Making Tracks: Ernst Langthaler

14 July 2016
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In the “Making Tracks” series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

By **Ernst Langthaler**

“**A Pile of Stones in the Midst of a Meadow”**

I grew up in a remote village of about 2,000 inhabitants. It was situated at the northeastern fringe of the Austrian Limestone Alps and embedded in a mountainous landscape. Located in the main valley, the central settlement, the *Markt* (“market”), comprised public buildings (among them a Catholic church, a municipal office, and a primary school) and several dozen private houses belonging to nonagricultural dwellers—employees in the building and manufacturing industries and transport services, as well as small artisans and merchants. In the adjacent valleys and scattered along the mountains, medium-sized family farms dotted the landscape, vast stretches of grassland and forest between them.

Since my parents lived in the central settlement, I was spared the daily commute of an hour or more on foot between home and school; this wasn’t the case for many of my classmates, who were the children of farmers. My close friends were boys and girls from the central settlement only—so-called *Marktler*; classmates from farming families, the *Bauernbuben* (“peasant boys”) and *Bauernmenscher* (“peasant girls”) were absent. Just the fact that we had these group names signified the meaningful distinction between youths from the nonagricultural center and the agricultural periphery.

After school, my friends and I used to prowl through the nearby creeks, grasslands, and woods, re-enacting scenes from films such as *Winnetou*, *Robin Hood*, or *The Three Musketeers*. The subalpine environment offered us “cowboys,” “Indians,” and “knights” many hiding places, amongst them piles of stones in the midst of the meadows. One such

structure, a cone, was five to ten meters in diameter and almost two meters high. Grasses, flowers and shrubbery sprouted in the clefts, and here and there a snake bathed in the sun. None of us had any idea how these strange landscape elements had emerged. They simply were there, and nobody worried about them.

A few decades later, I had finished school and completed my training at the pedagogical academy. I became a teacher in my home village, where historical school projects piqued my interest in the history of local society and nature. I went digging for documents in archives and libraries and talked with the older inhabitants about their lives. The result of these endeavors was a popular book [1] on the coevolution of local society and nature since the Middle Ages, which served as the basis for my doctoral thesis on village history and memory in the twentieth century. My writing allowed me to explore a part of my culture which, until that point, had been unfamiliar to me —the world of the mountain peasantry.

The key to understanding the peasant world took the form of the pile of stones in the midst of the meadow—my childhood playground. My investigations helped me to read these strange landscape elements as traces of past interactions between society and nature, primarily in the form of agriculture. Despite adverse climatic and soil conditions, the mountain peasants grew grain for bread and livestock feed for domestic use up to the mid-twentieth century. Since the topsoil was rather shallow, tilling the fields regularly lifted pieces of limestone rock to the surface. These stones were then removed from the fields, piled at suitable places, and eventually used to construct farm buildings. From the 1950s onwards, however, the grain fields were converted into meadows for regional specialization in “progressive” dairy farming; the piles of stones became relics of diversified farming.

My CV tells the rest of the story: I abandoned my career as a school teacher to become a freelance researcher in several historical projects, before joining the **Institute of Rural History in St. Pölten**. My **habilitation thesis** dealt with farming in a province of Nazi Germany. Afterwards, my research interests shifted from local and regional to global issues—above all, the globalization of agriculture and food. I chose the soybean as a prism for exploring agrofood globalization from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries. This led me to the Rachel Carson Center in Munich, which is probably the best place to develop this project further.

My home village is by no means isolated from current agrofood globalization; on the contrary, it is deeply embedded in transnational value chains. For instance, the dairy cattle on the mountain farms are fed with concentrates that contain protein-rich meal from soybeans grown outside of Europe (most likely in Brazil, Argentina, or Paraguay) and under problematic ecological and social conditions. However, the hay or silage for the cows stems from the local meadows which once served as a playground for me and my friends . The grassland's face has changed considerably over the decades: small landscape elements such as trees, hedgerows, and—most notably—piles of stones have been removed to adapt the meadows for the use of tractors and other machinery. With the disappearance of these environmental *lieux de mémoire*, grain farming in the Limestone Alps has withdrawn from memory to history.

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[1] Bernhard Gamsjänger and Ernst Langthaler (eds.), *Das Frankenfelser Buch*, Eigenverlag Marktgemeinde Frankenfels: Frankenfels 1997.