

Making Meaning Out of Mountains

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Making Meaning Out of Mountains

By Mark C. J. Stoddart. Vancouver, Canada: UBC Press, 2012. xi + 223 pp. US\$ 35.95. ISBN 978-0-7748-2197-1.

In all honesty, I must begin this review by admitting to a certain bemusement at reviewing a book whose themes I have been thinking about, and occasionally working on, for about a decade. In my files are partly completed papers touching on many of the themes Stoddart so adroitly deploys in this volume, especially the complex and highly intermediated ways in which what I call “mountain practitioners” create new mountain spaces (as a sort of “second nature”) out of the raw materials that preexist human intervention (that is, “first nature”). Technology obviously has a critical role to play here, not just in terms of what it can enable (eg better ice axes and crampons enabling more extreme winter mountaineering) but also in terms of the class dynamics implicit in its consumption (a pair of ice axes can easily cost US\$ 800, a good pair of new skis considerably more). While these dynamics are an important part of Stoddart’s analysis, they are not its object, which he himself describes as understanding “how the slippery concept of sustainability is used by the ski industry, skiers, the mass media and social movement groups” (p 22). Here indeed is a tantalizing paradox: while most skiers (and indeed all mountain practitioners) express some degree of love of nature, the very act of skiing requires its subjection and—some would say—wholesale destruction to accommodate the practices upon which this putative love of nature depends. It is the key achievement of this book that it uses the skills of the sociologist to bring into sharp focus practices that are, for the majority of the population who are not themselves

mountain practitioners, part of the barely acknowledged backdrop of daily life.

The analytical “engine room” for Stoddart’s exploration is the presentation of skiing as a practice that involves a relationship with nature that is so highly mediated by technologies of access that it should really be seen as a sort of “cyborg” practice. The personal equipment of contemporary resort skiing—skis, bindings, boots, poles, helmets, clothing—is really just the start of it. The places in which resort skiing takes place must actually be created out of a rather inconvenient “first nature.” First, one needs broad cleared spaces (roads for skiing, called “pistes”) carved by heavy machinery down mountain-sides—which is why, in western North America especially, ski resort development often follows industrial logging or mining activities. One also needs skier access to the carefully created and maintained pistes, which implies not just roads for vehicle traffic, but gondolas, ski lifts, as well as much of the less obvious transport infrastructure (buses, air transport, etc). One must add to this the hotel, restaurant, and nightclub infrastructures necessary for stays of multiple days and the inevitable “après-ski” activities. By the time all is said and done, the modern skier is a long way indeed from the original Norwegian mountain skier ethic, *friluftsliv* (which implies a sort of open-air existence in which the individual escapes urban artificiality), that inspired skiing as a mode of love of nature in the first place! Indeed, one could reasonably argue that modern resort skiing is the complete antithesis of that original ideal.

Stoddart’s analysis explores this terrain not so much through social histories of ski equipment and infrastructure (an interesting task that remains to be seriously undertaken), but more through ethnographic interviews with a broad cross section of ski practitioners. What interests him is not just what a third party analyst might perceive in the practice of

skiing, but what practitioners themselves see. He is, in other words, the sort of sociologist who seeks to uncover the perceived “lifeworlds” of his subjects in their own words rather than with reference to more abstract structural analysis. It is here that a problem with Stoddart’s analysis presents itself: it appears that the sample of sites observed and, especially, skiers interviewed represents only a very partial subgroup of the skier community. For example, discussing how skiers think about “gear,” Stoddart presents interviews with skiers who seem to want to portray themselves as outside the mainstream. They emphasize that while gear is important, their personal values of thrift and environmental responsibility mean that they make do with second-hand and older gear, even though they acknowledge that newer gear could provide a more exciting experience. While I recognize this tribe of “dirtbag” skiers (and have been part of it for many years often making my own gear), the vast majority of resort skiers see things rather differently. First, increasing numbers of skiers rent gear (skis, bindings, boots, poles, and helmets) rather than bringing their own. Indeed, very many skiers bring only their own clothing to the resort, never owning skis, boots, and poles. This changes considerably the dynamic of the relationship between gear, practitioner, and environment. After all, if the practitioner barely understands how the gear is constructed and works, this makes for a far more “psychocentric” skiing experience (to use the term favored by tourism theorists). It also helps explain why ski resorts around the world have both encouraged the “armoring up” of skiers (through body armor and helmets) and tightened surveillance on ski slopes to combat illicit or deviant skier behaviors (such as skiing too fast, too close to others, off-piste, etc). Indeed, some European countries now maintain special “ski police” units who work alongside the private ski

patrollers paid for by the resorts themselves. Many skiers have no interest in, or relationship to, the natural environment beyond the physical rush of skiing fast and posting snowy mountain panoramas on social media.

Does this apparent gap in the set of interviewees matter? I would argue that the answer is both yes and no. On one hand, I do not think that it would fundamentally change the contours of Stoddart's analysis of the environmentalist credentials of skiers and the ski industry within which they operate. After all, even the more environmentally orientated skiers that Stoddart interviews are clearly shown to be participating in an activity that undermines any putative biocentrism in personal outlook. For example, when asked, one skier immediately contrasts snowmobiling as a "bad" mountain practice as opposed to lift skiing which is presumably less bad. This is obviously an interesting sort of self-delusion, driven perhaps by a need to reconcile the cognitive dissonance inherent in pursuing an activity contrary to one's own stated beliefs and self-identification. Had Stoddart included in his interview sample a significant num-

ber of package holiday skiers—who are easy to find at Whistler/Blackcomb, where half the research was undertaken—he would have seen that this rapidly growing skier community operates from purely psychocentric motives, with no pretense that the natural environment is anything other than a stage for their pleasure and a scenic backdrop for their photographs.

I would also suggest that more needs to be made of the environmental posturing of ski resorts themselves. For example, the technological revolution in snowmaking machinery (used to ensure reliable snow conditions across a longer season) is deeply problematic environmentally, using vast quantities of water and energy. Regulation of these activities varies quite widely, reflecting different state attitudes to land and water resource management. Also, the structure of tenure over ski areas varies widely from country to country (in the Alps and Pyrenees, for example, resorts typically rent ski areas from summer pastoralists), and this matters in terms of enabling different sorts of management and development options. On this Stoddart has some interesting material to

present, but could have usefully included more, especially of a comparative nature.

Notwithstanding the above quibbles, this is an interesting and engaging book and the conclusion, when it comes, is well-made and apposite: "it is important ... to own up to the ecological ironies inherent in skiing" (p 177). More than this, Stoddart urges all participants in the complex and fascinating dramaturgy of skiing to engage more directly with the social and environmental impacts of this rapidly growing sport. It is doubtful that resort skiing can ever be made as environmentally benign as, say, yoga, but that does not mean that the growing numbers of enthusiasts and the very profitable industry that serves them ought not try to improve their environmental game. This book is a useful wake-up call.

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