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# The Mountain: A Political History From the Enlightenment to the Present

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## The Mountain: A Political History From the Enlightenment to the Present

By Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015. xi + 354 pp. US$ 50.00. ISBN 978-0-226-03111-8.

The impressively erudite *Faiseurs de montagne* by the two geographers Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz, first published in French in 2010, is finally available in English. This was possible thanks to a French Voices grant; others have made accessible to the English-speaking world works as diverse as those by the novelist Patrick Besson and the anthropologist Philippe Descola. *Faiseurs de montagne* has been skillfully translated by Jane Marie Todd, who even succeeded in faithfully rendering the different meanings of the French word "*montagne*," which she hardly ever translates as "mountain," except in the title. In fact, "*montagne*" can mean a single mountain, as well as the mountain as an idea. This is arguably the most important element required to fully understand the perspective of the authors, which is that of an intellectual history of the mountain as an idea. As such, it is the ultimate critique of *The World Is Flat*, the bald plea for globalization published in 2005 by the journalist Thomas Friedman.

After a passionate foreword by Martin Price, the introduction makes the case for studying the mountain as an idea. Even if the authors concede that there is hardly anything that is as physical and material as a mountain, their argument in favor of the need to study the mountain as a category of knowledge and as a social construct is convincing. They propose several examples where the definition of the mountain itself appears as the product of a changing social context. The controversies and disagreements around its definition are pointed out as a manifestation of the social and political embeddedness of the concept, as in the case of the Carpathians. What is less convincing is the analytical tool kit the authors propose. They suggest the concept of representation as the key to understanding the mountain as an idea, and decompose it into 4 plus 2 subconcepts: objectification, problematizing, paradigm, and intervention, plus figure and configuration. While the subconcepts are described in detail, the authors do not really explain how and why they chose these concepts and not others.

The book starts with different theories about the formation of mountains (orogenesis) and how mainly geographers, but also other kinds of natural scientists, have explored and described mountains. Here, and throughout the book, the authors quote many French scholars that may be well known in the French-speaking world but are completely unfamiliar to English-speaking readers. The first part focuses on the intellectual history of the mountain in relation to nation-states. The authors assume this as the dominant type of political structure since at least the Enlightenment. They point out how mountains were used as natural boundaries, for instance, between Argentina and Chile, and how the alleged order of nature was used by nation-states to pursue goals of either pacification or territorial expansion. The "mountaineer" (mountain dweller) emerges as a key element of the identity of many nation-states. This is a clear illustration of the social construction of the mountain. The political role of science is singled out through many examples, ranging from the American West to the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This also explains how mountain climbing went from a kind of geographical exploration to a political statement (oropolitics).

The second part of the book is devoted to the shift away from nation-states that, according to the authors, has occurred from the second half of the twentieth century. Particular attention is given to the processes of decolonization and globalization as driving forces. Here the authors clearly go beyond the usual examples from Europe and North America, building their argument across a large number of cases from all over the world, including Asia and Africa. Through these case studies, they show how decolonization and globalization contributed to the diffusion of various conceptions of the mountain and to the emergence of mountain issues on the global agenda. Chapters 8 and 10 do a terrific job of reconstructing the unfinished business of clearly inscribing mountain issues on the political agenda at the global level and within the European Union (EU), while chapter 9 stands out as one of the rare pieces of mountain scholarship featuring a gender dimension. It is too bad that the authors did not seize the opportunity of this translation to fully update these chapters and include recent developments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the EU Macroregional Strategy for the Alps, and also that many of the interesting figures that added much value to the French version did not make it to the English translation. Let's hope that they will find their place in a second edition.

The last substantive chapter points out that mountains are an issue-area capable of mobilizing what appears to be an increasing number of actors at various levels. This is particularly true in bioregions such as the Cordillera del Condor, the Virunga Mountains, the European Alps, and the Sierra Nevada of California. The authors argue, therefore, that mountains are an emerging framework for action mainly at the bioregional level, where they foster "orocentric identities."


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While the authors are very careful not to make simplistic arguments, such as claiming that imposing political structures corresponding to mountain ranges would result in more virtuous practices, the reader is left with many open questions about the political dimension of the processes described in the book. How do mountain identities manifest themselves politically within existing power structures? What are the main features of the institutional arrangements that are emerging at different levels to organize the governance of these processes? Last but not least, what policies are being proposed to address specific mountain issues?

To conclude, the argument of the authors in favor of the need to study the mountain as a category of knowledge and as a social construct is convincing. However, this does not exempt us from considering also the physical dimension of mountains, which exists irrespective of our knowledge. While it is important to take a step back and consider how mountains are conceived, it is also fundamental to recall that there is still so much of the physical world that remains unknown to us and that we may even misconceive. This leads to many environmental disasters. We urgently need to promote research that combines both the physical and conceptual dimensions of mountains. Now that we have this history of what the late Elinor Ostrom would have called knowledge of the mountain as a type of socio-ecological system, a history of the interplay between the various subsystems, including the conceptual dimension, of different mountain ranges needs to be written as well. For anyone endeavoring in this direction, *The Mountain* certainly represents a milestone in the study of the mountain as an idea: a soon-to-be classic of mountain studies.

## REFERENCE

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