

A Rugged Nation: Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy

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A Rugged Nation: Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy

By Marco Armiero. Isle of Harris,
United Kingdom: The White Horse
Press, 2011. xv + 228 pp. US\$
77.00, € 62.00. ISBN 9781-
874267-645.

This is a book about mountains and Italianess. This association may sound strange to foreign ears for, as Armiero says in the introduction, mountains “seem to lack the typical ingredients of Italianess” (p 1) for people who are not so familiar with Italian history and culture. Yet, in less than 200 pages, Armiero proves the centrality of the European Alps and the Apennines in the narratives of the nation and its territory from the very beginning of the process of unification, and also in the conception and implementation of major public policies related to forestry, energy, tourism, and other issues.

To reach his goal, Armiero does not rely exclusively on the well-known and very fruitful literature that focuses on the making of national landscapes. He could have done this, providing one more analysis for a State, a nation, and a territory that has been less studied than others in Europe and America. This book is not yet another case study within this academic framework. After recent examples dedicated to German landscapes and nature, Armiero provides an analysis that is halfway between, or at the confluence of, 2 academic schools: one that focuses on the making of national landscapes; the other stresses environmental history, which is eager to draw the objective story of a specific environment. Armiero focuses on the “mutual constituency of imagined communities and constructed natures,” the latter being “not just imagined nature,” because he aims to stress the “hybridity of that process; nature is socially

constructed in the sense that it has been made by generations of people working, living and narrating it but the social, blending with nature, bonds itself to environmental materiality” (p 5). This is how he combines, in a very fruitful way, an approach in terms of environmental history and the analysis of the symbolic aspects of the building of the Italian nation, materiality, and narratives: “Italian mountains have been shaped by words and bombs, by the narratives of modernization and the tonnes of concrete which brought that modernization to life through dams, roads and railways” (p 5).

His demonstration is organized in 4 steps. The first chapter, “Wild Mountains,” tells the story of the domestication of the wilderness in Italy. It starts in the early modern era, long before Italy was a unified country, when mountains were full of dragons and witches, and demonstrates how these fears and fantasies were still lively among local societies when the Industrial Revolution began. This section is less developed than the many excellent and highly detailed articles on the topic. It works as a simple starting point, mainly to make the reader conscious of the very rapid transformation of the images associated with mountains in this part of Europe at the end of the 19th century. This first chapter also describes the long hunt against wolves and, more important, what is regarded as the environmental degradation of Italian mountains due to mismanagement. Due to this emerging national vision of wilderness in the Alps and the Apennines, these mountains started to be seen as a whole, deserving of public interest and policies. Thus, scientists, climbers, tourism promoters, politicians, and administrations worked together to encourage reforestation, hydro-power plants, and sometimes integrated development plans at regional (such as for Basilicata or Calabria) or local levels.

The second chapter focuses on Italy’s mountain people. Armiero’s

main argument is to draw a symmetry between the will to domesticate the mountain wilderness and the will to domesticate the people living there: “Taming the mountains meant taming their inhabitants” (p 53). He recalls the recurrence of popular memories related to local rebels far into the 19th and 20th centuries, and describes the numerous peasant wars and guerilla warfare in the mountains of Sicily and Southern Apennines at the very beginning of the unification process. These dramatic events, which led an army of 120,000 soldiers to enter these highlands to repress popular movements, are said to have been the main initiatives to “nationalize mountains of the South” and eradicate mountain rebels throughout Italy.

The third chapter recalls an already well-studied topic: the transformation of the Alps into the “great natural sanctuary of Italian heroism” (p 88) during and just after the First World War. Compared with previous works, the originality of Armiero’s analysis is to combine the transformation of the materiality of the Italian Alps and the emerging symbolic status that they get from the battlefields. As he clearly demonstrates, “the war changed the Alpine landscape both with words and bombs, creating a hybrid environment in which the nationalization of nature was particularly strong” (p 87).

The fourth chapter is probably the most interesting. It focuses on the Fascist period and provides a great volume of information and quotations that shed light on the ideology and practices of the Italian regime of the 1920s and 1930s. Particularly enlightening is Armiero’s ability to underline the contradictions of Fascist rhetoric and policies. On one hand, mountain people were said to be a physical and moral model for all Italians, thanks to the natural setting of their daily life, the simplicity of rural life, and the heroism of the soldiers of the 1910s. But, on the

other hand, they were often seen as backward, reluctant toward reforestation and the building of hydro-power plants; and the national authorities regularly sent officials, sometimes militarized, such as the Forestry Corps, to the mountains to keep these people under control and give way to modernization. As Armiero puts it: "In public discourses the mountaineer was the hero of ruralism but in the forests and on the slopes he became the villain to control and punish" (p 129). Another paradox of the Fascist regime was to combine authoritarian discourses that led to radical reforestation and the will to keep people in the mountains and prevent their out-migration. In other words, during the Fascist regime, the mountains became a major category for the conception of the Italian people and territory and the implementation of national policies; but these concep-

tions and policies were not articulated according to a single vision, due to the variety and complexity of the issues at stake.

The epilogue of the book is quite surprising and somehow disappointing. Armiero focuses on another political context, that of the Resistance, which established major military strongholds in the northern mountains for a few months at the end of the Second World War, and on a specific case study, the Vajont dam disaster of 1963, when a huge landslide caused a devastating flood in the Venetian Alps, killing more than 2000 people. Although those late developments are both interesting and well addressed, it is surprising to find them in an epilogue, when the author could have provided an entire chapter on the postwar period and the years of exceptional economic growth and modernization, and a

final reflection on his project and the results of his analysis.

Despite this surprising so-called epilogue, this book provides an excellent point of view for those who are willing to escape the strict duality of natural-social approach of mountain environments. It also provides a very good synthetic presentation of the role and place of mountains in Italian politics from 1860 to 1940, with precise and complementary sources, and analysis in numerous footnotes and a huge bibliography.

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