Mountain Geography: Physical and Human Dimensions

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Mountain Geography: Physical and Human Dimensions

Edited by Martin F. Price, Alton C. Byers, Donald A. Friend, Thomas Kohler, and Larry W. Price. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013. xvii + 378 pp. US$ 95.00. ISBN 978-0-520-25431-2.

In my capacity as a professor of a popular mountain geography course, I was asked to comment on one of the most awaited contributions to the profession, the unifying textbook of montology, one that would help coalesce disparate themes related to mountain research, elegantly collected under the banner *Physical and Human Dimensions*, to propel a new generation of geographers into the realm of transdisciplinary science. I must confess that my inclination towards finding the perfect textbook for my class prompted a quick reaction in favor of this much-awaited effort, which has been produced over the past decade to respond to the needs of many mountain geographers. The idea of reviving the seminal 1981 textbook by Larry Price, *Mountains and Man*, was very appealing as part of the global effort related to the 2002 International Year of Mountains celebrations. Since then, the editors have collaborated very well in producing a revised edition, with a politically corrected title, the inclusion of 2 new chapters, updated information in the old chapters, and an impressive full-color cover.

I shall mention the stamina exhibited by Martin F. Price, as lead editor, to not let this initiative lose its momentum in the course of the project and to find closure with publication in 2013. One of my students suggested using the "mountain" metaphor to exemplify such an intellectual ascent! I note that Jack D. Ives's foreword to this revision echoes his own foreword to the 1981 book, pinpointing how inclusive current understanding has evolved away from disciplinary thinking alone towards a more integrative approach to the study of mountains. Not only is the gender bias eliminated in the title, but also the social dimension is introduced—albeit in only 2 new chapters. In his preface, Alton Byers notes that his copy of the 1981 book has underlined sentences, many dog-eared pages, a plethora of marginalia, and a well-worn-out spine with faded words. Similarly, I posit that students' copies of *Mountain Geography* will become full of question marks and exclamation points, as discussed below.

This is an elegant and comprehensive book about the many facets affecting our understanding of mountain systems. With 19 contributors from the most well-known educational institutions in the Western world, readers would expect to find the state of the knowledge on mountain theory and practice. They may recognize that 8 of the chapter authors are emeritus professors, and 1 passed away in 2010. Some readers might also point out the use of line drawings and black-and-white photography, maybe to retain the atmosphere of the original book version; however, a textbook of 2013 should provide a more didactic approach that reflects the 3 decades since 1981, with examples in text boxes, infographics, links to websites, a databank of questions for students in each chapter, full-color graphs or maps, and satellite images to illustrate complex trends, such as global environmental change. I certainly missed the opportunity of using a publisher-provided handbook for instructors or the pedagogical tool of PowerPoint presentations to support the teaching of individual chapters of the book.

The book is not divided into sections—most textbooks now tend to offer foundational, methodological, and case study parts—but, following a synthesis in the introductory chapter, flows to discuss mostly physical geography topics, such as orogeny and typology (2), mountain weather and climate (3), fluvial processes of snow and ice (4), geomorphic processes and landforms (5), soils (6), vegetation (7), and wildlife (8). These chapters are followed by human geography topics, such as attitudes in Western and Eastern traditions (9), populations and livelihoods (10), agriculture and land use (11), and a final chapter on sustainable mountain development (12). It is as if this textbook were designed for students who will need a dogmatic presentation of facts. Other university textbooks have appeal in the form of title alliteration for chapters, exemplary segments to refer to critical thinking, a clear timeline of events or major discoveries, even postscripts for each chapter inviting students to challenging activities, outdoor experimentation, or further reading—but not this one. One advantage of the book's nonsectional assembly is that professors can use chapters they require without following a suggested sequence, as I am doing to insert flexibility in my course, with the inclusion of other relevant material.

The book has a number of distinguished authors, but it is clear that other famous names have not been integrated as contributors; renowned scholars who could have offered insights to strengthen the text, particularly in the realm of social sciences, are sorely missed. Challenging ways of thinking about mountains, such as geospatial assessment, landscape archaeology, critical biogeography, the political ecology of mountaineers, biocultural heritage, or even landscape design are missing. A cursory review of the main terminology has left out these and other descriptors that are creating new narratives to understand the complexity of socioecological systems and the rich traditional ecological knowledge of mountains. The *Satoyama* initiative, for instance, and the *Satoumi* program to link the mountains to the sea are not mentioned.

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Examples are needed of large-scale preservation attempts connecting mountain protected areas to create binational corridors, and of transboundary initiatives for development. Zomia, exemplifying the plight of anarchist communities in the mountains of Southeast Asia, is not discussed, nor is the anthropogenic forcing of montane tropical cloud forests of Madagascar or the Andes to create the large anthromes of the highlands. In modern textbooks, many readers also favor involvement of junior faculty or students as authors, but above all, a representation of different angles provided by scholars from the global South. Despite many references to examples from the Himalaya and the Andes, for instance, the absence of authors affiliated to those regions and the positivistic narrative perpetuate hegemonic views and understandings about mountains from the binaries of the neocolonial global North and scientific knowledge. I would have liked to find more tables with data on alternative epistemographies of mountains, now that no references to principles or laws are included in the syllabi of the new geography, one where the silos of techniques and the physical and human domains have been meshed in favor of hybrid, integrative, and transdisciplinary approaches.

A comprehensive list of references follows each chapter, the longest filling 8 pages; nevertheless, in some chapters (such as the chapters on climate, vegetation, wildlife, people, and agriculture) most references are not recent, with a majority from before 2000. Students now prefer the use of DOIs, enabling them to readily find Internet sources; but none of these entries, some of which are contained in multiple chapters, include a link or a URL.

Yet I could not find a better textbook available in today's highly competitive publishing market. Despite having reviewed a couple of editorial proposals for other mountain-related textbooks, those missing pieces that made the question marks and exclamation points of my own copy are still absent in the competitors' proposals. Therefore, it is satisfactory that by reviving an old textbook, the University of California Press decided to embark on this important expedition towards the summit. There remains a strong sense of optimism that this current edition could be revisited and updated, and many from the global mountain community could integrate their efforts towards a montology textbook for the future. For now, this is the best we have.

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