



**Panel** 2.2. How Mechanization and Mountains Have Been Interacting (19th/ 20th Century)

**Panel organiser:** Abt, Roman K., Department of History, University of Basel, Switzerland

Mechanization is an important source for change in the lifeworld of human beings and their environments. It has met specific circumstances in the mountains, particularly due to the topographic relief there, resulting in unique solutions for transportation, agricultural production, etc. In the 19th and 20th century mechanization has been more expensive and technically difficult in mountain regions and thus less comprehensive than elsewhere. This is, in fact, one of the key reasons for the contrasting development of mountain regions and lowlands in modern era. The panel gives an opportunity to discuss processes, practices and discourses of mechanization in mountain areas. We want to look closely at mechanization in mountain regions during the last two centuries, taking into account technical and material aspects as well as effects on local economies and social interactions. Some of the questions the panel will address are: How have machines been adapted to mountain regions? What difference has the use of motors made? Are there continuities and/or shifts in the use of energy sources such as water, animals, electricity, fuels etc.? Who has paid for mechanization and what role have state subsidies played? How has mechanical equipment shaped the organization of labor? How have different actors reflected these processes? And how have these processes changed nature and perceptions of nature (i.e. landscape) in different mountain areas?

**Chair:** Mooser, Josef, Department of History, University of Basel, Switzerland

Monday 19.8.2013 // 1400 – 1530 // Session 2 – Room A-119

2.2.1. The „Armament of the Village“: Agricultural Restructuring in Mountainous Areas in Nazi Germany

Paper

**Langthaler, Ernst, Institute of Rural History, St. Pölten, Austria**

In this study rural planning for mountainous areas in Nazi Germany is explored as a case of ‘high modernism’ (James Scott), i.e. large-scale social engineering driven by a modernist ideology and put into practice by an authoritarian state. In 1940, the Nazi agrarian apparatus launched an action called ‘community construction in upland areas’ which was administered by a newly established sub-department of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. This project was implemented in a limited number of Alpine communes as experimental stations for the overall technological modernisation of the German countryside after the war. The planned measures encompassed technical restructuring such as the construction of roads, cable cars and power lines, the enlargement of the average farm area, the adoption of labour- and land-saving technology, the rationalisation, specialisation and commercialisation of farm production as well as institutional restructuring such as the organisation of individual farmers by local cooperatives, the transfer of expert knowledge into everyday decision-making and the substitution of the subsistence ethic by a more ‘productivist’ attitude towards farming. In sum, the low-input low-output farming system oriented towards oxen breeding should be transformed into a high-input high-output farming system oriented towards the marketing of dairy products. Even though this megalomaniac project failed due to external and internal contradictions, the vision of Nazi modernism anticipated the pathway of Alpine agricultural development in the post-war decades.

2.2.2. Dealing with Mechanization: Perspectives and Strategies of Farmers and Local Institutions in the Central Alps of Switzerland

Paper

**Wunderli Götschi, Rahel, Department of History, University of Basel, Switzerland**

The widespread use of fuel driven machines in mountain agriculture started after World War II. On the one hand, it was important for the farmers in these regions to take part in the process of mechanization in order to keep up with current modes of production. On the other hand, there were several aspects of mountain farming that limited the use of machines and vehicles or made their use particularly expensive. This paper shows how different kinds of farmers participated in mechanization during the second half of the 20th century, taking as an example a region in the central Alps of Switzerland. It also investigates the role and strategies of local institutions that helped finance this process. Finally, it asks how these actors have perceived mechanization and its effects over the course of the past decades.

2.2.3. From „Nightingale“ and „Helvetia“ to Single-Axle-Machines. The Adaption of Agricultural Machinery to Steep Slopes

Paper

**Abt, Roman K., Department of History, University of Basel, Switzerland**

Cutting the grass with motorized machines in Swiss alpine regions had its take off in the 1950s. It was in these years that the machine factory Aebi in Burgdorf (Switzerland) started to manufacture machines that were more and more adapted to mowing steep slopes. What circumstances did Aebi and other machine factories react to? And how did Aebi advertise its inventions? In this paper I proceed from the thesis that “Mechanization is an agent” (Sigfried Giedion). I argue that the study of very different aspects – such as relief, work force, politics, economic development, investment opportunities etc. – is necessary to understand the process of mechanization and motorization in agriculture which is especially significant for mountain regions. Throughout my paper I consider two aspects of the machine development from the end of the 19th century to the 1970ies: On the one hand, I will outline the changing metaphorical potential of different model names. On the other hand, I focus on the social construction of a market for these products by looking at how their advantages were promoted and how their deficiencies were addressed by producers (e.g. Aebi), experts and, users over time.

**Participants**

**Abt, Roman K.**  
Roman K. Abt (M. A.), PhD student, working title: “Processed Cheese and Grain. Agrarian Logistics in 20th Century Switzerland”. He has been working as a research assistant to Professor Monika Dommann at the University of Basel since January 2010.

**Langthaler, Ernst**  
Ernst Langthaler has studied Economic and Social History at the University of Vienna (MA 1995, PhD 2000, Habilitation 2010). He was Visiting Professor at the Universities of Innsbruck and Vienna and is currently Director of the Institute of Rural History in St. Pölten and Secretary of the European Rural History Organisation (EURHO). Recent books include “Im Kleinen das Große suchen. Mikrogeschichte in Theorie und Praxis” (co-editor, 2012), “Niederösterreich. Vom Ersten Weltkrieg bis zur Gegenwart” (co-author, 2013) and “Kulinarische ‚Heimat‘ und ‚Fremde‘. Migration und Ernährung im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert” (co-editor, 2013).

**Mooser, Josef**  
Prof. em. Dr. Josef Mooser studied History at LMU University of München; he got a PhD and Habilitation from the University of Bielefeld, where he acted as extraordinary Professor. Acting Professor at the FU Berlin and the University of Trier and, from 1993 – 2012, full Professor at the University of Basel. His research focuses on the Social History of Rural Societies, the History of Religion and Labour History. Among his Publications are: Ländliche Klassengesellschaft 1770-1848 (1984); Idylle oder Aufbruch? Das Dorf im bürgerlichen 19. Jahrhundert. Ein europäischer Vergleich (1990).

**Wunderli Götschi, Rahel**  
Lic. phil. Rahel Wunderli Götschi runs the PhD-project “Continuity and Change of an Alpine Cultural Landscape: Agriculture in Ursern Valley in the 20th Century” at the Department of History, University of Basel. She is member of the Committee of the Swiss Rural History Society.