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Diversity of Family Practices in Mountain Societies: Why?

Jon Mathieu

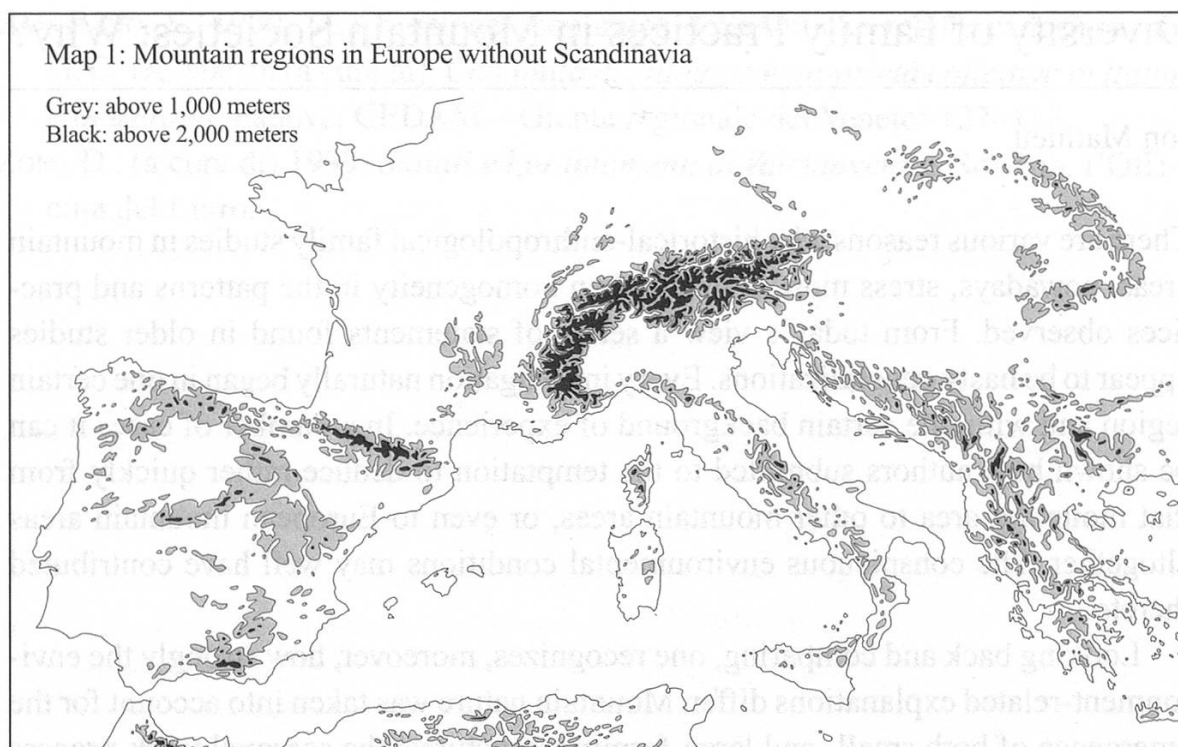
There are various reasons why historical-anthropological family studies in mountain areas, nowadays, stress more diversity than homogeneity in the patterns and practices observed. From today's view a series of statements found in older studies appear to be hasty generalizations. Every investigation naturally began in one certain region and with one certain background of experience. In a number of cases it can be shown how authors submitted to the temptation to deduce rather quickly from that mountain area to other mountain areas, or even to European mountain areas altogether. The conspicuous environmental conditions may well have contributed thereto.

Looking back and comparing, one recognizes, moreover, how strongly the environment-related explanations differ. Mountain nature was taken into account for the emergence of both small- and large-farming structures; the seasonal work-process of the mountain peasants was considered both intermittent and continuous; the employment of non-family servants in the farms was described as both typical and untypical; the scattering of land over various heights was connected with both impartible and partible inheritance patterns. Very quickly, too, the extensive forms of land-use in high sites became a synonym for the scarcity of agricultural resources¹.

An important framework for the increasing interest in diversity as a research perspective was produced by the multiplication of international contacts, and thus of comparative evidence. From a distance it seems easier to suppose similarities, whilst in close contact the differences stick out more. In the present volume, family studies on various European mountain regions have been collected. However, as a glance at the map of Europe reveals, we are far from an overall view. If one employs for the definition of mountain areas an arbitrary, but simple, criterion, and only includes the areas above 1,000 meters, it becomes clear that our horizon still needs broadening (Map 1).

As a large and especially high mountain region, the Alps in the literature on European upland areas play a prominent role. In the last twenty years the efforts to gain an overall view were intensified there, not least within the domain of histori-

1 Examples with various insistence and fullness of detail: Bergier, 1983: 78 (small farming structures); Blanchard, 1952: 216 (intermittent work-process); Derouet, 1989: 185 (no servants); Mitterauer, 1986; 1992 (large farming structures, continuous work-process, many servants); Netting, 1981: 17 (scattering of land and partible inheritance); Viazzo, 1989: 19 (extensive land-use and scarcity); Wolf, 1966: 75 (scattering of land and impartible inheritance).



cal-anthropological family research. Pier Paolo Viazzo, in his “Upland Communities”, points out that the demographic regimes in the alpine area were much more variable than one had supposed earlier on. Dionigi Albera, in his dissertation on domestic organization in this area, describes three different ideal types of family patterns within their social and economic context. I, myself, have tried, in a historical survey, to check up on the developments of various family forms in alpine regions during the period from 1500 to 1900².

Together with this general stress on diversity, there was a shift in explanation. It appeared mainly as a shift away from something, namely away from traditional or more sophisticated forms of ecological reasoning. At this point, however, the question arises: What can replace them? Which arguments, other than ecological ones, can account for diversity in historical family behaviour?

In what follows I sum up my position towards that point. The first section of the article offers some comparative evidence about the alpine area in the period mentioned. The second section discusses selected kinds of historical explanation, and the third one exemplifies my argument with a regional trajectory. The issue “family practices” is, of course, a wide field which can be treated from many perspectives. It must be stressed, therefore, that the article concentrates on questions of inheritance

2 Viazzo, 1989; 2001 (the second Italian edition contains an updated research report); Albera, 1995; 2001 (the 1995 dissertation is supposed to appear shortly in book-format; see also his contribution to this volume); Mathieu, 2000; 2009.

and household and, for example, largely excludes questions of seclusion or openness of families, such as expressed, among other things, in lower or higher rates of migration. Neither do I touch the debate on agency and strategy; stimulating contributions on this line have been provided, for the alpine area, by Laurence Fontaine (e.g. 1992).

Not superfluous is perhaps a preliminary remark on method. It is known that a “soft” way of comparative research consists in considering numerous variables, and thus creating a relatively complete picture of the circumstances in single places, whereby the comparison loses stringency, but gains in context. Just the other way round is the situation when one decides in favour of a “hard” comparison with few selected variables. I see no necessity in generally preferring either the one way or the other. As a historian, however, I have to point out the significance of the time-dimension. Time is the spine of historical scholarship, and should be included in comparative research. Put like this, the question will be not so much: Are two particular societies similar or dissimilar? But rather: Do they become more similar or dissimilar over time? What do their trajectories look like, when held up against each other?³

Comparative evidence

Our comparison begins on a regional level and in the second half of the 18th century. Carinthia, a region in the east of the alpine arc, was a duchy and *Erbland* of the Hapsburg at the time; today it is an Austrian *Bundesland*. The Grisons, in the centre of the Alps, formed the independent Freestate of the Three Leagues during the early modern period, comprising today's Swiss canton, plus a subject territory to the South. In terms of size and economy, the two territories were comparable, each measuring around 10,000 square kilometers and depending mainly on agriculture. In their structural development, however, they diverged considerably, as we will see. I call them region A (Carinthia) and B (Grisons), for the sake of convenience, and, first of all, provide some indications for the time from 1750.

In region A many holdings consist of dispersed, and often strongly populated, single farmsteads. The average household comprises 7 to 9 persons. The majority

3 This approach should not be confused with the search for the historical “origin”. Every “origin”, of course, has its own pre-history, or can be examined as to this pre-history. The time-related approach only aims at completing the synchronically constructed “anthropological” interpretations by diachronic ones. Thus, quite particular or new variables and factors may turn out to be important. In the present context, this marks the difference from the ideal types of alpine family patterns, which Albera draws up from the anthropological point of view. His concept seems useful and realistic to me, yet it will not, and cannot, provide answers to the question how the various relational configurations have developed over time, and which relationships, in which periods, were of special importance. Otherwise than in my aforementioned publications (note 2) I shall, in the present article, go into two patterns only, not into three.

Table 1: Social patterns in two alpine regions, late 18th century

Variable	Region A Carinthia	Region B Grisons
Settlement: form	dispersed	nucleated
Household: average size	7–9 persons	4 persons
Servants: % of population	25–35 per cent	1 per cent
Illegitimacy: rate	high	low
Social hierarchy	step-like, peasants as status group	gradual, informal
Transmission / inheritance	impartible, often by <i>Freistift</i>	partible, quite gender-neutral

of the households dispose of servants, on the average almost 3 to one farm, but some large ones get as far as 10, 15, or even 25. Altogether, a quarter to a third of the population is composed of farmhands. They stay, on the average, one or two years on a farm, after which they quit the service in order to find a new job with another peasant in the area. Many of them are born into the rural lower class, often from unmarried couples, high rates of illegitimacy are normal.

Region B, on the other hand, is marked by nucleated village settlements and by small farms (as one finds in much smaller numbers in region A, too, where they form a category differing from the farmsteads). The average household merely consists of 4 persons. Farms with servants are rare; the people whom one talks to as farmhands or maids make up 1% of the population. Otherwise than in region A, the peasants in this milieu do not stand out as a special, and specially categorized, status group. Nevertheless there is no lack of social hierarchy and patron-client-dependencies, partly because the land resources do not all belong to the cultivators. It is more the form of hierarchy that is different: step-like, explicit and articulate in region A, rather informal and gradual in region B. Very varied, finally, is the transmission of the farms, as one can see from the listing of the most important features: impartible on one hand, partible on the other (Table 1). We shall come back to the particular form of impartibility in Carinthia, the so-called *Freistift*, in the next section.

The historical sources, which are the basis of this characterization, stem from quite different documents. The quantitative statements on households and servants can be calculated from the well-known *Status animarum* or *Seelenbeschreibungen* (census lists), such as were ever more frequently put together in early modern times⁴.

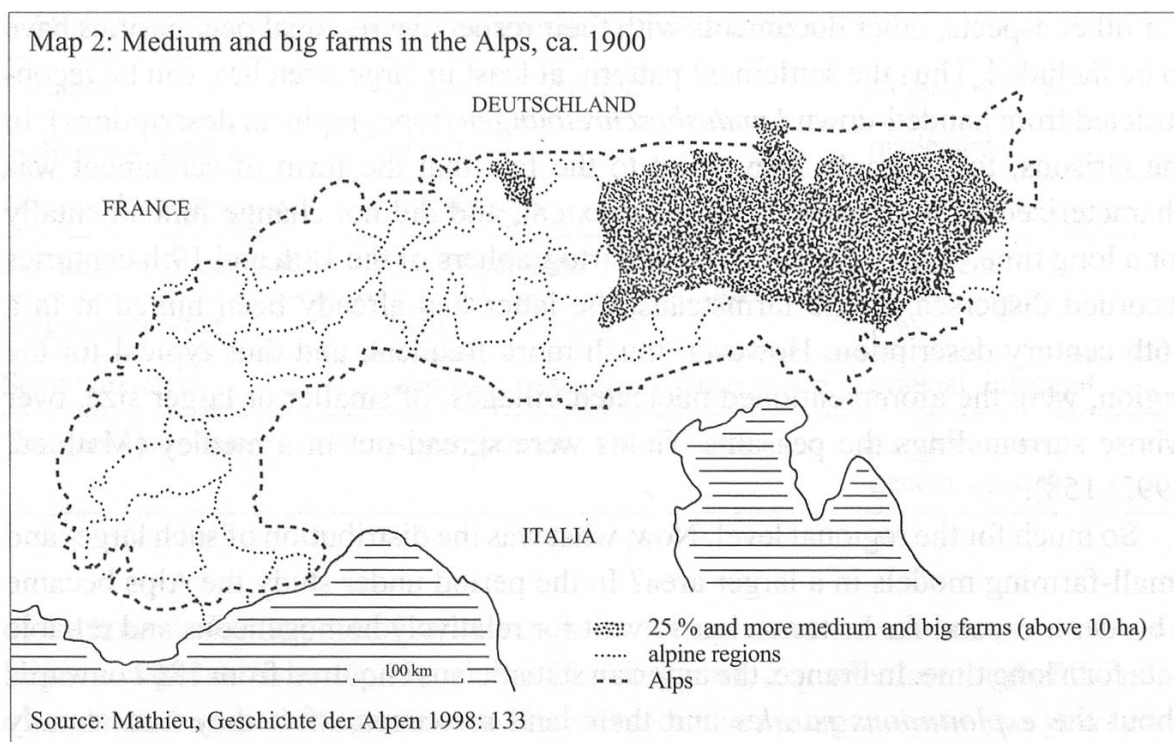
4 A sample of such data for the two regions has been published in Mathieu (2000: 64, 66 and 2009: 178, 187). Generally, one should consult these writings for detailed references, I restrict myself here to hints at selected literature.

For other aspects, other documents with their respective regional peculiarities have to be included. Thus the settlement pattern, at least in large stretches, can be reconstructed from handed-down *Landesbeschreibungen* (topographical descriptions). In the Grisons, for example, they point to the fact that the form of settlement was characterized by heterogeneity to some extent, and did not change fundamentally for a long time. Where the authors and cartographers of the 18th and 19th centuries recorded dispersed, single farmsteads, the latter had already been hinted at in a 16th century description. However, much more frequent, and thus typical for the region, were the aforementioned nucleated villages, of smaller or larger size, over whose surroundings the peasants' fields were spread out in a medley (Mathieu, 1992: 158).

So much for the regional level. Now, what was the distribution of such large- and small-farming models in a larger area? In the period under study the Alps became a border area, and the historian has to wait for relatively homogeneous and reliable data for a long time. In France, the agrarian statisticians enquired from 1862 onwards about the *exploitations rurales* and their land resources, after they had already organized many other inquiries. In Hapsburg Austria the first genuine census of farming operations was held in 1902. Switzerland followed three years later, and Italy, that otherwise did not lag behind in statistic affairs, only took up the task in 1930. Despite this straggler, the situation becomes surveyable about the year 1900. At that time the alpine area broke into two parts of uneven size: the whole North-East, from the centre of the Tyrol into Styria, displayed a high percentage of medium- and large-scale farms and thus differed from all other alpine regions. Thus in Salzburg, almost half of the farm holdings (49%) had at their disposal ten hectares and more, in the Trentino only 3% did so (Map 2).

A similar uneven distribution could be observed in agricultural employment: high numbers of servants in the tendentially big-farming North-East, low ones in the small-farm regions of the Central and Western Alps. So, too, the rates of illegitimacy took on an East-West descent: high in the large-farming and low in the small-farming regions⁵. Important for our subsequent argumentation is the indication that this division was not restricted to the alpine area, but was correspondingly so in the surrounding landscapes to the North. About 1900, when the German *Reich*, too, disposed of survey data, its South-West (Württemberg, Baden) formed a zone with mainly small peasant properties, different from the neighbouring Bavarian territory, where medium and large farms played a great role (Irsigler, 1982).

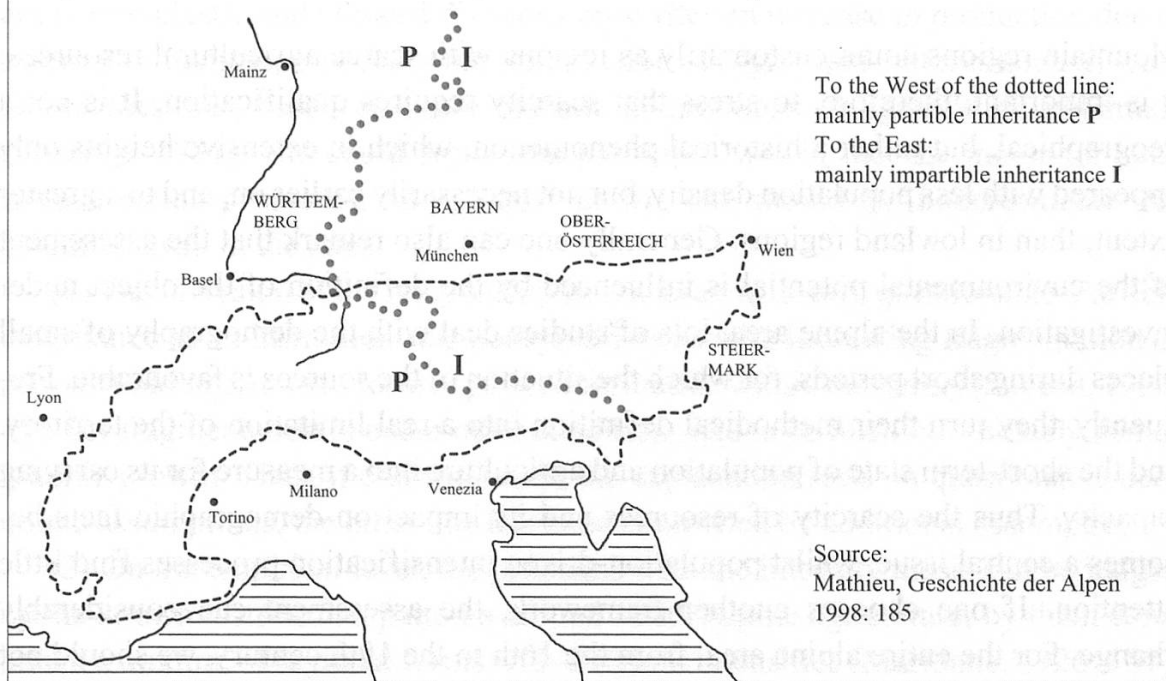
⁵ All data according to official statistics, see Mathieu (2009: 241–244); for the calculation, and for map 2, I have considered all administrative units (departments, cantons, etc.) with at least three-fourths of their territory located within the alpine area.



This structural similarity between upland and lowland regions is evidenced, too, by the modes of inheritance which were related to such regional patterns. More than previously, the transmission of farm property, in the 19th century, became a political and widely discussed issue. The heated debates on the social position of the *Bauernstand* (peasant estate) mostly concerned also problems of succession and led, since the turn of the century, to numerous empirical inquiries about rural inheritance customs (Schlumbohm, 2000). They showed that the law and the practice in some regions – not in all of them – differed considerably one from the other. In the Alps the inheritance practices encompassed, according to the inquiries, the whole range between strict equality of all those entitled and marked priority of one single person among them. Less variable was the spatial distribution. In the East, from the Eastern Tyrol to Carinthia and into Styria, the impartible handing down of the farms dominated. In almost all other regions various modes of partible inheritance were practised⁶.

6 These statements concern the inheritance of real estate; on map 3, which mainly relies on the aforementioned inquiries, some mixed regions and single regions with a tendency to impartibility in the West are not registered; in the Alps the indicated line follows the data of Kretschmer and Piegler (1965), in Southern Germany those of Huppertz (1939); certain exceptions to the dominant partibility in the Central and Western Alps were to be found in Northern-Alpine Swiss regions and Southern French regions: see Niederer 1968 (also to the Swiss Midland), and Albera, 1994 (criticism of the traditional categorization).

Map 3: Forms of inheritance in the Alps and their surroundings, ca. 1900



Thus, one can arrange the patterns around 1900 according to this East-West division. The correspondence with the aforementioned data is evident. Once again, the dividing line does not follow the ecological features, but passes right through the alpine area and the surrounding lowlands to the North (Map 3).

This is the point to briefly touch the micro-macro problem, which with such maps, again and again, leads to discussion. I am quite aware of the fact that the Black Forest, the Emmental and some other regions with impartibility are not taken into account on the map, and that there was a variety of partible practices on the other side: in the Italian Alps, in the French Alps, to the South and to the North⁷. Even in one region, and in one single village, the practices could diverge, as anybody knows, who tried to follow a couple of families through some generations. Complexity, however, is not the only intellectual virtue, simplicity is another one, and for the sake of overall comparison the partible/impartible category is still the most efficient one. In this case, with all its limitations, the map indicates that agrarian intensity and inheritance did not go together. This is one of the theses that we have to discuss further on.

7 See Lorenzetti and Merzario (2005) and the contribution in this volume.

Historical discussion

Mountain regions count customarily as regions with scarce agricultural resources; it is important, therefore, to stress that scarcity requires qualification. It is not a geographical, but rather a historical phenomenon, which in extensive heights only appeared with less population density, but not necessarily earlier on, and to a greater extent, than in lowland regions. Generally one can also remark that the assessment of the environmental potential is influenced by the definition of the object under investigation. In the alpine area, lots of studies deal with the demography of small places during short periods, for which the situation of the sources is favourable. Frequently, they turn their methodical definition into a real limitation of the territory, and the short-term state of population and agriculture into a measure for its carrying capacity. Thus the scarcity of resources and its impact on demographic facts becomes a central issue, whilst population-driven intensification processes find little attention. If one chooses another framework, the assessment can considerably change. For the entire alpine area, from the 16th to the 19th century, we should not underestimate the potential. According to latest estimates, the alpine population amounted around the year 1500 to about 2.9 million, till around 1900 the number then rose to approximately 7.9 million (Mathieu, 2009: 34–35).

This quantitative observation is suited to questioning certain assumptions as to the background of migration processes. An important tradition in historical studies views emigration from the mountains as an effect of scarce resources: At the beginning of the modern age, according to this tradition, population levels in many regions began to exceed available resources and thus inevitably set in motion a process of emigration that was to last for centuries. Our data, like other modern studies, suggest a change in interpretation. Considering the fact that the alpine population could increase by a factor of nearly three between 1500 and 1900, even though agriculture continued to be important throughout the period, it is hard to see how scarcity of resources around 1500 should have been the main reason for emigration. What is often ignored on a general level, is the fact that the surrounding regions were much more populated and especially far more urbanized than the Alps. This context underlines the significance of pull-factors in migration processes.

The statements as to the environmental potential also play a role in discussing the relationship between agrarian intensity and form of inheritance. In the literature one comes across the thesis which holds agrarian intensity to be a crucial factor for the emergence of partible inheritance and a smallholder-society. Corresponding examples often concern vine-producing regions, where these forms of inheritance and property are historically documented (Mitterauer, 1986; 1992). However, there are various arguments that speak against the thesis:

(1) The explanation rests on the premise that pre-industrial agriculture was generally non-elastic and allowed divisions only after an increase in production due to external influences, especially the introduction of high-yield cultures such as wine or potatoes. Yet, based on more realistic assumptions of agricultural potentials (Boserup, 1981), one could argue that partibility was in fact the motor for such intensification processes. As just now shown, one should not underestimate this potential, even in the Alps.

(2) The inversion of the relationship is, however, in its turn questionable. Partible inheritance as an institution was not synonymous with increasing fragmentation of peasant holdings, it was a form of power distribution within the family (Sabeau, 1990: 15). For fragmentation to occur other conditions had to be fulfilled – notably demographic growth. Thus, if one version of the explanation rests on questionable economic assumptions, the other one has to be completed by additional assumptions.

(3) On the empirical level, the problems with the intensity thesis can be judged by the known distribution patterns around 1900. Alpine agriculture, by then, comprised a mixture of regional forms with different intensities (Martonne, 1926: 157), whilst the primary modes of inheritance manifested an East-West distribution. Furthermore, as we have seen, this East-West distribution extended into the surrounding lowlands. There is little doubt that agrarian intensity, at the time, was on the average much higher in the lowlands than in the Alps.

With the rejection of a thesis, one has not solved things, it should rather inspire us to seek more plausible arguments. Two historic factors are, in my opinion, of especial, time-graduated importance for the emergence of small- and large-farming societies: first, the settlement pattern (which, in the Middle Ages, after all, could develop quite differently for political reasons), then the formation of territorial states (which, from the 16th century onwards, developed quickly in most regions). Let us consider both variables singly and briefly:

(1) Village settlements tended, for conceptual and practical reasons, towards a mode of production dominated by partible inheritance and potentially smaller farming operations, whilst the farms in dispersed settlements not only possessed larger individual potentials for expansion, but also favoured impartible transmission. Otherwise than in scattered settlements, the farms in nucleated villages with intermingled fields formed no spatial units, the reproduction of which could be an argument in inheritance discourse; with each transmission the houses and lands could be recombined, without diminishing the farms and without creating any new transport difficulties (Mathieu, 1992: 72).

(2) Thus, when the state came in strongly, during the 16th century, there was a specific basis for bifurcation, leading more clearly in two directions. This juridical-

institutional build-up, a product of ongoing state formation, sooner or later, overlapped the local customs and contributed to regional homogenization and further inter-regional differentiation. The norms for family succession gained, in other words, in importance and autonomy in relation to local customs, and in their turn, became an element of settlement development. The specific field of forces in which this normation took place (prince, nobility, communities), played only a secondary role according to this model, for the social interest in subdividing or maintaining the farms was in most cases ambivalent, and the economic productivity of large or small farming operation not generally definable⁸.

In contrast to the intensity thesis, which refers to the number of inhabitants in a certain area, this model concerns their spatial distribution and their political organization. It assumes that the forms of transmission of farm property were associated since the Middle Ages, albeit in a loose manner, with particular patterns of settlement, which could considerably influence the regional paths of development under certain historical conditions. These conditions came about when the political organization, from the beginning of the modern period, expanded territorially and stabilized institutionally. In the regional context this led to the homogenization of transmission forms, whilst in the inter-regional context quite divergent trajectories could set in⁹.

The spatial distribution and the political organization of the population cannot be related unconditionally to ecological factors, unless one expands the concept of ecotype so far that it considerably loses its analytical power¹⁰. I take it as a general problem of the ecological-demographic approach to inheritance, that both factors, from the very outset, often disappear from the view of research, because they do not belong to the canon of the discipline. Thus it may be useful to illustrate our presentation at the end on a regional level. We return to an alpine example already introduced: How should one imagine the historical trajectory of Carinthia?

8 This, in contrast to essentialist suppositions – often mentioned, but denied by many contradictions – concerning class-specific preferences for subdivision and size-specific differences in productivity.

9 A well-examined example of the interaction between regional pre-conditions and political fixation is Württemberg. There, the duke set up an investigation of local inheritance practices, and then decreed, from 1555 to 1610, a unified gender-neutral inheritance law that was swiftly accepted: “A particular inheritance regulation may have violated the old custom of a particular village, but once in place for a generation or so would become part of the observed rule structure.” (Sabeau, 1990: 27)

10 If one derives the notion of ecotype from existing general literature, and not from ecological variables, the danger of over-expansion is considerable, see Oris 2002; I am also of the opinion that one should be careful in using the related concept of adaptation; from a historical point of view, the trouble with adaptation is that it keeps changing, and thus adapting itself (Mathieu, 2009: 130–131, 225).

A regional trajectory

In Carinthia, during the early modern period, the transmission of farmsteads developed within the peasant-landlord relationship. Until the arrival of state reforms in the late 18th century the most common arrangement was the so-called *Freistift* – an arrangement whereby the landlord determined the successor to the farm and charged a sum of money for his *Bestiftung* (endowment). Peasant families and landlords shared a common preference for placing the sons ahead of the daughters in succession to the farm. Yet the daughters had a chance of being preferred to the sons, if they found a well-off husband who would submit a particularly lucrative offer to the landlord. Although in extreme cases the transfer of farmsteads took on the characteristics of a general auction, heritability without right of inheritance was the most common mode of transmission.

In its developed form, this system came into being after the middle of the 16th century when many landlords pursued a strategy aimed at turning property successions within their domain into negotiable deals. As most levies were fixed, landlords could only increase their revenue or recover possible inflation losses through the *Verehrung*, i.e. the sum paid by new holders on taking possession of the farm. Especially in periods of high population pressure and large demand, the right to choose the successor, claimed by the landlords, was a source of substantial gains. The urbarial records became more precisely worded and supplemented by regularly updated *Ehrungsbücher*. Written inventories of the subjects' chattels in the event of an inheritance became commonplace since landlords had a vested interest in the assets of the successors and levied a fee on the property fallen to ceding and leaving heirs (Fresacher, 1950–55, vol. 2 and 3; Dinkluge, 1966: 99–142).

One reason for the introduction of these massive control measures was the steadily growing financial needs of the Hapsburg princes, which led to new administration practices affecting the entire duchy of Carinthia. Part of the landlords' power rested precisely on the fact that larger sums could only be collected through their manors and estate organization. This meant that the prince was forced to engage in tough negotiations with the nobility, on a case-to-case basis, to justify and impose his tax needs. In the second half of the 16th century taxation became permanent. Like other Austrian territories, Carinthia had to fulfil a certain quota, and within the duchy quotas were assigned mainly by manors. Large-scale and small-scale interests of the prince and the nobility were firmly interwoven in this system. While the prince gained fiscal access to the regional population through the estates, the latter increased their authority over the population through the association with the prince (Fräss-Ehrfeld, 1994).

Much like the Hapsburgs haggled over taxes with the nobility, the noble landlords or their stewards haggled with their subjects over the conditions of rural property succession. Through the *Verehrung*, due on taking possession of a property, the succeeding peasant acquired a position, almost a kind of office, within the domain. This privileged relation to the lord created a considerable distance between the successor and the excluded family members who had been paid off with chattels and found themselves diminished to a status of near-servants. The public and institutionalized alliance between the heads of households and the emerging state thus increased the unbalance of power within the farm. The state reforms of the late 18th century turned the variable *Verehrung* into a standardized premium and diminished the landlords' control authority. In the years after 1848 properties were released from all obligations to the landlordship. Peasants now assumed full property rights of the holdings and became citizens of the Austro-Hungarian state. Yet the remarkable power of the head of the household did not vanish at once. As late as the second half of the 19th century, even working family-members, and not only the numerous servants, were officially referred to as *Dienstleute*.

Division of the farmsteads was also considered, occasionally, in Carinthia during the early modern period, since the mere existence of landlordships did not preclude such arrangements as a matter of principle. Given the degree of economic control exercised by the landlords in the duchy, this process always involved two parties – peasant family and landlord – thus increasing the number of obstacles to subdivision. An important reason for the general aversion to this solution has to be seen in the fact that many farm estates consisted of single homesteads forming a more or less closed territorial complex. In any case, the admission of new smallholds on little-used and often communal land seems to have been more common than the breaking up of old farms. Despite such ways of increasing the number of holdings, big homesteads retained their central position throughout the period, aided to some extent by the practice of awarding unoccupied farms to wealthy peasants (Pickl, 1981: 131).

This leads us back to the model. I think the correspondence between patterns of settlement and patterns of succession gives a clue to the entire alpine area, if we place it in a historical perspective: State-building with its various side-effects freed the rules of succession from local tradition and allowed them to become an autonomous agent in the evolution of settlements. In Carinthia, the system described might never have come about if the landlords in their modernization phase had encountered village structures. Once the farms were firmly under control of the new system of levies and taxes, however, the landlords exercised considerable influence on subsequent developments.

Conclusion

Historical-anthropological family studies in mountain region, nowadays, stress more the diversity than the homogeneity of the patterns and practices observed. Correspondingly, there is a shift in explanation away from ecological arguments. So the question arises: Which arguments, other than ecological ones, can account for diversity in historical family behaviour? Based on experiences in the history of the alpine area between 1500 and 1900, I have here summed up my position with regard to that point.

In a first section, the text offered some comparative evidence of diversity in family practices; the second and third sections dealt with the discussion and illustration of certain kinds of explanation. A model was proposed that proceeds from the spatial distribution and the political organization of the population. It assumes that the forms of transmission of farm property were associated since the Middle Ages, albeit in a loose manner, with particular settlement patterns, which could considerably influence the regional paths of development under certain historical conditions. These conditions came about when the political organization, from the beginning of the modern period, expanded territorially and stabilized institutionally. In the regional context this led to the homogenization of transmission forms, whilst in the inter-regional context quite divergent trajectories could set in.

I am well aware that there is never just one reason for anything. Nevertheless, it is important to construct simplified models in order to distinguish the general relationships from the particular ones. I assume that the proposed kind of explanation may be, in various regions, of different use and necessarily so. In the alpine area one cannot only apply it to the family and household practices here considered. It also provides clues as to the examination of the more collective forms of alpculture (Alpwirtschaft), which one often regards as especially typical of the area¹¹.

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11 For an application of the spatial and political variables used above, to account for diversity in early modern regulations of alpculture, see Mathieu, 1992: 256.

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