How can one be a “montagnard”? Social and political expressions of modern imaginaries of territoriality

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Abstract

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How can one be a “montagnard”? Social and political expressions of modern imaginaries of territoriality

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This paper is a near-complete translation of a paper published in 2008 in a special issue of Annales de Géographie dedicated to emerging issues in cultural geography\(^1\). Short sections, referring to broad issues in cultural geography, have been deleted, a distinct conclusion has been written, and some references of the last 10 years added. For quoting, please refer to the published version.

Abstract: Historically, academic notions of culture and identity have changed, with naturalistic and ecological perspectives yielding progressively to perspectives in the 20\(^{th}\) century emphasizing intersubjectivity and political and social processes in the construction of collectives identities. But this renewal of academic paradigms should not blind us to the fact that corresponding conceptions have been simultaneously active within modern societies as imaginary figures, shaping social groupings and social interactions. This paper analyzes the historical emergence of a set of conceptions about people living in mountains and the invention of a corresponding human type - the montagnard in French-speaking literature, and its various equivalents in English ("mountaineer", "mountain man" or "mountain people") and other European languages (such as Bergbauer in German) - which has been invoked in various social and political contexts, with particular understandings of collective territorialities. Though referring to phenomena over the past three centuries, the article focuses mainly on contemporary political issues related to mountain identities.


Three authors in search of characters

In 1749, Buffon dedicated a volume of his *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière* to the human species. Some historians of the human sciences see it as a foundational text of anthropology, and even an important contribution to geographical thought. As with many of his contemporaries, Buffon postulated the fundamental unity of the human species; humanity’s anatomic and cultural variations, understood through the prism of “race” as was the custom then, were explained through variation in “climates”.

In a volume of the *Suppléments* appearing in 1778, he reproduces a long extract of a text by a certain Commerson on the “half-men” who live in the high mountains of the interior of the island of Madagascar, and who form a sizable “national body” called the Quimos or Kimos. The author said they were white-skinned and of small build. Buffon discussed the account, being surprised that so close to the equator, and therefore in a hot climate, one would find such small people. But by bringing together observations made on plants and “men for whom climate had yielded similar races” in the Andes, in Ethiopia, and in Lapland, he concluded that wherever a temperature gradient permitted comparisons of individuals of the same species, those that lived in relatively colder climates present forms of dwarfism. To explain the white skin of the Quimos, Buffon offered that the descendants of the first representatives of the species, according to him white themselves and originating in the mountains of Central Asia, conserved their original color when they remained in relatively temperate climates. Inversely, those who

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6 Buffon, 1778, *Supplément*, op. cit., p 463
established themselves in hot climates saw their epidermis darken from the sun’s rays. Furthermore, the “mores” of populations he described would be diversified in virtue of the same principal of acclimation to different environments, as well as in function of the kinds of food that each allowed.

In a text published in 1936 on the occasion of the 9th Congress of the Institut de Hautes Etudes Marocaines [Institute of Advanced Moroccan Studies], Jean Célérier proposed a way, unusual for his time, of understanding population issues in the mountains⁷. Of course he expressed some of the concerns of geography of his day, notably the joining of natural and social phenomena and the effects of the natural environment on the temperament of local populations. But he also developed a political analysis of the role of representations of Moroccan territory on the way Moroccan society was conceived and categorized. He considered, notably, that the hypothesis of a retreat of the Berber populations to the mountains following successive invasions—a hypothesis widely adopted since the French occupation—was unwarranted. According to Célérier, the Berbers of the Atlas merely constituted the non-Arabized part of this people once distributed over the entire territory, which later works largely confirmed. He also thought that the Atlas as an entity made no sense for the majority of its inhabitants, who were more concerned with delimiting the nearby areas they frequented. He concluded that the identification of a mountain range designated by a single term, the Atlas, arose from a naturalist reading progressively adopted by the colonial powers for pointing at the natural environment of the Berbers so as to better organize its management of Moroccan society and control its territory.

In 1998, Elizabeth A Byers, the head of The Mountain Institute, an organization aiming to bring attention to the distinctiveness of mountain regions around the world, published an article in the magazine of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) presenting the Mountain Forum⁸. She introduced her article as follows: “Mountain peoples and mountain organizations have many common

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characteristics including isolation from one another and from much of the rest of society”9. She explains that this Forum, created in 1996, “is a network of networks”10, in that it brings together, essentially through an electronic platform, networks of regional actors organized at the level of continents, for example Europe, and the principal mountain ranges, such as the Andes. The Forum is said to have three objectives: “to provide a forum for the exchange of ideas, to be an advocate for mountain peoples and environments, and to foster mutual support among mountain people”11. On the digital platform of the Forum, there are databases, forums and digital talks, an online library, case studies and recommendations regarding policies and initiatives. Furthermore, at the regional level the Forum organizes workshops and information exchanges. The article by E. Byers in essence is factual; it doesn’t take any analytical position. It simply offers a description of an initiative that continues to this day with a certain success.

**Problematizing the relations between culture, identity and space**

The three texts referenced above share an interest in presumed mountain-populations; each points to the ethno- and social type which this article focuses on. However, each text differs radically in terms of its underlying paradigm. Specifically, they differ in how they postulate or understand the singularity of their objects and their subjects, and how they problematize the relations between space, culture and identity—in short, the way they problematize the territoriality12 of each group they invoke.

For Buffon, relying on the account of a famous explorer of his time, Nicolas Commerson, the uniqueness of the Quimos rested on a discrete notion of space, a bio-physical of territoriality and a naturalistic concept of culture and identity: the surface of the earth is composed of separate entities for which everything within is causally related; the territoriality of this human group results from its adaptation to bio-physical

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10 E. A. Byers, 1998, op. cit., p 13
12 By this term, we designate the human imperative to come to terms with our terrestrial condition, and the material and symbolic arrangements that derive from this. Our analysis relies on the differentiation of three registers of territoriality, i.e. three ways of imagining the relation between space, culture and identity.
phenomena; the culture of this group, understood as the totality of artifacts, empirical traits and “customs” which define it, is the product of the natural entity within which it is constituted, the “high mountains” of Madagascar; the identity of this group and the zone over which it extends is understood as the objective result, unique and lasting, of these processes.

For Célérier, the Berbers of Morocco aren’t so determined by their immediate surroundings than by the designation by the colonial state of a natural entity, the Atlas mountains, to which alone an ensemble of tribes were associated. At first glance, the spatial reasoning here is not different from that which was just identified in the first paradigm, except that it is guided by political and strategic questions. Under these conditions, we propose recognizing here an institutional register of territoriality. By this we mean the register by which social institutions—such as states—through a play of symbols and rules, name social and geographic entities, and regulate practices of the environment of corresponding groups. Therefore, this institutional register of territoriality contributes to the making of social identities, i.e. the process by which groups are identified as such from the outside, owing to a series of identifiers, some of which are cultural (language, religious practices, customs, etc.), which allow the group to be situated within a representation of the society as a whole. According to Célérier, the construction of Berber social identity occurred through the identification of a geographic entity to which it is linked, the Atlas, in the political context of colonial segmentation of Morocco.

For Byers, the Mountain Forum connects social actors mobilized around a global project arising from a shared engagement of individuals living in mountain regions and those who present themselves as their advocates. Mountain societies, even though distant from one another, are deemed sufficiently related to justify such exchanges. The kinds of identity that predominates here are what we most often call personal and collective identity. The second designates the feeling and shared wish of multiple individuals to belong to the same group and to act in consequence of this; such a group can result from the internalization of a social entity, exogenously defined, or result from a new and endogenous configuration. Personal identity here refers less to the psychologizing sense (self awareness) but rather to Hannah Arendt’s and Charles Taylor’s conceptualizations
in political philosophy: “My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.”¹³ The Mountain Forum as described by Byers results from the gradual creation a collective identity involving individuals situated far apart yet in relationship with one another, sharing representations, knowledge and experiences—and thereby a certain form of culture—related to a specific kind of environment. In this case, we suggest speaking of a inter-subjective or self-referential register of territoriality, a register by which each individual inscribes herself or himself simultaneously in an affinity group and a system of corresponding spatial practices.

In the chronological sequence of these three texts it would be tempting to recognize signs of renewal in the notion of culture: from culture as a fact of nature to culture as an institutional phenomenon, to culture as an inter-subjective construction. This renewal would proceed from the invalidation of earlier problematics, be it because evidence showed them to be misguided—The Quimos as Buffon describes them never existed—or because they ignored factors and processes that later came to be seen as decisive, for example the role of collective action and self-representation in contemporary societies. Similarly, we might be tempted to apply this modest sampling of texts to an evolutionist analysis of modernity: modernity would have led local communities to emancipate themselves from bio-physical forms of territoriality by favoring the elaboration of institutional forms of territoriality, sophisticated yet normative, before yielding, in these times of weakening institutional control, to forms of territoriality based on affinity.

The present article adopts a different position regarding the diversity of problematics evident in the three narratives. Rather than consider that one perspective on the relations between identity (social, collective, and personal), culture and territoriality supplants the preceding one, it proposes considering these narratives as illustrations of

different imaginaries of territoriality which can coexist and be combined within logics of action tending to singularize corresponding social and geographic entities.

In order to defend this thesis, we will further look at how scholars and social actors refer to so-called “montagnards” in the French-speaking world, “mountain peoples” and “mountaineers” in the English-speaking world\textsuperscript{14}, studying contemporary forms of practices, actions, and identifications related to “mountains”, since they have been conceived as a class of natural objects, i.e. since the time of Buffon.

**The construction of a social category with a modern conception of mountains**

Numerous historians have shown, in a more nuanced and detailed way than at the beginning of this article, that the categories “mountain peoples” and “mountaineers” has for long owed little to those that they designate, but much to the naturalist and philosophical discourses of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{15}. In fact, in the image of Buffon, many authors of the enlightenment and the following century endeavored to create a conception of the world that joined a representation of the diversity of natural forms—mountains becoming then an essential category—to a representation of the diversity of peoples and nations. In the 18\textsuperscript{th} century one thus finds an increase in statements aiming to define the scope of the categories “mountain” or “mountain region” on the one hand, and “mountain people” or “mountaineer” on the other, and to apprehend their relations in a causal way. The category “mountain” was defined according to criteria of size, slope, altitude, or the succession of climates and vegetation, and thought at times to be the earliest, at times the later, trace of the history of the earth\textsuperscript{16}. The “mountaineer” tends then to become a human

\textsuperscript{14} In French, “montagnards” has been the main word used for designating individuals living in mountain regions for centuries, both among scientists and in ordinary language. The same word has been common for pointing at mountain climbers since the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century. It is only from the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century that it has become common to talk about “populations de montagne”. In English, “mountaineer” was equivalent to “montagnards” until the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century; then, the word became reserved for climbers and sportsmen, individuals living in so-called “mountain regions” being mostly named “mountain populations” or “mountain people”. Some regional appellations have been adopted such as hillbilly in the Appalachian mountains and highlander in Scotland, both loaded with many connotations which will be commented later in this paper.


\textsuperscript{16} N. Broc, 1991, op. cit.
type whose attributes—physical, psychic, moral, etc.—derive from a kind of environment said to be “mountainous”. Yet, for a long time, the people designated by this term did not recognize themselves in it, largely preferring local and regional names.

Nonetheless, this identity became naturalized and widely diffused in modern societies by way of popular and touristic literature, and works directed to broad publics, particularly school children (figure 1). For this reason, the “montagnard” became one among other social types—“workers”, “bourgeoisie”, “peasants”, etc.—that European societies were adopting to think about their internal diversity and to construct their popular mythologies.

Figure 1: Camille Guy and Marcel Dubois, 1896, *Album géographique*, Paris, A. Colin
But this tendency, because it was tied to moral and political values, also gained a normative and prescriptive function, already evident in Célérier’s work. The uniqueness of the groups and peoples described in these ways was then subordinated to social roles and political projects by which national societies understood themselves as such. But the terms of this normative and descriptive function varied in relation to political context. Applied to mountain populations where national mythology extolled its virtues, for example in Switzerland\textsuperscript{17}, Scotland\textsuperscript{18}, and from 1918 in Austria, the category “montagnards” (or its equivalent in other languages such as Bergbauern or Highlanders) has often designated a model to follow and favored public interventions promoting such cultural traits and ways of life. Applied to populations whose traits are deemed outside the mainstream social model or whose behaviors are seen as maladapted to a modernity promoted in the west, the term feeds a social critique and a questioning of the way of life of such mountain dwellers. It was this representation that motivated forestry policies in several countries at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{19} and the French policy of building ski resorts in the 1960s and 1970s\textsuperscript{20}. An analogous representation has prevailed in the United States for the Southern Appalachian population and its “hillbillies” said to be “the least understood and the most underappreciated culture in the United States”\textsuperscript{21}. The construction of these social identities, the pejorative representations used to justify them in several countries, and the radical measures they engendered, gave rise to a repositioning, beginning in the 1960s, by part of the academic community, and interpretations in terms of class relations\textsuperscript{22} and “colonization”\textsuperscript{23}. 

\textsuperscript{20} Jean-Paul Guérin, 1984, \textit{L'Aménagement de la montagne en France: politique, discours et production d'espaces dans les Alpes du Nord}, Gap, Ophrys
\textsuperscript{22} David E. Whisnant, 1980, \textit{Modernizing the Mountaineer}, New York, Burt Franklin;
Despite the diversity of texts which have made use of the terms over the last several centuries, “mountain people” and “montagnards” have essentially served to designate populations apprehended from without. These names have allowed the formation of one of the most popular figures of alterity by which we conceive human diversity, just as mountains were seen as fundamentally different from the milieux where the majority of the producers of these representations spoke.

However, from the middle of the 19th century, the social use of these categories became more complex for two reasons: the will of mountain climbers to refer to themselves as “montagnards”, or more specifically to adopt and keep for themselves the English-speaking word “mountaineers”; and the tendency of many social actors living in mountain environments to designate themselves in reference to “mountains”.

How mountain climbers became “mountaineers”

The words “montagnard” or “mountaineer” became a tool for self-designation among alpinists at the middle of the 19th century. Indeed, during the earliest days of alpinism, these words were reserved by tourists for high-mountain guides and inhabitants of the high Alpine valleys. But the emergence of a more athletic alpinism, at times deemed heroic, and the advent of Alpine clubs in the 1850s, first British and then continental, led a new generation of climbers to claim the title for themselves24. During the second half of the 19th century, the term “montagnard” more often designated these alpinist tourists than resident populations25.

There are several explanations for this tendency. In practicing mountaineering, there was an evident concern with social distinction, so as not to be confused with the contemplative tourist, who was beginning to be mocked in popular literature. There was

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25 Just as the term “mountain men” designates in North America, not the western Native American tribes, but rather the colonists who exploited these regions and lived by trading with the original inhabitants of the sites. (see Roderick Nash, 1967, Wilderness and the American Mind, New Haven: Yale University Press).
also, as in Edward Whymper\textsuperscript{26}, a symbolic dismissal of local mountain populations, who could not yet offer the technical skills needed by elite alpinists. Finally, there was the concern to delimit a system of values, if not an ethic, which would constitute the ideological foundation for the Alpine clubs of the time, and whose broader diffusion within society became an objective.

In this process of appropriating the name \textit{montagnard/mountaineer}, the influence of the relations, often close, that alpinists and Alpine clubs maintained with scientific circles and governments should not be underestimated. Sport climbing recruited its adepts from among the most leisured, most educated, and most connected social groups at the time. The Alpine clubs prided themselves as well on contributing to the advancement of science, at times by initiating scientific studies, at times by divulging scientific knowledge in their publications. As such, they saw themselves as bearers as much of scholarly representations of mountains as of modern mountain practices. Popular representations and traditional practices were only rarely objects of comparable curiosity on their part, at least until the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. This state of mind also allowed, during this period, a genuine collaboration of Alpine clubs with forest administrators, with whom they shared objectives on behalf of a naturalist and progressive conception of mountains. It also allowed the alpinists to assume an important role in promoting the idea of protecting mountain nature, which states took up very early, with little consideration for local populations and without taking into account their frequent hostility vis-à-vis such emerging public policies.

This appropriation of the term \textit{montagnard/mountaineer} by members of Alpine clubs should be interpreted as forms of personal and collective identity, much more than of social identity. They connect their personal and collective image to a kind of environment—\textit{in this case the “high mountains”}—which they invest with their practices and initiatives (such as the building of mountain huts). We discern here the manifestation of that which we have proposed calling the subjective and self-referential register of territoriality. But it would be reductive to limit ourselves to this interpretation and this one register. Because of their proximity to national administrators and their participation

\textsuperscript{26} Edward Whymper, 1900, \textit{Scrambles amongst the Alps in the Years 1860-69}, London, John Murray.
in state projects, their identification and actions cannot be apprehended independent of the institutional register of territoriality. Finally, in contributing to the setting of the first public policies specific to mountain regions, especially forestry and conservation policies, they conceived themselves as decisive interpreters of the bio-physical reality of the high mountains, particularly in the Alps. Largely reforested, alleviated of grazing pressure, managed in terms of new tourist practices, the European high mountains were said to be brought into new bio-physical equilibria. The three registers of territoriality distinguished here therefore proved eminently complementary in the construction of this specific group, the Alpine clubs, in that none could be considered decisive alone.

**Emerging modes of self-designation of local populations**

The taking up of the name “mountain people” by local populations came both later and more slowly, but again this was largely subordinate to issues of political recognition in national, yet heterogeneous contexts. In fact, even though we lack specific studies on this point, it seems that these populations didn’t begin to claim the appellation until the end of the 19th century, and even then only in the sole touristic regions where they protested the indifference shown them by some tourists27. This process occurred earlier or later depending on whether the national imaginaries tended to celebrate, or on the contrary denigrate, the so-called mountain people. The rather distinct cases of Switzerland, France, and the European Union are instructive.

Mountains became objects of public policies in Switzerland beginning in the 1920s. The depopulation of corresponding regions, observed since the middle of the 19th century, had become cause for concern, giving rise to legislative proposals aiming to mitigate the causes and effects. Switzerland then, on behalf of a certain concept of the positive qualities of its mountains and the virtues of its mountain inhabitants, adopted the

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first public measures aiming to keep these populations in place. Soon afterward, several lobbies were set up as privileged interlocutors of the Federal Parliament and administration for questions relating to the management of the Alps and Jura. Notable among these, from 1943, was the Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für die Bergbauern or Groupement suisse des paysans de montagne [Swiss Organization of Mountain Farmers], which presented itself as the official emanation of Swiss mountain populations. The organization of a representative body for mountain populations thus came following the adoption of the first public policies aiming to assist the corresponding regions. Both were justified by a concern to correct the social and territorial imbalances brought about by the economic development of the industrial period.

A comparable configuration also occurred in France, but close to half a century later. Some twenty years following the adoption of measures favoring mountain agriculture, France gave itself a “Loi Montagne” [Mountain Law] (1985) which sought to address a wide range of social and economic problems. A National Association of Elected Representatives of the Mountains (Association Nationale des Elus de la Montagne, ANEM) was established right afterward, presenting itself as representing mountain populations and establishing itself as an interlocutor with public powers at the national level. Born in the aftermath of virulent polemics over the cogency and modes of tourist development and protection of the French mountains, following as well the decentralization laws of 1982-1983, which recognized the competencies of local elected officials in matters of urban planning, but the application of which was limited in mountain jurisdictions by other texts, ANEM adopted a discourse aiming to restore the legitimacy of elected officials from the mountains: “we are a ‘territorial lobby’, over a very complex territory that is the mountains. It engenders an ensemble of issues arising out of montagnards society [société des montagnards]. Our objective is to be the expression of this mountain population”²⁹. In the years following its creation, ANEM

²⁹ Pierre Remy, 2001, “Un lobby territorial et l’expertise scientifique”, in Bernard Debarbieux and Pierre-Antoine Landel (eds), La montagne entre science et politique, Grenoble, Dossiers de la Revue de Géographie Alpine
demonstrated its activism and efficacy in forcing the national legislature to take into consideration the claimed distinctiveness of mountain regions.

The progressive transfer of competencies in policy matters to the level of the European Union led to a comparable structuring of lobbies and pressure groups. In 1974, in the context of discussions over collective agricultural policy, a working group, Euromontana, gathering together associations and representatives of the farming sector, was created to promote a particular community politics for mountain agriculture. This group, which became an association in 1996, progressively widened its circle of adherents, opening itself to the new countries of the European Union, and also broadening its range of concerns. Since the mid-1990s, it has focused its actions on promoting sustainable rural development and transnational-cooperation at the scale of European “massifs”. In 1993 members of the European Parliament and national associations of elected representatives from mountain regions, the ANEM and its Italian counterpart, the UNCEM, notably established a European Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Regions (AEM). The European Commission, encouraged in this by the existing associations, for a time also reflected on the opportunity and possibility of specifying measures for mountain regions in the context of the overhaul of regional politics for the 2007-2012 period. At the same time, reference to mountains in the treaties of the Union appeared for the first time in the draft European Constitution of 2003 as a good illustration of a policy of territorial cohesion to be promoted. Though these two initiatives failed, the Commission, the AEM, and Euromontana today work in concert to create organizational structures at the level of mountain ranges. They are based, when possible, on the sizable European regions established in the 1990s. Since 1990, the Alpine Convention, a treaty that links the Alpine states of the European Union in defining and implementing sustainable-development policies, has served as a laboratory for such initiatives, which now extend to the Carpathians and Pyrenees, and tomorrow perhaps to the Caucuses and Central Asia.

The ensemble of these initiatives formed part of two processes long recognized in the social sciences: (1) a social process of identity conversion from a denigrated social identity to an affirmed collective identity, with the self-definition of identity of the groups concerned transforming the motives for stigmatization into sources of collective pride; and (2) a political process of institutionalization, particularly in the form of advocacy groups, aiming to influence democratic and deliberative processes in the name of a legitimacy acquired through widely shared social identities. In these conditions, both subjective and institutional registers of territoriality are strongly mobilized. But the attention here to socio-political processes shouldn’t obscure the importance as well of the bio-physical register; indeed, the initiatives mentioned here specifically aimed to defend or promote kinds of uses of mountains likely to alter their character. Thus, when the associations of elected representatives demanded more autonomy in managing the administrative territories of their members, they especially sought to reduce the weight of environmental constraints; conversely, the Alpine Convention and many of its advocates have sought to generalize a mode of sustainable development and environmental protection to the level of ranges, a proposition motivated by a certain conception of alpine environments, and inclined to favor ecological elements and forms of management.

The reformulation of social and collective identities in the context of the globalization of mountain issues

Since the beginning of the 1990s, a process similar to that seen in Europe throughout the 20th century is expanding at the global level, giving rise to the requalification of “mountain peoples” and new manners of self-identification. In 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, in what was a first for such a gathering, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) described mountains as a planetary issue. In Agenda 21, the action plan of the conference, an entire chapter, chapter 13, was dedicated to mountains. There mountains are offered as a model environment for the implementation of the sustainable development goals promoted at the gathering. This attention to mountains culminated in 2002 with the organization of the International Year
of Mountains, again at the instigation of United Nations. That same year, in the context of
the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg, the Mountain
Partnership was created, bringing together diverse bodies (states, international
organizations, NGOs, associations of elected representatives, scientific teams, etc.) eager
to coordinate their initiatives directed toward mountain regions.

UNCED placed at the forefront international organizations—particularly the Food
and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which was entrusted with implementing and
monitoring chapter 13, and later assumed leadership of the Mountain Partnership—and
the states which were most involved in the negotiations. Switzerland, which was at the
time preparing to enter the UN, played a decisive role in the discussion, leading a group
of mountainous countries mostly from the Global South (Ethiopia, Bolivia, Nepal, etc.).
These countries, brought together with the support of several NGOs, formed a lobby
which was particularly active during the annual sessions of the U.N. Commission on
Sustainable Development (CSD). But further—and this is principal interest of this series
of events to the thesis of this article—these institutional actors strove to engage the active
participation of, on the one hand, scientific experts and, on the other, local populations.
The analysis which follows concerns principally this new configuration of protagonists,
the modalities of naming and characterizing “mountain” populations which resulted, and
the registers of territoriality which this implies.

The status given to the scientific community and its initiatives.

Very early in the agenda of preparations for the UNCED, the secretariat for the
conference and the administrations of the most engaged countries approached scientists
so as to have at their disposal appropriate expertise, and to be able to put it to use. In
1991, at the initiative of the general secretariat of the conference and the Swiss Agency
for Development and Cooperation (SDC), a working group was formed around several
individuals, most notably Bruno Messerli. At that time, the latter was still a professor at

32 Bernard Debarbieux and Martin Price, 2008, “Representing Mountains: From Local and
National to Global Common Good”, Geopolitics, 13, 1, pp 148-168; and Bernard Debarbieux and
Gilles Rudaz, 2015, op. cit.
the University of Bern, leading the “Mountain Geography” group of the International Geographical Union, of which he later became president. This group of experts was tasked with reflecting on the contents of Chapter 13. This experience prefigured a long-standing collaboration which formed part of the constitution of what the political scientist Peter Haas has called an “epistemic community”, referring to “a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area”33. The members of this epistemic community could consequently think about, represent and promote mountains in similar and coordinated ways.

At the same time, the scientific community organized itself at the global level with the twin goals of creating a body of knowledge appropriate to the issues and facilitating the implementation of local and regional campaigns and networks which would follow. Several conferences had laid the groundwork for this field, notably at Munich in 1974, and Lake Mohonk, in upstate New York, in 1986. The work of synthesizing available knowledge at the beginning of the 1990s took form in a series of scientific publications, largely financed by the SDC or UN agencies, events or commissions, such as UNCED and the United Nations University34. The task of disseminating this knowledge to a broad public took the form of lavish pamphlets, financed by the SDC, which year after year has supported the CSD on a series of issues (water, tourism, etc.) concerning mountain regions. Alongside this effort toward synthesis, scientists organized themselves in regional associations (the Andes, Africa, etc.), seeking to build regional communities intended to become the preferred interlocutors of states and NGOs working at these levels.

In fact, the organization of this scientific community and some of its activities do not seem exempt from identity concerns, this time with relation to themselves. Here are three indications: first, on several occasions researchers coming from varied disciplines

debated whether the field of knowledge in which they engaged deserved to be called, as one of them, Fausto Sarmiento, suggested, “montology”\(^{35}\); next, scientific meetings have often allowed, notably with some researchers from the Andes, praise for their intimate and personal knowledge of the mountains they study, thus associating the knowledge produced with a personal trajectory standing as a source of legitimacy \(^{36}\). Finally, taking advantage of a working session in Quito in 1998, several of the most visible geographers in this community organized a “field pilgrimage”\(^{37}\) to Chimborazo, leaving a plaque honoring Alexander von Humboldt on the summit. The German geographer, an emblematic figure of geography and field science in the Andes, had led the first near-complete ascent of Chimborazo in 1802. The construction of knowledge of mountains at the global level, and of an apparatus for producing this knowledge, thus went side by side with a process of singularization and self-designation for many of the researchers involved.

*The status attributed to so-called mountain populations*

During the same period, this epistemic community, constructed around the promotion of sustainable development policies in mountain regions, elaborated a specific discourse about local populations which they sought to bring into the process. In fact, the various international conferences on sustainable development organized during these years had already highlighted the value of the knowledge and know-how of local populations, and the importance of their involvement. Article 26 of *Agenda 21* stipulates that autochthonous populations have “a holistic traditional scientific knowledge of their lands, natural resources and environment (…) national and international efforts to implement environmentally sound and sustainable development should recognize,

\(^{35}\) Fausto Sarmiento is an academic originally from Ecuador, working in the United States. On the modalities of the scientific discussion concerning the delimitation of this field of knowledge, see Lorenza Mondada, "La 'montagne' comme objet de savoir co-construit dans le débat scientifique", *Revue de Géographie Alpine*, 2001, 89/2, 79-92.


accommodate, promote and strengthen the role of indigenous people and their communities”.

This interest in mountain populations was again affirmed in Johannesburg. In this perspective, international organizations insisted on the importance of concerned states recognizing the distinctiveness of these regions and granting a certain autonomy to the peoples living in them, as a guarantee of good management. The declaration issued at the Bishkek conference, closing the International Year of Mountains, put the promotion of “local stewardship” at the top of its recommendations: “We support local governance and ownership of resources, individual freedom, cultural self-determination, and traditional belief systems, which lie at the core of sustainable development in mountain areas, especially where the economic influence of external forces is high”. The globalization of mountain issues thus illustrates what has been termed glocalization, that is “the global institutionalization of the expectation and construction of local particularism”\(^\text{38}\). In the case studied here, this glocalization finds expression in the concern to recognize ecological and cultural uniqueness at the global level, while promoting local autonomy as a necessary condition for “sustainable communities.”

As a sign of the existence and functioning of an epistemic community, scientists and NGOs have adopted a similar rhetoric. Because they portray themselves as promoters of participatory sustainable-development policies, they problematize the taking into account of culture and local know-how: “Programmes of sustainable mountain development need to take cultural values, traditions, and preferences into account: if they do not, they will fail to engage local communities and other stakeholders whose support they need to be truly sustainable over the long term”\(^\text{39}\). Since they have nature conservation as an objective, they celebrate with a single voice biological diversity and cultural diversity: “(mountain) biodiversity can only be conserved when equal attention is given to cultural diversity”\(^\text{40}\). From this perspective, research has been undertaken to


\(^\text{40}\) Jack Ives, 2002, “Along a steep pathway”, Our planet, UNEP magazine, 131, 3-5.
gather and diffuse the traditional environmental knowledge and cultural values of resident populations.

The promotion and establishment of mountains on the international stage therefore has designated “mountain populations” or “mountain people” as the principal partners and beneficiaries of this mobilization. The relative stake in the shared designation of these populations thus is great. Academic publications from the 1990s, following a model established in regional-geography studies of the mid-century, emphasize and elevate diversity, avoiding any suggestion that these populations share fundamental traits. Yet many of these publications, since they seek to provide an overall account of the livelihoods of such populations, suggest that they have a common need to come to terms with a very specific kind of environment. The definition of mountains as a kind of natural environment therefore both preconditions and orients such analyses. Certainly, the scientific community has long recognized that defining mountains presents considerable difficulties, and several authors have suggested sticking to a rather loose interpretation. Nonetheless, an official delimitation of the mountains of the world was compiled by scientists and finalized by the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP), and was adopted by several international organizations. Based on criteria of slope and altitude, they declared that a fifth of humanity today lives in mountains, which all together cover a quarter of the earth’s surface.

But once again, the identity of the so-called “mountain populations” was constructed from an external perspective, in the frame of a skillful argument seeking to delimit mountains and promote sustainable development policies. It was still therefore a social identity, independent of the ones these populations assumed themselves. Indeed, 

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43 See Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz, 2015, op. cit., chapter 1
field studies show that few of them, especially in the countries of the South, think of themselves this way. Given this situation, some social scientists have criticized this naturalist prism as a corruption of the cultures of these populations, and as the expression of a political will to subordinate their identities and practices to the goals of environmental conservation. The definitions and characterizations of mountains and mountain populations, scientific and political in its principles and justifications, quickly became the subject of political and scientific controversy.

The modes of adjustment of local populations to the globalization of mountain issues.

How did the concerned populations position themselves when invited to think of themselves as mountain ones and to contribute under that title to sustainable development policies at the global level? In fact, they adopted several very different attitudes.

A first attitude consisted of taking advantage of this new context to carry out local initiatives in partnership with intergovernmental organizations, NGOs, or cooperation offices. In this way, the Swiss SDC has accompanied many local development projects throughout the world, projects presented then in official government reports, as so much contributions to this international cause.

A second attitude consisted of these populations involving themselves in long-distance partnerships and organizing themselves in regional and transnational networks set up by some of the initiators of this process of globalizing mountain issues. Exchange programs between the inhabitants of different mountain chains (HimalAndes and SANREM, among others) were organized up by scientists with the financial support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Information-sharing networks, on the model of the Mountain Forum mentioned at the very beginning of this paper, were set up by NGOs eager to optimize communication between populations seen as facing similar problems. Finally, resources centers were set up at the regional level, for example the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICMOD) for the greater

Himalayan region, and the Consortium for the Sustainable Development of the Andean Region (CONDESAN) for the Andes, concerned to engage the corresponding populations of these regions in their agenda. Similar initiatives were taken in European mountain regions following the Alpine Convention. In 2007, at the initiative of the Convention’s secretariat and CIPRA (International Commission for the Protection of the Alps, a transnational association very active in the promotion of sustainable development at the level of the massif), a 240 member-strong association of municipalities, Alliance in the Alps, took on the goal of promoting sustainable development at this level. Similar associations have emerged recently in the Carpathians and Central Asia. Additionally, a great many mountain municipalities and regions in Europe have increased the number of sister-relationships and other forms of cultural exchanges with other mountain municipalities or regions in the world, often with the aide of national agencies eager to facilitate this kind of initiative.46

A third response has been for some actors to organize in reaction to global initiatives seen as imposed from above. The World Mountain People Association (WMPA) is one example: at its origin, this association, which was created in 2001 at the initiative of individuals otherwise involved in associations of elected representatives of mountain regions in Europe (ANEM, UNCEM, AEM), clearly aimed to position itself as the preferred interlocutor of international organizations so as to favor local autonomy and to guarantee a voice for the populations concerned. The founding partners made explicit their interest in reproducing at the global level that which they had achieved at the level of France, Italy and Europe at the height of their community discussions and elaboration of national policies regarding mountain regions. Perceived at first as a force aiming to jeopardize the global initiatives regarding the world’s mountains, the WMPA in the end was recognized in its representative role, joining the Mountain Partnership. Having won this recognition, its objectives have broadened to promoting mountain agricultural and artisanal products, creating protective labels and establishing dedicated marketing circuits, as well as conserving and promoting mountain cultures and identities.

Return to forms of identity and registers of territoriality

Throughout this fairly complex process, animated by many heterogeneous actors, how can we specify the role of the various forms of identity and registers of territoriality identified so far? During the last fifteen years, considerable energy and means have been devoted to identifying and describing the mountain regions and environments of the world. This mobilization has explicitly aimed to promote sustainable development and the conservation of the biological and cultural diversity of these regions. It thus concerned cultivating the distinctiveness of mountain regions, especially in their biophysical dimensions.

The principal initiators of this process—scientists, diplomats, as well as NGOs and IGOs—share a common engagement with the cause of mountains, to the point at times of being defined by it, as reflected in those who call themselves “montologists”. In their actions, they point to an ensemble of “mountain populations” for whom they wish to speak and who are presented as the legitimate beneficiaries of the policies that they pursue. We recognize here a kind of repeat at the global level of what happened in Western and Southern Europe from the end of the 19th century: the making of a mountain social identity subordinated to the objectives of managing mountains as such. But this time, the objective of sustainable development has taken precedence over reforestation.

The ways affected populations have positioned themselves has varied greatly vis-à-vis the categories used to refer to them, notably “mountain populations” and “mountain people”. Some have shown themselves indifferent, while others have assumed the labels on their own account—to shape collective identities, rethink their uniqueness and place in the world, or to gain means, active networks, or coordinate demands. This observation supports in part that which analysts of the indigenous movement in the Americas have concluded⁴⁷: the display of a common identity entails varied cultural and political

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strategies, consisting often of combining heterogeneous referents of identity, mobilized according to circumstance\textsuperscript{48}.

But this selective way of making reference to mountains in the construction of new collective identities, clearly linked to the globalization of mountain issues, shouldn’t lead us to think that the institutional and nation-state registers of mountain territoriality have become obsolete. The analysis above and some supplementary elements lead us to the opposite conclusion. In fact, we have observed that certain countries for which reference to mountains constitutes an important part of their very identity, or a decisive internal issue in terms of development—notably Switzerland—have played a decisive role in this process of globalization.

Next, the process itself, because it is based on inter-governmental organizations, rests first and foremost on the engagement of member states of these organizations. In this way the International Year of Mountains (IYM) took the form of an ensemble of events many of which had national aims. France illustrates this fact well: the French state hoped the IYM would all at once help promote Agenda 21 and sustainable development in mountain regions, update its own “mountain” policies, advance mountain policy at the level of Europe, and sustain numerous initiatives by local actors. The mobilization of local and institutional actors was impressive—382 proposals were submitted and 188 were approved—as was the diversity of the projects (cultural, economic, environmental, educational, etc.) and the spatial frames (local, interregional, transnational, long-distance partnerships, etc.).

Therefore, considering the role played by some states, such as France and Switzerland, and intergovernmental organizations in this worldwide reshaping of modes of identification of, and with, mountains, we cannot overlook the importance of

\textsuperscript{48} By way of illustration, it is interesting to note that the same Andean leaders will at times invoke their Amerindian identity, and at other times their identity as mountain people, when they are not invoking the Andes, their particular ethnic group, or their village. Conversely, there are Amerindian peoples who never took advantage of the register of a mountain identity: this is the case of the Indians of Chiapas, located in one of the most mountainous regions of Mexico. The Zapatista uprising of the 1990s, whose cause became world-renown and played a major role in the growth in power of the Amerindian movement at the continental level, never instrumentalized references to mountains, finding itself perhaps too distant from the aims and kinds of action of the communities that do.
institutional registers of territoriality. Even further, several promoters of these initiatives, foremost some intergovernmental organizations, have actively sought to win recognition for mountain peoples and environments by states otherwise resistant to doing so—be it to retain a free hand in exploiting natural-resources or to avoid recognizing cultural minorities. Thus, far from being the initiative of a few activists, the globalization of mountain issues attests to the ability of very heterogeneous protagonists—individuals, cultural and professional groups, intergovernmental organizations, and states—to construct a complementarity of identifications (geographic, social, collective), motivations, and actions capable of redrawing the field of discourses and legitimate action regarding mountains.

The degree to which the bio-physical register of territoriality participates in the whole of this process remains to be determined. It has often been invoked by the protagonists of this process to demonstrate the distinctiveness of mountain environments or the ways of life and subsistence of their inhabitants. It has also been used, though less frequently, to support the hopes and claims of certain communities, and here we could see reemerge the image of the free and proud Bergbaeur or Highlander, like the one made common in the literature of the enlightenment. But besides constituting one of several figures of the territorial imaginary, the bio-physical register of territoriality is operative in the whole of actions and concrete changes arising from the practical initiatives ensuing from this imaginary. The data banks of the resource centers mentioned above and many field studies attest to these practical initiatives which, because they are built on a discourse of mountain specificity, also participate in constructing the distinctiveness, including the bio-physical distinctiveness, of the corresponding regions and sites.

To illustrate this, we can point to the specific example of mountain massifs that tend to be depicted as so many “bioregions” or “ecoregions”, so as to better conceive and implement interventions and regulations at that scale. This approach was adopted first by environmental organizations, such as WWF and CIPRA, and then by interested states, as seen in the Alpine Convention. It tends to be the case for groups of inhabitants who defend the idea that new social collectives should emerge and be organized at the level of the mountain ranges to which they belong; this is the idea that underlies the activities of
Alliance in the Alps. The same is evident among adherents of the bio-regional movement in North America⁴⁹: followers promote natural entities (essentially watersheds and mountain ranges), no longer merely as areas for management, but also, and above all, as administrative and political entities and as a frameworks for reconfiguring collective identities. The advocates and conceptualizers of this movement speak of a process of territorial reshaping, referring “both to geographical terrain and a terrain of consciousness - to a place and the ideas that have developed about how to live in that place”⁵⁰, to “ecocentric identities”⁵¹ or even to an “ecology of shared identities”.⁵²

Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to analyze the ways mountain identities have been defined according to various conceptions of culture and territoriality. Let’s summarize the argument, following the two perspectives adopted all along the paper: first the invention and social diffusion of the categories “montagnards”, “mountain people” and “mountain population”; second the various imagined territorialities on which these categories have been based through time.

The modern meanings of the categories “montagnards”, “mountain people” and “mountain population” were born in the 18th century, when scholars and philosophers became eager to organize knowledge of human diversity according to geographic and natural categories. This manner of thinking, external to the people being designated, was quickly adopted by tourists and administrations. In the 20th century the designated populations gradually did the same, mostly in order to take advantage of this mode of designation for defending their own interests at national, continental, and then global levels. This diffusion of the modes of categorization illustrates social processes quite

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⁵⁰ Berg and Dasmann, 1978, op. cit., p. 218


familiar to the social sciences: the spread of scientific models of knowledge within the societies they analyze and the social reflexivity which derives from this process; the conversion of social identities into collective identities; and the politicization of collective identities, especially within minorities eager for recognition and a voice in debates concerning their daily life.

The mountain identities identified above are of different types and correspond to different registers of territoriality. A first one is based on the idea, ground in the dominant scientific culture of the 18th and 20th century but still active today, that populations living in mountain environments, as defined by natural scientists, present specific characters or features due to their close relation to these environments. The corresponding imagined territoriality insists on the nature-society relationships developed at a local or regional scale. A second register of territoriality, called institutional here, is based on the idea that “mountain people”, still seen from above and externally, are a component of national societies or humanity as a whole and should be thought of according to their contribution to the collective bodies they are embedded in. The corresponding imagined territoriality is more horizontal, focusing on the articulation of diverse areas and social groupings. A third type of mountain identity relates to the modes of self-designation of individuals and collectives willing to refer to mountains for conceiving and representing themselves. The corresponding territoriality is highly reflexive and often political when issues of recognition and rights are at stake, highlighting in a symbolic manner the relations of the people with their environment. These various forms of identity and imagined territoriality have offered, in academia, strong alternatives for conceiving the social world, belonging to competing schools of thought. But the same may not be true outside of that sphere. In fact, the illustration developed here shows that these various forms cohabitate and are even superimposed in the discourses and modes of action of key actors engaged in mountain topics and issues.