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Linking Up the Alps: How Networks of Local Political Actors Build the Pan-Alpine Region

By Cristina Del Biaggio. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2016. 370 pp. €52.50. ISBN 978-3-0343-1630-9.

This is an interesting Swiss contribution to the debate on the making of regional identity. Based on a 2013 Geneva University geography PhD dissertation, its central concern is how people have responded, following the 1991 Alpine Convention, to the challenges facing the mountains. Essentially this was by local political actors creating networks. Yet, despite the positive subtitle, Del Biaggio's conclusion is that the Alps are only partially a region. Following a brief introduction, this is explored in 4 sections. Two chapters set out the theoretical and methodological approach. These are followed by descriptions of the key international accords and the 3 networks chosen for study. The next chapters are given over to analyzing, on the basis of the author's field research, the dynamics and working of the networks. The final chapters examine the significance and effectiveness of the networks.

Drawing on recent thinking in regional geography, Del Biaggio stresses, first, the increasing importance of regions, especially in an age of fluid borders that makes nation-states unhelpful as units of analysis. Here, her assessment would have been strengthened by considering the idea of a "Europe of the Regions" and the work of the European Union's (EU) Committee of the Regions. Second, her theoretical analysis suggests that regions are not "natural" bodies, whether ecological or biological, but "social constructs." This leads her to privilege the idea of "regional assemblages" over ideas of multilevel governance, although she does not explore the latter in detail. For her, region building emerges from a new form of governance based on networks. However, she does not consider political science ideas of network societies and policy communities. Her chosen concepts are explored in an interpretative and qualitative way, using a single case embedded research design. Investigation was carried out using questionnaires, interviews, and personal observations. The latter often involved participation in the events under scrutiny, so there is often a markedly personal tone to the work.

Del Biaggio's empirical research takes her into the demonstration of how, from the early 1950s, there was nongovernmental pressure from the Commission Internationale pour la Protection des Alpes (CIPRA) for action to be taken to redress the way the fabric of the Alps, human and natural, was coming under threat. Eventually this led to the signing of the Alpine Convention. Operative from 1995 and aiming at using the polluter pays principle, it has been complemented by a series of protocols—signed by all states save Switzerland—and, in 2002, by a secretariat. In addition, from 2000, the EU, with its institutions and regional funds, helped to define a wider Alpine space.

All this stimulated the creation of a series of networks of local actors, whose working has not so far been explored. Two of these were associated with CIPRA: Alliance in the Alps (a grouping of mountain municipalities) and the Alpine Network of Protected Areas (ALPARC). Another network, not involved in CIPRA, the Alpine Pearls grouping of sustainable tourist centers, was added by a fellow researcher. We are not told what percentage of the total number of networks this is.

Together, the 3 networks helped to create a new space for action, hence moving toward a new Alpine identity. For Del Biaggio, this derives from, on one hand, agreed ways of looking at the Alps, which she calls "objectification," seeing them as a unified region based on geomorphology and homogenous sociocultural characteristics, thus going beyond mere beauty and nostalgia. On the other hand, people inside the networks increasingly see themselves as "Alpine," even in unglamorous towns that are away from the high mountains but are affected by flooding and tourism. Because the mountains constituted the common reference for local actors, they identified themselves as belonging to the Alps. This "identification" was the key to setting up a territory that is held together by sustainable development. These 2 processes were the engine for the actors, pushing them to create institutions that demonstrate their shared belief in the Alps and seek to resolve problems of Alpine degradation not soluble in a national context.

All of this is then examined by analysis of the ways in which the networks actually work. This includes drawing on the Internet, responding to new social challenges and accessing EU funds. Exchanging information, developing ecological awareness, and analyzing gastronomic events all play their part, too. Social media seem not to have been significant. Yet there are problems: language difficulties, off-putting fees for network membership, and unhelpful state intervention. Hence only 5% of municipalities participate in Alliance in the Alps. And this depends on leading personalities, grassroots involvement being fairly limited. Moreover, the networks do not enjoy real power. Accordingly, the Alpine region is still a matter of potential rather than a finished and independent institutional structure. The shared vision and the need to guarantee a sustainable future have only taken things so far.

It is difficult to dissent from such realistic assessments. However, they do somewhat call into question some

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initial claims. National frontiers have not really eroded, as events in 2016 have made all too clear. Moreover, the EU has clearly been more significant than Del Biaggio sometimes suggests—in fact, it clearly provided positive essential contexts and supports. One might also query the lack of definition of networks. Calling them structures "capable of creating links where none existed before" is a little vague.

Equally, the book fails to explain why Switzerland is the only signatory state not to have ratified the implementation protocols to the Alpine Convention. The possibility of ratifying a few was left open for years, but in 2010 parliament—supported in 2012 by government—decided not to do so. The reasons seem to be that Swiss conservatives felt the convention prioritized the ecological over the economic; and, as they believed their policies to be more sustainable than most, the protocols seemed redundant. The creation of the new base tunnel and the possibility of a second Gotthard road tunnel are ahead of the convention's thinking on transport infrastructures. However, to some, all this tends to reduce the Alps to more of a transit area.

Overall, it might have been better if Del Biaggio had not stuck so closely to her thesis and had widened the context of the study. For example, she did not consider economic trends or the political climate of the times, though these must have conditioned the development of the networks. Looking more widely and more recently would have added to the book's value.

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