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Article

2009

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## Mountain regions as referents for collective action

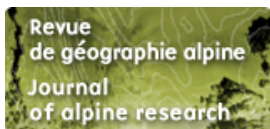
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### How to cite

DEBARBIEUX, Bernard. Mountain regions as referents for collective action. In: Revue de géographie alpine, 2009, vol. 97, n° 2.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:23458>



# Revue de géographie alpine/ Journal of Alpine Research

97-2 (2009)

Les régions de montagne comme référents de l'action collective

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Bernard Debarbieux

## Preface

### Mountain regions as referents for collective action

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Bernard Debarbieux, « Preface », *Revue de géographie alpine/Journal of Alpine Research* [En ligne], 97-2 | 2009, mis en ligne le 25 mars 2010, consulté le 11 octobre 2012. URL : <http://rga.revues.org/855>

Éditeur : Association pour la diffusion de la recherche alpine

<http://rga.revues.org>

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# Introduction

## Mountain areas: a framework and referent for collective action

In 2002, the journal “Geopolitics” devoted an entire issue to a subject that was both unusual and unavoidable. Instead of asking yet again the question that has been addressed in countless ways since the American and French revolutions (What is a nation?), the director for the issue solicited contributions from several authors on the following question: When is a nation? Adopting this change of perspective, the different contributors enriched the debate with stimulating insights on the conditions required for the creation of a nation and the processes leading up to this.

In this special issue of the *Revue de Géographie Alpine*, we have attempted the exercise with another notion, at first sight less passionate, that of the “mountain region”. Sceptics will claim that the notion is not comparable, maintaining that a mountain region is such an entity because of natural reasons, regardless of the social and political temporalities. And yet any region, if we take this to mean a system of actors and institutions delimiting a spatial entity through their intentions or actual practices, is, like a nation, a product that is never totally stabilised but contingent on the beliefs, intentions and activities of its inhabitants. Regarding the reference to mountains, this is rarely trivial. It may lead one to think that it is the mountains that make the region or that the region is only what it is because of the mountains found there. Thus, instead of asking the question “What is a mountain region?” this issue could ask the “when and how” question: When and how does a mountain region come into existence? To be even more specific, we could begin with the question When and how does one decide to refer to a mountain entity to define an area of beliefs, intentions and practices?

As unusual as it may seem, this question should not come as a surprise. It comes in the wake of studies that, for more than 15 years now, have observed an increase in regional power and a new form of regionalism in favour of the reorganisation of economic, cultural and institutional practices on a global scale (Harvie, 1995; Castells, 1997; Keating, 1998; McNeill, 2004). It also follows on from publications that have studied the entry of mountain areas into the political arena: mountain area lobbies have found their analysts (for example, Gerboux, 2004; Rudaz, 2005) and there have been numerous public policies concerning mountain areas (namely, for France, Gerboux, 1994 and Bazin, 1999) and a few institutional experiments like the Appalachian Regional Commission (for example, Bradshaw, 1992). However, as interesting and useful as these analyses may be, they remain somewhat marginal to the reasons underlying the preparation of this special issue.

The articles brought together in this publication are intended to respond to an even more specific question: Under what conditions and what circumstances are a mountain massifs or ranges used as a reference for regional construction? Answers to this question

are rare, apart from those already published by some of the contributors to this issue (namely Debarbieux and Price, 2008; Balsiger, 2007; Amilhat-Szary, 2005; Fall and Egerer, 2004). Yet this phenomenon is assuming increasing importance in several regions of the world, as Gilles Rudaz demonstrates in the opening article of this issue.

In this special issue of the *Revue de Géographie Alpine*, our aim is to seek answers to this question in three directions at the same time: in terms of a relevant entity for public concern (1), in terms of organisational configurations (2), and in terms of regional identity (3).

## **Mountain areas as a relevant entity for public concern**

Since the Second World War, and especially since the 1980s, mountain ranges and massifs have taken on increasing importance in public policies, at both national and supranational levels as well as in the international arena (Debarbieux and Price, 2008). This is related to the growing number of concerns for which the notion of the mountain area as a territorial entity is particularly useful in defining, illustrating and addressing the issues at stake. Thus the policies of welfare states have often concerned mountain regions namely because of the relatively low average revenues of local populations; agricultural and regional policies in distributing subsidies have often targeted those working in “mountain” professions with a view to keeping them afloat in a competitive economy; for some ten years now, the threat of decreasing biodiversity has renewed interest in biological diversity and endemisms in mountain areas; at the same time, fears related to climate change have found a striking example of the problem in the melting and retreat of mountain glaciers; promotion of the rights of indigenous communities has served as a reminder of the considerable ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity of so-called mountain populations and has helped promote different forms of political autonomy. There are thus numerous examples of, firstly, problematizing economic, social and environmental issues using the notion of mountain areas and, secondly, of targeting mountain areas with some of the tools and measures used to address these issues. Depending on the case in question, the status of mountain areas varies. Thus mountain areas are sometimes the place where a particular problem is first revealed or where a striking example of the problem is found. Sometimes mountain areas may also constitute priority zones for intervention and treatment of the problem. The following general observation may be made: the political identification of mountain areas – let us call it “objectivation”, as when one speaks of an object of public policy – results from the problematization by territorial differentiation – let us simply call it “territorial problematization” – of issues that extend well beyond these areas. Instead of speaking of issues here, we suggest using the term “paradigms”. The examples cited above already provide us with a considerable array: objectives of social redistribution, compensation for handicaps in a competitive economy, loss of biodiversity, global warming, minority rights, etc.

This process that links paradigm, territorial problematization and objectivation is at the root of the public individualisation of mountains and their surrounding areas. It is understandable, and numerous empirical studies have confirmed this, that the

administrative and regulatory zoning and definitions of mountain areas are not aimed at delimiting natural objects but at giving a detailed spatial dimension to a category that enables paradigms for collective action and their political treatment to be interpreted in terms of territorial differentiation. It is in this way that we can better understand, for example, the creation of the Appalachian Regional Commission (a means of focusing efforts to combat pockets of poverty and economic stagnation in the US) or that of the Alpine Convention (optimising the implementation of sustainable development policies in a region of Europe where the stakes in this respect often appear greater than elsewhere), or the debate on the adoption of a policy for mountain areas, and an official definition of such areas, in Morocco (intervention in a process of economic and social development that is accentuating the contrasts between coastal and inland regions, Boujrouf, 2007).

In this issue, two articles in particular adopt this perspective. These are the contribution of Gilles Rudaz, which focuses on numerous cases and types of individualisation of mountain regions in public policies over the past 30 years, and that of Jorg Balsiger, which provides a detailed and systematic comparison of the Swiss Alps and the Californian Sierra Nevada regarding the appropriateness of regional institutional and political measures in relation to the motivations of the public policies themselves.

## **Mountain areas and their organisational configurations**

One direction of research, which is complementary to the one mentioned above, consists in identifying political and institutional configurations that preside over this research for relevance between paradigms, issues and mountain regions defined for this purpose. However, taking all issues into consideration, these configurations have radically changed over the past twenty years. For a long time, in North America as in Europe, public policies with development or natural resource management objectives were satisfied with management areas. This was particularly the case for catchment areas, the identification of which certainly met the criteria of specific relevance (optimise drinking water supply, manage the resource for irrigation, monitor quality, etc.), but, all in all, only constituted entities based on technical or even technocratic reasoning. Mountain massifs, such as the Massif Central in France or the Appalachians in North America, were for a time identified from this perspective.

For the past twenty years, thanks to the decentralisation observed in numerous countries and the encouragement for greater consultation with local actors, and even their participation, management entities have tended to become institutional arrangements on which forms of governance have been set up. This has been observed in the management of catchment areas in several European countries where locally elected representatives and users have become involved. It has also been observed with the implementation of policies in favour of mountain regions in France and Italy, for example, policies that were accompanied by ruling bodies comprising representatives of national administrations, locally elected representatives and users. It has been observed with the Alpine Convention, set up in 1991 on the basis of common inter-state concerns and environmental objectives, and subsequently enriched by numerous pan-alpine networks of actors concerned with having a say in the matter. For some years now, it has

also been observed with the diffusion of the alpine model to the Carpathians and the Balkans, as well as the Caucasus and Central Asia. Finally, it has been observed with the generalisation of use of the notion of mountain massif in the regional policy of the EU with the contribution of national institutions and associations of national and regional actors (Euromontana, Association Européenne des Elus de la Montagne, etc.).

In this issue, the article by Cristina Del Biaggio reports on the activities of two alpine networks set up in the wake of the Alpine Convention, which, with the help of other parallel initiatives, have succeeded today in making the Alps, as a single entity, a truly organised collective action area. The article by Jörg Balsiger also stresses, in its comparison of the Swiss Alps and the Sierra Nevada, the diversity of organisational configurations (that he refers to as “organisational landscapes”) and the increasing number of those who have actively participated in the definition and implementation of public policies concerning the two regions.

## **Mountain areas and collective identities**

Finally, several articles in this issue deal with the role of collective identities in the emergence of mountain regions as a framework for collective action. Of the three directions selected in this issue to address this question, it is without doubt the one that raises the most theoretical questions, questions that are moreover difficult. Does a mountain region, massif or range, in order for it to be qualified as a reference area for collective action, require being experienced as an identifier in the feeling of shared belonging that inhabitants develop? In response to a comparable question concerning the idea of the region in general, certain authors replied in the affirmative. For example, the Finnish geographer, Anssi Paasi, writes: “it is helpful to think analytically that identity is part of the institutionalisation of regions, the process through which regions come into being” (Paasi, 2002). More specifically, Paasi uses identity to refer to two different things, the adjustment of which governs the existence of the region: the identity of the region (the unique and lasting set of singular characters that makes it what it is) and regional identity (the feeling of belonging shared by the inhabitants). Furthermore, many other authors cite this same regional identity as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for the existence of a region.

One may have doubts about this thesis for two types of reasons: conceptual and empirical. Some of the articles in this issue provide interesting contributions from this point of view. Firstly, numerous examples show that the absence or weakness of a shared feeling of belonging does not necessarily burden a strictly regional process. We know, for example, how weak the feeling of being European is, but, given the notion of region held here in France, this does not prevent the European Union from being an undeniable regional entity. In the Alps, the vigour and the density of transnational networks (cf. the article of Cristina Del Biaggio) and the cooperative and conflictual institutional relations leave no doubts as to the existence of an area of collective action, even if, as Cristina Del Biaggio clearly shows, “alpineness” as a form and scale of collective identity has rarely been tested. Even activists on the alpine political terrain, including locally elected

representatives and managers of protected areas who like to imagine their own political identity in terms of the Alps as an entity, do not appear too concerned about converting their citizens or their agents. Juliet Fall, in an article focusing on forms of trans-border cooperation in protected areas, reaches a similar conclusion, but by another path entirely: trans-border cooperation only really functions if the idea of a border, and underlying this the identities associated with it, remain very present in the mind of every protagonist. In a article dealing with the Andean borders of Bolivia, Chile and Argentina, Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary demonstrates that an initiative bringing together locally elected representatives and indigenist activists was able to be set up on the basis of a mountain area referent, the Andes, and an ethnic referent, the Aymara culture, without the local populations feeling really concerned by this new mountain and trans-border object that had brought their communities closer together. Finally, using a contrario reasoning, Mathieu Petite, in his analysis of a cultural project financed by the Interreg programme, shows that rhetoric focussing mainly on identity in such an initiative is not sufficient to establish lasting and substantial institutional cooperative arrangements.

A more detailed analysis of existing literature suggests that although collective identity is certainly an advantage in the lasting constitution of a region, it is often put forward to optimize a type of project that accompanies it. This is particularly the case with several theoreticians of bioregionalism. This movement, which developed in California in the 1970s from a combination of environmentalist and counter culture movements, advocates the identification of natural regions as institutional frameworks for public life in North America to the detriment of existing entities (the Canadian provinces, the American states, or the counties of these two countries, for example), considered to be artificial and capable of showing indifference toward environmental problems (Berg and Dasman, 1977; Sale, 1985). From this perspective, certain authors determine the success of the establishment of bioregions through the development of an "eco-identity" (Mathews, 1991), whereby the inhabitants of a catchment area or a mountain range see themselves as a collectivity with regard to natural entities (Bretherton, 2001; Mc Ginnis et al., 1999). This requirement can only be understood if one takes into account the exclusive character of the alternative proposed (bioregions must substitute for any other form of political territoriality) and its utilitarian aim, which requires that affective attachment to a bioregion results in virtuous practices with respect to the environment (inhabitants with a true citizen mentality would be more concerned for the territorial base with which they identify). Similar utilitarian arguments may be found among the theoreticians of regional planning and development, who believe that collective identities are factors that determine economic involvement and thus prosperity.

Apart from the illustrations that show the opposite, the exclusivist and utilitarian thesis concerning regional identity in the construction of regions is debatable on theoretical grounds. The hypothesis of a reduction in the range of territorial identities in favour of a single identity, whether or not this is bioregional, is not in agreement with current studies, which reveal an increasing diversification of the social and political identifiers of contemporary individuals. In addition, the constitution of trans-border regions invariably requires that the state and sub-state entities be involved in their emergence. Thus, it is at these levels that the resources and levers for action are found. This has been

clearly shown by VanDeveer (2004) in the context of areas bordering the Baltic. Similarly, in this issue, Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary demonstrates that the constitution of the Aymara region is based on the institutional functions and authorities of the three countries involved. Furthermore, as Meredith (2005) has shown for bioregions, the utilitarian conception of regional identity is not without its ethnic problems concerning the instrumentalisation of collective identities to practical ends, as well as philosophical problems regarding the risk of reducing identity to its practical dimension. For the reasons outlined in the preceding discussion on collective identities, collective action, when it uses a mountain region, massif or range as a reference framework and as an object, undoubtedly deserves to be considered in a manner different from that proposed by the nation state for the organisation of civil society in the 19th century. Unlike the national identities of that time, the identities of mountain areas, when they exist as such, do not benefit from being considered in an exclusive manner. Unlike the coextensive organisational configurations of the national societies of the 19th century those of mountain regions benefit from being considered as linked with those that continue to function at scales and within frameworks inherited from the past (national, sub-national, local).

When and how does a mountain region become such an entity? The articles in this special issue have outlined several complementary responses to this question: When a region perceived as a mountain entity can be used to delimit and problematize governance issues (taking into account the region's mountainous character) that are sufficiently important and recurrent to give rise to an institutional reconfiguration at this scale; When, at the scale of pre-existing entities, and possibly within the population directly concerned, there are resources and room for manoeuvre that enable local actors to promote an institutional configuration, and, if need be, one based on identity, which is complementary to existing configurations.

*Translation: Brian Keogh*

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