

*“Individualizing” social research. Conflicts, kinship and sexuality in the Swiss Alps at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

1. The Free School
  - a. The conflict
  - b. Radicals and conservatives
  - c. Thesis
2. Continuities
  - a. Continuity of radical and conservative families
3. Networks
  - a. Fama
  - b. The socio-professional networks
4. Sexuality
  - a. Illegitimacy
  - b. The control of fertility
5. Conclusions

**1. The Free School: Political conflicts and sources**

**a. The conflict**

In 1900 a relatively small group of radical families founded a Free School in Villette, a mountain village in the Valley of Bagnes in the Swiss Canton of Valais.

Map 1

In fact, since the 1890s a new issue had contributed to a new political and cultural polarisation within the community: it was a litigation over Bagnes’ parish school, the ‘Grande Ecole’, which was carried out within the political community. Religious instruction given at the school and the influence of the local parson, Xavier de Cocatrix, were the bone of contention, which made a part of the families contest its orientation.

This 'Ecole libre' was a private school that was supported by the local radical faction, dedicated to laicist teaching and free-thinking. It was the first school of this kind in Western Switzerland.

The founding of this school in an alpine valley which is mostly considered marginal and backward is a very interesting phenomenon.

The radical families involved in the conflicts at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were closely connected with important political and cultural phenomena, like:

- The growing influence of free-thinking
- The spread of openly declared atheism – to an exceptional degree in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Valais

In the Cantonal census of 1888, 19 persons declare to be « without any confession » ;

→ They are 164 in 1900 and 349 in 1910, which means that nearly 75% of all atheists in early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Valais live in Bagnes.

- The development of socialism in the valley at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
  - Most well-known socialists in early 20<sup>th</sup> c. Bagnes originated from formerly radical families
- Two main sources inform us about the structure of the opposing parties in this period. On the one hand, there is a petition signed by a number of radicals and aimed against teaching at the 'Grande Ecole' by a local clerk, probably dating from the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand there are lists of the first students of the Ecole libre, which were published by Sandra Deslarzes-May, though not systematically (Deslarzes-May 1998).

## **b. Radicals and Conservatives**

We can compare these sources with earlier documents about local conflicts. These evolutions, in fact, happened in the wake of earlier sharp conflicts between a radical minority and the Catholic-conservative majority in this region.

In Valais, this conflict was sometimes fought violently. Acolytes of the radical current organised themselves in 'Jeune Suisse' (Young Switzerland) in 1835, a society inspired by the Italian agitator Giuseppe Mazzini. In 1844, troops of 'Young Switzerland' and the conservatives clashed in nearby Martigny. This conflict was carried out in the community of Bagnes as well: Radicals and Conservatives faced each other in the battle of Corberaye, near Villette; several men were killed or wounded. Thanks to the enquiries against 'Young Switzerland' we have got several lists that help us to

identify the radicals, the people most involved in fighting and many Conservative leaders.

I will not linger over details of the local political history, but I want to underline that the political polarisation in the wake of founding 'Young Switzerland' and 'Old Switzerland' became the origin of many local and cantonal conflicts lasting until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Various sources produced in the wake of the conflicts described above allow us to "individualize" the research, analysing very closely the composition of current political parties.

- Especially lists of political militants during the 19<sup>th</sup> century conflicts

But the most important element in this inquiry is the opportunity to compare such lists and names with systematic genealogies of the local families, published by the Centre regional d'études des populations Alpines (CREPA) from 2005 to 2008 (A.A.V.V., *Familles de Bagnes*, 2005-08).

(→ slide)

### c. Thesis

The availability of genealogies makes it possible to study the influence of kinship in the local political history, making familial continuities visible. This is, in my opinion, an essential and often neglected dimension, precisely because of the lack of reliable genealogical data.

Studies on local political conflicts often – and more or less explicitly– adopt a hierarchic interpretation scheme, wherein ideas and political views are passed down from top to bottom: conflicts thus appear as struggles between individuals and families from the elite, each of them supported by their political clientele. An analysis based very much on individual lists and local genealogies in Bagnes sheds light on a more complex reality. In my presentation I will try to illustrate 3 general thesis by a contextualized case study:

1. The focus on individuals and their genealogies makes it possible and to study the influence of family and kinship on political attitudes and mobilization on the one hand, and to underline the agency of men and (sometimes) women belonging to the popular classes on the other hand.
2. This means that we have to extend the very concept of politics, to include the **informal** political activities of peasants, artisans and women and understand their values and cultural orientations.
3. And last but not least, the focus on individuals and families allows for studying the link between attitudes in the private sphere and the political articulation of values: concretely I will insist on the link

between political mobilization, kinship and sexuality; especially illicit sexual relations and the control of fertility.

## **2. Continuities**

In general, we know that the radicals, even though a minority, enjoyed growing popular approval in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which we can quantify thanks to the results of local elections: from 1860 to 1900 the radicals won between 20 and 35 per cent of the votes in federal elections (Andrey, 1976: 266-69). But who were the radicals?

### **Table 1**

**In Table 1** I tried to quantify the mentions of political activities of radical individuals, classifying them according to genealogical branches – every line represents a branch, a kin group descending from two common ancestors. This way you can attribute a value to every branch, according to the number of mentions in the sources throughout the conflicts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

(I reckoned as half a mention every wife of a radical activist – which is interesting from the perspective of reconstructing radical networks).

The grey zone indicates the most active groups – according to our sources - at the end of the century. We see easily that in most cases we have to do with families with a long radical tradition, going back to the 1840es and 1830s years – at least.

In most cases we have to do with popular families, with their own political and ideological tradition.

### **Tab. 2: Socialists**

## **3. Institutions, mobilization and networks**

### **a. J. Fama and the Casino in Saxon.**

Moreover, these branches form dense kinship networks: endogamy within the radical groups is high. The spread of free-thinking and of socialism in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Western Valais was largely a question of local networks.

## **Photo Casino**

The importance of family and professional networks for the spread of radicalism is not new. My colleagues Delphine Debons and Christine Payot have demonstrated how closely the foundation of the first casino in Switzerland, which opened in Saxon in 1853, was connected with a similar radical network around the leading radical Morand, Barman and Claivaz families from Martigny, associated with their friend, the radical Italian refugee Joseph Fama.

### **Diagram 1**

Interestingly enough, the casino in Saxon was associated by public rumour with amoral practices, promoting gambling and tolerating prostitution. But how did such networks come into being and develop?

#### **b. The socio-professional networks**

- Fortunately, at least from a historian's point of view, another incident shook up the region between 1868 and 1883. It was an investigation into the money forger Joseph-Samuel Farinet's activities in Valais, which became famous by C.F. Ramuz's successful novel "Farinet ou de la fausse monnaie" in 1931.

Farinet's activities were not of an overtly political nature. But several of his accomplices and friends are well known to us by their political activities, and more and more the counterfeiter appears to have relied on a popular radical network which later would be involved in the conflicts round about the parish school and the founding of the free school.

Now, if we look at the closest radical collaborators of Farinet, we see that they often were, in their way, entrepreneurs: they were not poor farmers, related to the traditional sectors of the agro-pastoral economy; they were often

- mountain guides ;
- early tourist operators ;
- stone stove merchants.

looking for opportunities in innovative sectors in the valley. In other words, the radical networks were connected with economic and social change in the region.

**Louis Luisier, a key-actor in this story**, was a small tradesman in stone stoves – a sector that fairly developed in the Bagnes Valley during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His liberal family had been closely linked to the development of such an activity in the nineteenth century.

Luisier himself left his native village to settle in Martigny, where he tried to start businesses in new fields, buying a tannery and becoming the partner of Fc Frachebourg.

**François Frachebourg** (one of the first accomplices of the counterfeiter) was a leather tanner operating in Martigny-Bourg, active in local trade, thus belonging to Luisiers business network;

But his closest contacts remained mostly in the area of stone stoves, where his accomplice and brother-in-law, **Jean-Pierre Cretton**, operated.

**Maurice-Eugène Maret**, another among the foremost of Farinet's accomplices, was not a conservative mountain farmer either, he became, above all, one of the pioneers of local tourism. In the 1860s he was the first person to open a business in Fionney, in the upper part of the Bagnes Valley: a place mainly meant for the first alpinists and explorers visiting the most imposing peaks of the region. Fionnay soon became the first dynamic centre of local tourism which, at the end of the century, counted various hotels and restaurants.

Also **the Bessard brothers**, liberals too, and Luisier's relatives involved in the Farinet investigation were not simple mountain farmers; they were among the first well-known alpine guides in the region after they had made some prestigious ascents.

**Like Fellay 8 and radical guides milieu.** Moreover, Séraphin Bessard opened a food-shop in Fionnay in the 1890s.

The radicals often met at the Hotel du Grand-Combin, opened in 1856 by Pierre-Joseph Perraudin, who belonged himself to a core radical family.

In conclusion, the Farinet's radical 'friends' were active in tourism and in the most dynamic fields of the regional economy. Popular radicalism, in this sense, was closely connected with social and economic change in the valley, brought by the slow development of tourism. Familial solidarities were not the only reason for the development of a radical milieu : the radical networks were partly supported by new socio-economic orientations. This was also the background of the free school founded in 1900.

#### **4. Politics, Sexuality and Fertility**

##### **a. Illegitimacy**

But how did these milieus take shape? A closer analysis of the kin groups forming the different factions suggests that sexuality played a significant role.

**Table 2.** Radicalism and sexuality;

In Table I listed all branches with the highest number of children conceived out of wedlock. Once more, the relation is fairly evident: out of the 26 groups which had the highest numbers of illegitimate children, at least 17 groups are clearly radical core-families, with their own, in particular sexual attitude.

Some of the further top-26 groups are politically mixed, including radicals and conservatives too. In these cases we observe that the illicit sexual relations are mostly related to the radical families of the branch – like in the large Vaudan 10 group.

The “bastardy-prone” groups – in Peter Laslets terminology, were often allied with families which shared similar values and behaviour patterns: we can see this phenomenon considering the Bessard group, a key radical and illegitimacy-prone branch.

**Tab. 3.: Sexual Networks : The Bessard family**

These data are important to understand the reasons for political mobilization: popular radicalism was not simply a consequence of patronage relations, but it grew partly on the ground of refusing traditional Catholic precepts and of a different conception of family and sexuality by a significant part of the working classes. This diversification of sexual cultures gave new reasons for dissent and conflict with the conservative majority.

**b. The Control of fertility**

The protagonists behind the Ecole libre were characterized by a particular family and sexual behaviour, not only because they had many illegitimate children, they were also local forerunners of the control of fertility. If we study the families of the protagonists of the founding of the Free School, like M. Charvoz, Alphonse Michaud, Ulrich Gaillard, we observe that their members had few

children, a relatively short fertile period or long intervals between births. Can we therefore affirm that radical families were forerunners of the control of fertility?

Together with Arnaud Bringé (Ined, Paris) I tried to quantify the demographic behaviour of some radical and conservative families, individualizing, so to say, our demographic research.

**Tab. 1. Fertility in Bagnes in the 19th c. (children per mother)**

décennie	fécondité
1800-09	4.96
1810-19	5.39
1820-29	5.31
1830-39	5.31
1840-49	4.88
1850-59	4.90
1860-69	4.90
1870-79	4.63
1880-89	4.25
1890-99	4.08

Source: Database Bagnes 2005, élaboration : Arnaud Bringé

Arnaud Bringé measured, with a statistical regression, the influence of the political variable on the fertility of the couples (probability of the birth of a new child for every couple):

**Tab. 7: Régression logistique à temps discret mesurant l'effet de variables explicatives sur la survenue d'un nouvel enfant issu de l'union**

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Err.
<b>Types de Branches généalogiques</b>		
<i>Autres</i>	<i>Référence</i>	
Radical	-0,011	0,074
Conservateur	0,231***	0,088
*** significatif à un seuil de 1%		

The table shows that conservative families had a higher fertility rate than average; but the results for core radical families are not evident. We observe, in fact, that radicals did not always follow the same pattern; some families had a clearly low fertility rate – a strong indicator for contraception – during the second half of the 19th century, but other radical groups had not. On the contrary: some radical families had a higher fertility rate than average.

In this sense we were forced to individualize, or « familiarize », the inquiry, to understand the different fertility patterns. The result is the following table, where we summed up the demographic behaviour of a sample of radical and conservative families: first the length of the fecund period:

**Tab.9. Length of the fertile period, in years, for selected branches**

Branch	1800-1900	1840-1900	politics
<i>Average</i>	<i>10.22</i>	<i>9.99</i>	<i>indéfini</i>
<b>Radical groups with low fertility</b>			
BSA§7-12	<b>6.87</b>	<b>7.18</b>	radicaux
DUM§6-33	<b>7.47</b>	<b>5.37</b>	radicaux
MCO§5-445	<b>8.25</b>	<b>8</b>	radicaux
BOV§1-257	<b>8.75</b>		radicaux
BRU§31-26	<b>4.71</b>	<b>5.8</b>	radicaux
BSO§14-21	<b>6.96</b>	<b>7</b>	radicaux
CAR§9-112	<b>9.91</b>	8.93	radicaux
FEL§8-57	<b>8.75</b>		radicaux
MRE§10-8.10	<b>8.42</b>	<b>9.63</b>	radicaux
MRE§10-9	<b>7.23</b>	<b>7.82</b>	radicaux
OIL§3-4212	<b>5.12</b>		radicaux
PER§4-47	<b>9.83</b>	<b>8.78</b>	radicaux
FIL§4-69	<b>8.32</b>		radicaux
BRU§20-11	<b>8.75</b>		radicaux
MAR§49-33	<b>9.48</b>	10.13	radicaux
<b>Radical groups with „normal“ or high fertility</b>			
BSA§7-13	13.07	13.55	radicaux

DUM§6-23	11.27	10.84	radicaux
MCO§5-134	12.07	11.57	radicaux
MCO§5-443	10.96	11.58	radicaux
ALT§5-34	11.24	12.55	radicaux
BSE§30-16	11.47	10.15	radicaux
CAR§9-142	10.85	10.3	radicaux
FEL§8-10.75	12.18	11.5	radicaux
FEL§8-31	12	10.62	radicaux
PER§4-41	10.72	11.04	radicaux
MAR/49-33	11.49		radicaux
MCA§14-81	12.83		radicaux radicaux
PAC§3-31	12.63		
Moyenne br.rad	9.7	<b>9.31</b>	

### Conservatives groups

Branch	1800-1900	1840-1900	politics
<i>Average</i>	<b>10.22</b>	<b>9.99</b>	<i>indéfini</i>
<b>LUI§4-224</b>	<b>7.90</b>	5.50	conservateurs
LUI§4-226	10.00	11.22	conservateurs
BAI§12-53	12.00	10.82	conservateurs
CRE§2-142	11.15	10.56	conservateurs
COU/3-141	13.02		conservateurs
MCO§20-138	9.77		conservateurs
MCO§20-4	10.80		conservateurs
Moyenne br.conservatrices	10.66	9.53	

The length of the fertile period is only one indication of contraception: in order to collect more significant data, we looked at different demographic indicators as well:

**Tab. 13. Selected variables**

Main Variables	Secondary Variables
1. Number of children (low),	4. Age of the woman at marriage,
2. End of fertile period (early),	5. Age of the woman at the birth of the first child.
3. Interval (long) betw. births	

---

We can also propose a kind of demographic typology for the 35 groups under consideration (7 conservatives and 28 radicals):

**Tab 14. Classification according to the selected variables**

---

Category	N. Radical branch/group	Conservatives
c3	4 (OIL/3; MRE/10-8; BSO/14; BOV/1-257)	1 (LUI/4-224)
c2+	3	0
c2	6	0
c1	7	0
f2	6	2
f3	2 (MAR/49, BSE/30-16)	4

**Explications :**

Type	
<b>c3</b>	: all variables positive = contraception very probable.
<b>c2</b>	: 2 positive variables (c2+: 2 variables clearly positive) = contraception probable.
<b>c1</b>	: 1 variable positive (other variables ambiguous) = ambiguous result
<b>f2</b>	: 2 negative variables: contraception improbable.
<b>f3</b>	: all variables negative = no contraception.

---

We can conclude that, although not all radical families show the same demographic pattern, the families where we find strong indicators for contraceptive practices are – with one exception – radical ones, whereas conservative families show no indications of contraception.

It is noteworthy that contraception remained sharply forbidden by the Catholic Church - and that the parsons probably kept a careful eye on the sexual behaviour of families.

So it is probable that the treatment of the numerous illegitimate children – or of the children issued of an illicit relation – in the parish school was an important cause of litigation within the community and one of the causes of the dissent and the falling apart of the radical families. Sexual behaviour represented a crucial element of the political and social ground on which radicalism, free thinking, atheism, and early 20th century socialism could develop.

## 5. Conclusions.

Now, one might say that this is an interesting case study but not a political conflict: it was a private group which founded a private school; although we can show the influence of radical ideology and of religious sensitivities, it was a private issue in so far as the political institutions were not directly concerned.

I think it is a crucial issue from the perspective of the political mobilization of popular groups. The story of the free school was nevertheless, in my sense, an eminent political struggle, not only because it was a conflict between radicals and conservatives, not only because it reveals a deep ideological opposition against the Catholic clergy, not only because the conflict was carried out first in the local council, involving the local communal institution, but above all: education was a central political issue which was deeply connected with familial and individual values of the local population, including the popular groups. For the local community the founding of a free school was more important than most decisions by local and cantonal institutions.

This perspective leads us to extend the concept of politics beyond formal institutions, beyond parties or official organizations, to study popular political and religious ideas or ideologies, the ways in which such ideas were applied or in which way they influenced the local political and social life.

This approach sheds light upon different actors, other than classical political history or the history of social conflicts do: especially on the agency of popular groups.

One of the results of this exploratory study is the necessity to question the category of patronage/clientele. The detailed analysis of concrete families does not reveal the rigid vertical structures we could expect in a 19<sup>th</sup> century mountain valley. The political allegiances are not simply the result of patronage and dependence but must be explained by relying to more and more complex factors, like ideological religious and sexual identities, not only at the level of the local elite but in popular groups too.

The emergence of political factions can be better explained as the political expression of specific social “milieus”: a milieu could be defined, in this sense, as a privileged network between people (or families) sharing similar political and cultural values, in this case a similar social, family and sexual identity. In this sense, I think, we need to “individualize” the research, focussing on different behaviour patterns of individuals, of families or kin groups. Only by individualizing or « familiarizing » demographic research we will obtain interesting results concerning the link between sexual attitudes and political allegiances.

Of course, we do not know how far the results of this case study can be generalized; but I think this analysis shows several factors we must carefully look at if we want to understand the logic of popular politics and the mechanisms of the political mobilization of the working classes.