The Mountain: A Political History from the Enlightenment to the Present

Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015. xii and 354 pp., illustrations, notes, index. $50.00 cloth (ISBN 9780226031118); $40.00 electronic (ISBN 9780226031255).

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In The Englishman Who Went Up a Hill but Came Down a Mountain, a 1995 film set during World War I, a winsome surveyor informs a Welsh village that their local peak was 984 feet in height and therefore would be classified on maps as a hill, not a mountain. The villagers then carry buckets of dirt to the top until the highest point surpasses 1,000 feet to reclaim its customary status as a mountain. The interplay of state authorities and local residents in the film illustrates a central theme of Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz’s impressive study of the ways societies have constructed their mountains as political objects over the last three centuries.

The definition of a mountain has remained elusive, ever since Alexander von Humboldt and other naturalists codified these comparable landforms into a category of knowledge between the late seventeenth and late nineteenth centuries. Naturalists identified connections between high elevations or steep topography and the order of nature. Local residents in the mountains became assimilated into the natural environment and were classified as a people apart from the rest of society in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways. Debarbieux and Rudaz are careful to note the heterogeneity of representations and objectifications of the mountain. Nonetheless, they repeatedly highlight the ascendancy of the Alps, and the Swiss Alps in particular, as a model for defining the archetypal mountain in the modern era of nation states as well as the period of globalization.

Mountains have served as barriers since antiquity, but became associated during the Enlightenment with a “normative naturalism” (p. 48). In this way of thinking, elevated landforms were said to provide the boundaries with which nature itself had differentiated nations from one another. Likewise, the Scottish Highlander, Swiss peasant, or Italian mountain troops each became emblematic figures for their nation.

Yet mountain dwellers soon became problems to be solved by the mid-nineteenth century. Forest policies in France and national parks in the United States each restricted access by local inhabitants to their lands in the name of natural restoration or preservation. Mountain residents were joined by climbers who considered themselves superior to the indigenes. The mountain climbers also identified with the masculinity of the local residents, so much so that they adopted the residents’ name as their own, the “mountaineers.”

The Mountain originally appeared as Les faiseurs de montagne (Paris: CNRS, 2010), and the excellent translation rightly renders montagnard as mountaineer. In this telling, mountaineer refers almost invariably to a mountain dweller, inhabitant, or resident rather than a mountain climber or alpinist. This might cause initial confusion for some Anglophone readers, and the conceptually dense introduction might deter nonacademics interested in
mountains. Yet an attentive reading of this analytically sophisticated and empirically detailed work amply repays the effort. The French edition was more profusely illustrated, but the English version brings certain passages up to date and appears to supersede the original.

From the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, the mountain was reconfigured as a place to live and as a territory. Outmigration was considered a threat to biodiversity and scenic appeal, and something to be stemmed by subsidies to mountain farmers. The introduction of hydraulic engineering, hydropower, and highways attempted to bring modernity to the village. French state planning to develop ski resorts is usefully compared with U.S. interventions in the Appalachians and the mountain West.

Since the mid-twentieth century, local communities have embraced the name montagnard, and its equivalents, in reaction against earlier derogatory connotations. The creation of groups lobbying on behalf of mountain regions and populations marked the institutionalization of these identities in Europe. Similarly, the emergence of official labels for mountain products exemplifies one of Debarbieux and Rudaz’s central claims: “to show how the political construction of the mountain rests as much on regulatory initiatives as on the social imaginary” (p. 133).

The Mountain is at its best when examining such regulatory initiatives, and the second half of the book examines them at global and regional scales. A chapter on colonialism provides a bridge to later chapters with all-too-brief vignettes of borders, hill tribes, and climbers that could be developed more fully. A chapter on acclimatization and the tropics examines the extension of European forestry policies and national parks to the Global South into the 1970s. It would have been useful to link separate discussions of forestry policy in Indochina and Thailand due to their shared political context, and to discuss Zoñia as a conceptualization of the highlands of Asia that could be envisioned only after the end of empire and the Cold War.

Several chapters on the globalization of mountain issues provide a richly detailed and deeply satisfying account of the emergence, and incomplete realization, of a new epistemic object—the global mountain. Representatives from the Alps (especially Switzerland, Italy, France, and Germany) have reasserted the importance of the Alps as a global model. The continuing prominence of the Alps might suggest the persistence of “imperial” relationships or perhaps the globalization of peculiarly European (or sometimes even specifically Swiss or French) definitions of the mountain.

Debarbieux and Rudaz highlight the role of Italy, Switzerland, and Kyrgyzstan in redefining the global mountain since 1990, but Switzerland clearly led the way by bankrolling multiple international efforts. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) underwrote the founding in the 1980s of a scholarly society and journal (Mountain Research and Development), and of a lobbying group to publicize mountain issues. Swiss diplomats credited Swiss scientists at the Rio Earth Summit, which inserted a paragraph about mountains into Agenda 21. The Swiss government also provided financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan, a post-Soviet republic that received its independence in 1991. They developed a special relationship, including Kyrgyzstan’s membership in the Swiss voting constituency in the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and other institutions.

The International Year of the Mountains (IYM) was proposed by Kyrgyzstan for 2002, and the authors provide a revisionist account of its formation. The IYM is too often viewed as the tale of heroic scientists planting the flag of the mountains at progressively higher levels at international congresses until reaching the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. Although the authors attend closely to these lobbying efforts, their account suggests the IYM was also intended to be a coming out party for Switzerland, which until then had pursued a policy of radical neutrality. The Swiss asked Kyrgyzstan to propose the IYM so that the celebration would coincide with Switzerland’s entry into the United Nations in 2002.

By the end of the twentieth century, mountain peoples were viewed as part of the solution rather than part of the problem, and Debarbieux and Rudaz provide an excellent discussion of the uneven efforts to include the voices of mountain peoples in international organizations. The World Mountain People Association (WMPA) met at a conference in France in 2000 and attempted to generalize to other parts of the world the tactics and forms of political organization used by French representatives of mountain regions. Not surprisingly, this group’s “humanist vision of a mountain internationale” (p. 228) was viewed warily by some governments. The WMPA has been unable to construct the object it was said to represent—mountain peoples—as a coherent entity. Efforts to organize mountain women at a 2002 conference in Bhutan met with a similar fate: “Like ‘mountain populations’ considered as a totality, the category of ‘mountain women of the world’ never managed to lead to collective action, since the people so designated were unable to constitute themselves as a political subject” (p. 231).
The “mountain” played little role in European Union (EU) policy until the 2000s. In the Common Market, mountains were merely one among many areas suffering from agricultural handicaps. Yet as cohesion became the rallying cry for those opposed to neoliberal visions of the EU, territorial cohesion and diversity became a focus of debate. The task of identifying regions that would justify policies of territorial cohesion fell to lobbying groups such as a European organization of representatives from mountain regions based on French and Italian Alpine models. Studies sponsored by the EU and Switzerland coinciding with the IYM defined the mountains of Europe as regions of biodiversity and cultural diversity and provided generous estimates of the mountainous landmass and population within Europe.

Recently, the mountain massif has been transformed into an ecosystem that unifies rather than a boundary that divides. In the nineteenth century, summits demarcated boundaries that kept the peace between states, but in the twenty-first century, peace has been secured through transborder protected areas in mountains straddling Peru–Ecuador or Rwanda–Congo–Uganda. The authors also discuss the Yellowstone to Yukon initiative in the Rockies, the Alpine Convention in Europe, and regional planning for the Sierra Nevada in California. Intriguingly, they conclude that these mountain ranges have created a new political terrain shared by environmentalists and advocates for development and revived a normative naturalism.

The Mountain is a remarkable book, ambitious in scope and original in its argument that the history of mountains is to be found in the political configurations of modernity rather than in the mind or the imagination. The mountain is not only an object in nature to which representations are attached, but a political notion and a category of knowledge that remains under construction.