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Source: Mountain Research and Development, 31(1) : 68-69

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm078

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Mountain Research and Development (MRD)
An international, peer-reviewed open access journal
published by the International Mountain Society (IMS)
www.mrd-journal.org

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Les Faiseurs de montagne

By Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz. Paris, France: CNRS Editions, 2010. 373 pp. € 29.00. ISBN 978-2-271-06985-6.

This is an exceptional book that provides the community of mountain scholars with the basis for an intellectual debate that has been lacking for some time. It is not a textbook about mountains or mountain people, although it discusses many of the contemporary themes and issues found within the mountain literature. It is an intellectual history, concerned with the basic notion of a "mountain" and how ideas about this have influenced the subsequent agenda of research and policy. The title itself perhaps indicates most clearly the nature of this book. It is not easy to translate into English, although I would propose, somewhat clumsily, "The making of the concept of a mountain," which, in true French tradition, evokes a mode of thinking that requires us to recognize that the everyday use of words embraces a specific cultural and political context.

Debarbieux and Rudaz examine the historical origins of the concept of a mountain, showing how it emerged as part of the scientific inquiries of the Age of Enlightenment. As a specific category or object of enquiry, they see the ideas evolving as science in general tries to formulate new ways of looking at the world tied to exploration, measurement, and particularly cartography. The very different contributions of Buache (1752) and von Humboldt (1919) are used to illustrate how mountains and mountain landscapes became part of "knowledge."

However, where this book makes a novel contribution is to provide a parallel analysis of the development of the idea of a *montagnard,* or mountain resident. The analysis at this stage draws heavily on European experience but indicates how, from the 18th to early 20th century, a variety of factors led to mountain people being considered in 2 distinctly different ways. For some, the *montagnard* is backward, sometimes mentally so, and certainly "wild": for others, he or she is the epitome of hardworking, healthy, ingenious, and spiritually pure humanity. Both views, incidentally, are a product of a deterministically viewed link with the characteristics of a mountain environment.

The historical analysis serves as a template for what follows in the book. It traces how the several different conceptions of mountains and mountain people evolved, often contemporaneously. Which concept prevailed at a particular time owed less to its "scientific validity" than to the prevailing cultural and political milieu. This is why Debarbieux and Rudaz describe the process as the "construction" of mountain ideas. They then proceed to examine the key issues that have framed this debate and that have produced a body of literature and political agendas that we describe today as mountain policies.

The authors partition their work on the basis of geographical scale, arguing that the problem of providing concepts that bridge scales is central to much of the mountain debate. Part 1 deals with the historical evolution of ideas and issues at the scale of the state. They use examples—such as the determination of national boundaries, for example, Chile and Argentina, the writing of the history of the Highland Clearances in Scotland, and the reevaluation of mountain landscapes in the United States, leading to the creation of the US National Parks—to highlight the process by which images and myths of mountains become embedded in national consciousness and pillars of political action. These illustrate how, as the mountains assume the imagery of wilderness, particularly in the United States, the people living in these areas are often marginalized and even removed. The history of this process is often submerged in a literature that seeks to glorify the landscape but not necessarily the people!

Beginning in the late 19th century, particularly in Europe and the United States, Debarbieux and Rudaz show how mountain regions have emerged as a defined political territory around which state policy is created. In this respect, they employ the concept of "territorialization," which denotes not just spatial partition but a process in which social and political value is embodied in the region itself. This is most marked in the case of forestry initiatives, tourism, the legal establishment of Geographical Indicators to protect mountain production, and, more recently, the development of grassroots organizations representing mountain people themselves.

Part 2 shifts attention to the global scale, where the authors document the variety of processes by which mountain areas become incorporated not just in the emerging states but as part of a global process that began with imperialism. Examples are drawn from Afghanistan, Vietnam, Bhutan, the Maghreb, and other areas, exploring further the theme of the creation of an imagery of the mountains to fit the prevailing ideology. Over time, state initiatives move from political boundary making to the restructuring of the landscapes to meet changing models of environmental protection and agricultural development.

While mountains have been generally accepted as bioregions, they remain problematic as political territories. In the final chapter of the book, this process is reexamined in the light of attempts to create mountain-defined political units such as the Alpine Convention or the nascent Carpathian Convention. This is a particularly interesting issue that the writers approach from a rather narrow spatial perspective, but that is worthy of much greater attention from the viewpoint of political economy.

However, it is not just the general process of "territorialization" of

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mountain areas themselves that Debarbieux and Rudaz document, but more particularly the way in which an international community of scholars, civil servants and technical experts, and, recently, mountain peoples themselves has developed to highlight the needs of these areas. The authors trace the path of this "institutional globalization" from the corridors of the UN, to the writing of Chapter 13 of Agenda 21 at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, to numerous international conferences involving nongovernmental organizations, to the 21st-century shift in focus to the participation of mountain communities in the debates about their future. The study highlights the role of Switzerland and other states in supporting these initiatives and the emergence of the Mountain Forum, an international on-line framework for discussion and exchange of information, as key elements in a multifronted drive to position mountain issues on the global stage.

In sum, this book provides a fascinating account of the historical processes through which an essentially natural phenomenon, mountains, became identified as both a scientific category as well as a recognizable territory of human activity. This activity itself has generated not just a body of specialized knowledge but also its own political advocates who seek to maintain a distinctive mountain profile from local to international scale. Yet no one can agree on a term with which to label "the study of mountains"! Debarbieux and Rudaz provide a very valuable clue as to why this remains a difficult issue, and they point the way toward the construction of a political economy of mountain regions.

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