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Migration in the Swiss Alps and Swiss Jura from the Middle Ages to the mid-20th century: a brief review

Anne-Lise Head-König

EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Brian Keogh

- 1 Migration has always been a necessary complement to the survival of mountain populations. The aim of this paper is to identify certain characteristics of this migration and to examine the role of demographic, economic and cultural factors that, over the long term, have influenced migratory movements in the alpine arc and the Jura Mountains. Institutional factors have also had an impact and, depending on the period in question, have sometimes exerted a decisive influence on the extent and types of migration. The migratory typologies also reflect specific socio-economic contexts: substitution migrations, returning migrations, maintenance migrations, short-distance and long-distance migrations, temporary or definitive migrations, labour migrations, colonisation migrations or forced migrations. In addition, migratory movements varied according to the characteristics of the migrants: stage of family life cycle, matrimonial state, size of family, level of training of migrants – or its lack –, and gender, since migration among men is not the same as that among women. Finally, migration also had an influence on those left behind, and on their economy.

Migratory movements and their chronologies

- 2 Since the beginning of the 2nd millennium, a double type de migration has always existed: on the one hand, mass migrations, which have taken on different forms, and,

on the other, more individual migrations that have nevertheless had implications for both the country of emigration and the host country.

- 3 The largest mass emigration of the Middle Ages was that of the Walser people. In very recent studies, Ignaz Bellwald and Max Waibel were able to establish the chronology of this migration of the people of Lötschental, which took place over almost two centuries and brought them successively to the Valais region, Gressonay in the Val d'Aoste, les Grisons, the Oberland st-gallois, and even as far as Austria (Bellwald, 2007; Waibel, 2007). A number of reasons were responsible for these migratory flows: demographic pressure, armed conflict between local lords, followed by destruction, as well as institutional factors. In the Lötschental, demographic pressure resulted in an expansion of the land available for cultivation following extensive land clearances and the retreat of the forest, which allowed the establishment of a very substantial permanent habitat at an altitude of more than 2000 m in the 11th and 12th centuries. The high population densities of certain regions, namely the Valais region, just before the outbreak of the Black Death, were remarkable. Indeed, they were equal to, or even greater than, those observed at the beginning of the 19th century, when the rural economy was far more developed (Dubuis, 1990). The increase in population in the 11th and 12th centuries, however, was accompanied by a worsening of living conditions and an increasing number of conflicts. Thus, in the Lötschental, armed conflicts between local lords resulted in the abandonment of more than 700 settlements at the end of the 13th century and beginning of the 14th century because of massive destruction and the migration from the Lötschen region. In the regions of settlement, institutional measures introduced by feudal lords favoured immigration. For the landlords, it was a question of boosting the settled population as a means for increasing the number of armed men, increasing their tax revenues, and defending and controlling the alpine passes.
- 4 This arrival of colonizing peoples speaking another language was a source of conflict with the indigenous population, particularly since the newcomers benefited from a number of specific privileges (Walserrecht), promising them individual freedom, hereditary tenure and autonomy in the management of their commune. Some of these same elements were to appear later, in the 17th and 18th centuries, in the conditions offered to Swiss colonizers in Brandebourg.
- 5 From the end of the 14th century, the population started to grow and was reflected, particularly in certain Valais parishes, by an increasing proportion of larger families. The communities of the Neuchâtel district of the Jura, and those of the Bernese Oberland and central Switzerland, also experienced a rapid increase. In fact, from a demographic point of view, the 15th century favoured mountain areas, either because the regions that had escaped the Black Death were able to continue their growth, or because recovery started earlier in the mountain parishes. This particularity of mountain areas could well explain the appearance of migration on a massive scale with the generalised development of foreign service from the 15th century¹, which was further accentuated by the specialisation of the mountain economies in stock rearing, requiring less labour than planting crops. The rapid growth of mountain populations probably explains the importance of the alpine cantons in the Swiss states. At the dawn of the 16th century, the mountain populations accounted for some 50-53% of the country's population. However, this demographic vitality was not only due to the population already settled there. Immigration in the Jura (Radeff, 1977) and the Alps

(Viazzo, 1989), whose role is now becoming better understood, also made an important contribution to population growth.

- 6 Two factors played a decisive role in the substantial population movements that characterised the 15th and 16th centuries: the attraction of the freedom existing in most of the higher regions of Switzerland – it often allowed immigrants from the lower valley areas to escape from the over-zealous controls imposed by landlords – and the absence of restrictions on the settlement of newcomers, who were often welcomed. Certain communes of the alpine arc were not yet established in a definitive manner, making it easier for migrants to settle when they participated in communal work such as forest clearing and the building of embankments. The demographic factor, and more specifically a policy of population replacement, also sometimes played a role. Population losses due to mortality, caused by epidemics and enlistment in the foreign service, which affected a substantial part of the young population reaching adulthood, encouraged some communities in the 16th century to grant the “droit de bourgeoisie” (local citizenship) relatively easily to newcomers – in total contrast with what occurred from the 17th century onwards – and to even lower the age of majority to 14 years in order to increase the number of adult men entitled to bear arms, as was the case in the canton of Glaris.
- 7 At the end of the 16th century, the gradual establishment of more developed state structures at the commune level was aimed at limiting the mobility of the poorest elements of the population who could not prove they had local citizenship rights and were therefore not entitled to assistance. Controls not only concerned indigenous migrants but also foreign migrants and “welsches” peddlers who were confronted with numerous restrictions in the cantons of central Switzerland. From the 17th century to the middle of the 19th century, state interference increased. The State sought to define those persons who were allowed to migrate and those who were not, migrations that were authorized and those that were not, as well as enlistments in foreign military service, which varied according to the interests of the ruling classes. These interventions of the cantonal states and the communes had a direct influence on migratory movements and on the form they took within a canton, between cantons, and to other European countries. They also affected land use management and the forms of habitat by facilitating certain migratory flows through the amount of the dwelling fee levied and so-called “entrage” fees to enter a commune, which newcomers always had to pay.
- 8 The attitude of state authorities toward emigration varied considerably, as did the policy adopted concerning the immigrants who helped make up for the losses suffered through those leaving. While the alpine arc remained relatively closed to newcomers, at least as far as any lasting development was concerned, the Pre-Alps and the Jura regions experienced strong immigration. Typical among such regions were those of the early clock-making and textile industries. From the end of the 17th century, the development of early industrial activities contributed strongly to the settlement of the Prealpine and marginal land areas that had sparse populations due in part to internal population movements. Such movements were sometimes encouraged by cantonal governments and by strict state restrictions limiting any increase in the number of households on the flat lands from where the migrants originated. This migration within cantons due to early industrialisation also explains a certain drop in the number of people joining the foreign service, as the conditions of pay there were no longer

competitive with the revenues from the textile activities. In the 18th century, the population density in these areas of recent settlement often exceeded that of the areas of origin, whether these were the mountains of St.Gall, Zurich or Appenzell.

- 9 The decline, then the collapse, of the proto-industrial activities in the 19th century, however, led to the partial abandonment of the high-level habitat and a migratory return flow to the flat lands, with a rural exodus amplified by the farming crisis at the end of the 19th century and the need to restructure agriculture production. From the 18th century, the Jura was also an area that exerted a strong attraction for immigrants, with increasing numbers opting for work in the new industrial activities such as clock-making, with its male and female workers, or lace-making, which employed a large number of women. The indigenous population thus partly abandoned agricultural activities – livestock farming and cereal production – on the higher lands of the Neuchatel region of the Jura massif. This rural job market attracted an increasing population from outside the canton, from the mid-altitude and higher regions where resources were insufficient to support the families living there (Cop, 1981; Christ, 1991).
- 10 The 1820-1860 period was one of difficult structural adjustments for most mountain regions. Several factors conspired against maintaining a working population and, in particular, employing an increasingly large young population in the area, since the adaptation of high birth rates to falling mortality rates only occurred slowly in both the protestant and catholic highland areas. The number of jobs stagnated and sometimes decreased sharply, particularly in certain proto-industrial sectors. Political intervention led to a reorientation of migratory flows: the creation of national armies in the 1830s in France and the Netherlands decreased the demand for Swiss mercenaries. The banning of foreign military service by the Confederation in 1859 also affected this service in Italy and no longer provided a means of absorbing unemployed young from the non-industrialised mountain cantons, as observed by the Lucerne government. The expulsion of the Swiss from Lombardy exacerbated the problem, as did the climatic conditions and the impoverishment that followed. Mass emigration overseas provided an outlet. Beginning in the 1840s and increasing in the decades that followed, it affected above all the working population of the primary sector, whereas emigration to other European countries remained in large part a migration of better-qualified people.
- 11 From the 1870s, markets and mobility began to operate differently, affected by enormous structural changes in agriculture that freed labour no longer able to find employment. A set of unfavourable social and economic factors, particularly the difficulty of combining meagre agricultural resources with those of secondary activities, encouraged emigration from the higher regions to the lower land and towns of Switzerland, as well as to other countries. Those mountainous regions that had succeeded in developing tourism provided an exception to this rule. During the latter third of the 19th century, the area experienced the first phases of a rural exodus that continued until the First World War under the combined effect of internal emigration and emigration to other European and overseas countries. Between the two World Wars, rural depopulation became more marked as households struggled with insufficient resources, despite a federal policy of subsidies and infrastructure investments aimed at helping maintain the populations in mountain areas. The crisis of the 1930s affected the alpine arc and the Jura massif alike. Both regions saw the departure of large numbers of the male working population, from the agricultural

sector as well as the clock-making industry, in search of employment elsewhere. Deteriorating living conditions in the mountain areas, at a time when they were improving in the lower lying districts, explains why the mountain population continued to decrease in the mid 20th century, namely in areas where there had been no improvements in communications and transport to make life less arduous.

Institutional control and state intervention

- 12 From the 17th century to the middle of the 19th century, state authorities used legal control mechanisms to determine those persons who could emigrate or immigrate. This control procedure applied to any form of migration, whether it was for religious, civil or military reasons. State intervention has sometimes taken on extremely restrictive forms, ranging from the forced expulsion of religious dissidents from the country – such as the anabaptists and mennonites from the Emmental region, who found refuge first of all in the lands of the Prince-Bishop of Basle² – to forced enlistment in the foreign service³. Elsewhere, however, other dissidents, and in particular the pietists of the Grisons, emigrated under their own initiative to Haute Lusace to the south of Berlin in the 18th century, in order to “return to the true homeland”. But as far as Swiss internal mobility was concerned, migratory movements from the 17th century until the federal Constitution of 1848 were largely influenced through the “droit d’établissement” (settlement right), which was strongly linked to legislation regarding the poor. With the exception of the interlude marked by the Helvetic Republic and the Mediation Act, freedom of settlement was limited by a set of restrictions related to the acquisition of land, access to communal rights, communal “droits d’entrage” (entrance fees), and “droit d’habitation” (dwelling rights). These restrictions were particularly severe in the alpine arc, given the ever-present fear of “demographic overloading”. The status of “inhabitant” with only very limited rights was the lot of the foreigner, with a few exceptions. The immigrant who wanted to settle was often not welcome, whether this was in the valleys of the Grisons, the Valais or central Switzerland. Definitive immigration in the greater part of the alpine arc was therefore very limited, particularly since the commune authorities restricted the rights of their own citizens with regard to marriage with those considered as foreigners, meaning those from another commune or canton. Opposition to this type of marriage was two-fold: firstly, the fear of having to provide newcomers with assistance, and secondly, especially in mountain areas where the principle of egalitarian transmission of property among heirs prevailed, the host community feared that the land which was part of their heritage, namely the alpine pastures, would pass into the hands of “foreigners”, meaning those from outside the commune, even if they were only from the neighbouring commune.
- 13 Canton and commune authorities, however, have always managed to differentiate migratory movements on the basis of their usefulness for the local economy. Temporary migrations to and from the mountain areas to meet specific needs were therefore tolerated (Lorenzetti, 2009). There have also been exceptions in some regions of Switzerland, where certain foreigners, although not particularly welcomed as immigrants, over the course of their business relations ended up by settling in Switzerland. Thus, the canton of Schwyz, in the 17th and 18th centuries, witnessed first the immigration, and then the settlement, of merchants from Gressonay (in the Val

d'Aoste) trading in linen and cotton (Auf der Maur, 1996). As for the Jura massif, it stands in contrast to the alpine region in that it is a region that is relatively open to foreigners, even though immigration there has not always been without problems.

- 14 Following the example of the mountain areas, the cantons of the Plateau also legislated to prevent migrants from competing with indigenous populations in the towns, particularly in the crafts sector. Thus, up to the beginning of the 19th century, emigration from the mountain areas to the Swiss towns mainly comprised women working as domestics, while emigration among men from the alpine regions tended to be more to areas outside Switzerland (Head-König, 2002).
- 15 The middle of the 19th century represents an important watershed for the Swiss rural population with the creation of the federal State which modified not only the relationship between the state, its citizens and their mobility, but also the relationship between citizens and the markets, namely with the elimination of measures aimed at restricting access to the labour and land markets to a limited circle of actors. From the mid 19th century, the possibilities for alpine dwellers to migrate within the country to towns and regions undergoing industrialisation became much easier.

Types of migration

- 16 Mass migration and individual migration seem to have always co-existed from as early as the first centuries of the second millennium. Even if Swiss sources provide no indication of the extent of individual migration, the migration of craftsmen with trades was already observed for the Italian area in the 12th century. Italian sources, and particularly the accounts of the construction of religious buildings in Milan and cathedrals in other cities, thus mention the frequent presence of Tessin people in this building sector. In the 14th century, there were thousands of workers from the Tessin region on all the public construction sites of the major Italian urban centres, employed either as specialists – architects, plasterers, military engineers, etc. – or labourers. As pointed out by Pier Paolo Viazzo, the reverse situation could also be observed, with masons from certain communities of the Piedmontese Alps in Swiss towns in the 15th and 16th centuries (Viazzo, 1989) as well as those from the Neuchâtel region in the 17th and 18th centuries. But the extent of some migratory movements in the Alps sometimes led to very marked “substitution” phenomena, when immigrant labour had to take the place of those who had left, particularly for agricultural work. This was the case with the long-term migrations of café owners and pastry cooks from certain valleys of the Grisons, where in the 18th and 19th centuries people from the Southern Tyrol and Vorarlberg came to take the place of the emigrants. This was also the case in the Tessin, with its architects and plasterers. In these regions, it was therefore often not overpopulation that led to emigration, but rather the type of activity that could not be practised in the area. In fact, emigration resulted, sometimes as early as the 17th century, in stagnation, and even the first depopulation in certain regions with strong long-term migration, such as in Engadine between 1659 and 1750 (Mathieu, 1986). Substitution was also observed where the local population preferred better-remunerated proto-industrial, and then industrial, jobs to agricultural employment, hence the need for farm workers from the Berne area in the Neuchâtel region as well as craftsmen and domestic servants. Moreover, depending on the economic situation, the need for outside labour was also met by the immigration of adult workers from the

border regions (Daveau, 1959), as well as apprentices from the Franche-Comté (Brelot, 1995), a province of Eastern France.

- 17 The mountain regions were characterised by migration systems that existed in parallel within the same area, but affected different social classes. Sometimes these systems differed slightly in the period of their operation, generally reflecting the absence or availability of capital and family and village networks.
- 18 The coexistence of numerous types of migration was particularly marked in the Grisons, and to a lesser extent in the canton of Glaris, while in other regions of the alpine arc (Uri, Schwyz, the Valais, Appenzell) migrations were of less diverse character. The different types of migration resulted from very different incentives, depending on whether they were voluntary or forced; they also differed in terms of the capital that migrants had at their disposition – undoubtedly the availability of capital explained the differences in the types of migrants observed in Schams and Oberhalbstein in the Grisons: the former were pastry cooks and café owners, while the latter were soldiers in foreign armies or employees in the hotel trade (Caflisch, 2008). A lack of homogeneity also characterised the migratory behaviour in neighbouring mountain communes. In a Glaronese commune (Netstal), for example, the emigration of cheese-makers to Russia was observed, while in another commune (Mittlödi), it was the emigration of pastry cooks and cotton wadding manufacturers to French towns. In some communes, however, there was hardly any emigration.
- 19 Migrations differed just as much with respect to the objectives of the mountain emigrants as to the duration of the migrations (seasonal, several years, lifelong, or even definitive⁴), their geographic area and the qualifications of the migrants. Temporary migration was sometimes a means of providing maintenance for the family that stayed behind, involving either the migration of the father or very young children to neighbouring countries to temporarily alleviate the burden on the family, even though their placement in employment did not bring in much revenue (Uhlig, 1980; Seglias, 2004). Many young people left with the idea of returning as soon as economic conditions improved. Thus young men joined foreign military service, up until 1859, and young women went into domestic service in the towns. At the end of the 19th century, there was also the temporary migration across the Atlantic of numerous young people from the Valais region (Anderegg, 1980). As for definitive migration, this may have resulted from a relative overpopulation or from institutional and environmental obstacles that before the middle of the 19th century restricted the creation of new households in the places of origin. The geographic area may also have varied in function of the specialisations of migrants: migration of mountain dwellers in search of agricultural land in Algeria, South America, North America, or in more neighbouring regions such as Bavaria where people from the Tavetsch settled definitively. Migrants from Fribourg not only left to join the foreign service, they also contributed, with their know-how, to the development of cheese-making activities in Franche-Comté and Savoie (Viallet, 1993), just as certain migrants from the Bernese and Glaronese regions did in Russia in the 19th century (Tschudin, 1990). Finally, the professional profile of migrants also determined the type of place where they settled. Thus café owners and pastry cooks necessarily settled in towns and were to be found throughout Europe, from Italy to Russia, and from France and Spain to Sweden (Kaiser, 1985).

Conclusion

- 20 Based on the available information on migratory movements, considered in the long term, the great majority of the male population of the high regions of Switzerland has always been mobile. Furthermore, in mountain areas, the directions of migratory flow have continually changed. Migration has never been a one way process, even though immigration seems to have always been less marked than emigration, on account of the lack of adequate resources and institutional constraints that were often greater for outsiders settling in highland communes than on the lower lands. Exceptions to the rule, however, were numerous with the development of those sectors of activity for which indigenous labour was insufficient. Textiles, clock-making, even agriculture in the Jura massif, and, from the second half of the 19th century, tourism brought in immigrant labour from outside the mountain areas, in part because it was cheaper. As for emigration from the highland areas, this was seen as a phenomenon of population overflow or an indispensable means of helping the areas' families to survive.
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NOTES

1. Enlistments at that time were mainly in the service of France and the Italian states but, from the 17th century, Swiss mercenaries were found in all the European armies.
2. Recent studies have shown to what extent those established in the Sundgau were pioneers in agricultural development, and this was still the case in the 20th century.
3. Thus, from the second third of the 18th century, the State of Lucerne often sentenced men found guilty of an offence to 6 years in foreign military service.
4. In Switzerland, return emigration was very limited compared with other parts of Europe (Furter, R., Head-König, A.-L., Lorenzetti, L., 2009).

ABSTRACTS

This paper aims at retracing the important phases of migrations in the alpine regions and the Jura from the Middle Ages up to the middle of the 20th century. Migration has always functioned as a necessary complement to the resources of the inhabitants of the upland regions and it increases when the economic disparity with the lowlands becomes more marked. A striking characteristic of such migration is the great diversity that can be observed, since not only the destinations of the migrants varied from community to community, but also different forms of mobility coexisted within the same territory. Migration might be seasonal, pluriannual, lifelong or even definitive. It is also notable that the various types of migration can be observed to be part of a plurisecular tradition, apart from some significant exceptions, such as the emigration of the Walser, enforced migrations and the new types of migration as from the second half of the nineteenth century. The mobility of part of the population was also a consequence of modifications deriving from changes in the prevalent type of production (animal husbandry instead of the cultivation of cereals), as well as from demographic factors. In addition to these factors one can observe the role played by political institutions throughout the period under study: seigneurial power in the Middle Ages, the communal and cantonal instances until the second half of the nineteenth century, and afterwards the federal authorities.

Cette contribution vise à montrer les grandes phases des mouvements migratoires du Moyen Age au milieu du XXe siècle dans les mondes alpin et jurassien suisses. La migration a toujours été une complémentarité nécessaire aux ressources de la montagne, et elle s'amplifie lorsque les disparités économiques avec le plat pays s'accroissent. Elle se caractérise par une forte diversité, puisque non seulement les destinations et les aires d'établissement des migrants peuvent varier fortement d'une commune à l'autre, mais aussi parce qu'au sein d'un même territoire ont toujours coexisté des formes différentes de mobilité, saisonnières, pluriannuelles, viagères ou définitives. Un aspect remarquable de ces types de migration est qu'ils s'inscrivent dans une très longue tradition pluriséculaire, avec quelques exceptions notables, ainsi les migrations des Walser, les migrations forcées et les nouvelles formes de la migration dès la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle. La mobilité est imposée aussi par les modifications des formes prévalantes de production (élevage plutôt qu'embravures), de même que par les facteurs démographiques. A ces facteurs s'ajoute celui du rôle des institutions politiques tout au long de la période étudiée, seigneuriales au Moyen Age, communales et cantonales jusque dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle, puis fédérales.

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Keywords: influence of political instances, necessary complementarity, substitution, types of migration

Mots-clés: complémentarité nécessaire, rôle des institutions, substitution, types de migration

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