuits.

As a special case, and thirdly, some studies in this volume consider family and kinship ties as major variables that determine patterns of clustering and disjunction (i. e., pluri-activity) of particular economic activities. Several arguments are connected with this thesis. Kinship and, in extended form, clientage ties, are seen as important labor mobilization and control regimes that can propel a local society as a whole onto a particular development path (Fontaine). Kinship networks also serve as pools of information for the diffusion of entrepreneurial know-how and of information on distant markets that render possible shifts between different activities (Head-König). Finally, family organization on the household level can mediate the way specific activities, particularly ambulatory craft trades, are linked to the life course (Beonio-Brocchieri). It should be pointed out, however, that the material supporting these arguments is incidental and tenuous at best, a fact ex-

<sup>5</sup> This is, however, by no means unique; see the development of the concept of the adaptive family by Richard Wall, "Work, welfare and the family: an illustration of the adaptive family," in Lloyd Bonfield et al. (eds.), *The world we have gained: histories of population and social structure*, Oxford, 1986, pp. 261–294.

plained in part by the difficulties with which studies of household and family structure are confronted in many areas of the central and western part of the Alpine arc.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, they may provide avenues for future research on the specific course that Alpine areas followed in their gradual integration into wider economic circuits.

6 In many regions, no household lists were established during the early modern period. For Austria, where material is abundant, see the work by Mitterauer and his collaborators, for instance Michael Mitterauer, "Formen ländlicher Wirtschaft: Historische Ökotypen und familiale Arbeitsorganisation im österreichischen Raum," in idem and Joseph Ehmer (eds.), *Familienstruktur und Arbeitsorganisation in ländlichen Gesellschaften*, Wien, 1986, pp. 187–323, a short version in English is accessible as "Peasant and non-peasant family forms in relation to the physical environment and the local economy," in Richard Rudolph (ed.), *The European peasant family and society: historical studies*, Liverpool, 1995, pp. 26–48. For the central and western parts of the Alps, studies remain rather scarce; relevant contributions include David J. Siddle, "Articulating the grid of inheritance: the accumulation of wealth in peasant Savoy 1561–1792," in Mattmüller (footnote 1); Raul Merzario, *Il capitalismo nelle montagne: strategie famigliari nella prima fase di industrializzazione nel Comasco*, Bologna, 1989, pp. 123–181; Mathieu (footnote 1), pp. 272–278.