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**The Mountain: A Political History from the Enlightenment to the Present**, Bernard Debarbieux and Gilles Rudaz, trans. Jane Marie Todd, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2015, 352 pp., \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 9780226031118, \$10.00 to \$50.00 (e-book), ISBN 9780226031255

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Books titled 'The X' can fill the prospective reader with the foreboding that such an implicit promise of exhaustive coverage will prove impossible for the author or authors to keep. Fortunately, *The Mountain* by Debarbieux and Rudaz more than ably sidesteps this potential pitfall, and indeed does so by interrogating and problematising the very concept of a singular definition of its titular noun.

Offering *A Political History from the Enlightenment to the Present*, the volume likewise avoids any attempt at a blow-by-blow chronology and instead considers the conception of the mountain with reference to three different political scales: the nation state, colonial empires, and 'the global space as it now exists' (p.3). Rather than viewing the mountain solely as physical object or naturalistic fact, Debarbieux and Rudaz set out 'to the study the processes by which societies construct their mountains' (p.2).

Such an approach to the interrogation of past landscapes is nothing new - the concept of a cultural landscape, constructed by human activity and thought, is at this point almost a century old - but Debarbieux and Rudaz's innovation lies specifically in tracing the relationship between the constructed mountains of modernity, and the political activity of the era.<sup>1</sup> This approach thus asks 'what the notion of the mountain makes it possible to think, say, and do' in a variety of territorial, colonial, and ideological contexts (p.139), and demonstrates the startling impact that the mountain as an idea has had on the history of the past three centuries.

A brief overview of the structure of the volume gives some insight into its scope. Its two sections consider the mountain first in the context of the nation state, and then within the context of processes of globalisation. The first section swiftly moves from considering the significance of the mountain within discourses of territoriality, to the idea of the mountaineer as a national or patriotic figure, a consideration of 'the politics of nature' by which mountains came to be assigned as wilderness spaces to be set apart from industrial modernity, and a discussion of the mountain as 'a living environment'. This latter theme, dealing with issues of the management of the mountain environment, and the frequent exercise of power over the daily lives of mountain peoples by external elites, provides a bridge into global issues. A single chapter is given to a topic which could form the basis of many monographs; namely, the interaction between ideas of mountain space (and its inhabitants) and exercises of colonialism as enacted by Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. This is followed by a chapter specifically considering the tropical mountain forest, elucidating the replacement of a variety of spatially-sensitive autochthonal practices relating to the use and cultivation of the mountain landscape with universalising, European regional planning models.

The final three chapters move to consider contexts even broader and more recent than colonialism. 'The Globalization of Mountain Issues', considers the new status of the mountain as a 'global political object' (p.194) which, in common with rainforests, oceans, and Antarctica, has been identified by international agencies as having a particular potential to impact global practices. The volume returns

to its running theme of mountaineers in a consideration of the 'Mountain Men and Women of Globalization', suggesting the ways in which globalisation – and the idea of the global mountain – serves both to promote and threaten their distinctive identities. The mountain is then placed within the context of the EU, which Debarbieux and Rudaz suggest has – in the face of heterogeneous categories of the mountain and of mountain practice – traditionally been reluctant to consider and treat mountains as a pan-European issue. In the final chapter, the authors propose the compelling, but perhaps idealistic idea of the mountain as a concept with the potential to unify policies, people, and passions for collective action.

After covering so many intellectual and geological miles, the conclusion emphasises that the aim was not to be exhaustive, but rather to promote a new approach to the study of the history of landscape by considering the mountain 'as a figure, around and through which a set of conceptions of the natural, social, and political world has taken shape' (p.285). Although, as suggested above, such a non-naturalistic approach to landscape and mountains is by no means as novel as Debarbieux and Rudaz imply, *The Mountain* should certainly be praised for the nuanced methodology and vocabulary which it introduces for dealing with its subject.

The authors rightly emphasise – in both their introduction and their first chapter – that the mountain 'as an object of knowledge' is surprisingly difficult to define from a naturalistic perspective: multitudes of individuals, institutions, and governments have long since differed on the precise characteristics of height, ruggedness, or rockiness, which make an irregularity in the earth's surface 'a mountain'. By contrast, they suggest, a constructionist definition is rather easier to pin down, through employing a series of interlocking concepts: objectification, problematization, paradigm, and intervention. The first two concepts refer to the construction of a conception of the mountain, and the motivations behind it, emphasising that 'descriptions' of mountains in historical and contemporary contexts are by no means straightforward expressions of an external reality but, rather, a way of imagining and expressing a variety of societal, cultural, and political ideas. The latter concepts, in turn, consider the wider ideological contexts in which these ideas are formed, and the actions (or 'interventions') enacted upon the material object of the mountain.

As the final point suggests, it is impossible to deny that, in spite of an approach in which a mountain 'is not defined as a thing in itself' (p.7), the space between the constructed mountain and the natural mountain is always inevitably collapsing. The 'mountain imaginary', as Debarbieux and Rudaz compellingly term it, does not simply remain within people's minds: it goes on to influence their activities and actions within the material world. Nevertheless, their crucial point is in emphasising the chicken of the idea before the egg of the materiality: the mountain has to be constructed before it can be acted upon.

In discussing the theoretical vocabulary underlying this volume, it is worth emphasising that both the authors and the translator deserve praise for producing a text which is at once methodologically incisive and highly readable. The strength of the volume is that it roots its abstract questions of objectification, problematization, paradigm, and intervention in concrete examples which are deployed to compelling effect.

These examples illustrate the mountain imaginary, and its impact on the material world, from a multitude of angles. Themes of particular interest to this reader included discussion of the relationship between the mountain and ideas of territoriality, the construction of a wilderness aesthetic, and the problematic and ever-shifting definition of 'mountaineers'. In terms of territoriality, Debarbieux and

Rudaz highlight that mountains have been invoked both as state borders – as in the case of the Argentina-Chile border, bulwarked by the Andes – and as the centralising principle of a territory, as in Romania and Korea. This reflection may seem simplistic, but it highlights an important point: throughout modern history, the mountain has enabled states to conceive and assert a ‘natural’ territory from the starting point of two apparently contradictory assumptions (the mountain as a border, or edge, and the mountain as a centre).

In considering the development of a wilderness aesthetic, Debarbieux and Rudaz remind the reader of a long-discussed but often-forgotten point: that our perception and privileging of natural or original ‘wildernesses’ is rooted in ideological assumptions that are both recent and, indeed, recently contested.<sup>2</sup> They highlight the role of the nineteenth-century environmentalist John Muir in promoting the protection of Yosemite on the basis of its ecological value, which replaced earlier concepts of wilderness protection on the basis of scenic or aesthetic value. As the authors succinctly put it, in both cases the mountain formed the key figure through which these ideas were expressed and enacted.

However, despite modern conceptions of mountains as depopulated wildernesses, the mountain is rarely empty, either in reality or ideology. A recurring theme throughout the volume is that of the construction of ‘the mountaineer’, a term which Debarbieux and Rudaz emphasise belonged to the ordinary people of mountain spaces long before it was appropriated by modern-day mountain-climbers, generally travelling in to mountain regions from outside in order to claim the local summits in the name of nationalism or heroism. Meanwhile, the development of a modern wilderness aesthetic required the ideological debasement and physical displacement of those who traditionally filled that space. Throughout, Debarbieux and Rudaz demonstrate the ways in which conceptions of both the mountain space and of those who inhabited it served to transfer control and agency over the mountains from the mountaineers to external elites: colonialists, politicians, and scientists, who often replaced the nuances of localised management with universalised approaches which sought both to preserve the mountain environment, and to draw economic profit and production from it.

These are just three examples among many, all of which are evidently rooted in an impressive depth of research and data. However, it is not to diminish the work underlying this volume to note that its breadth leads to some inevitable issues, namely in terms of the precision with which it sometimes engages with different histories, subject to their own historiographical debates and sub-disciplinary vocabularies. For example, in discussing the result of Sir Francis Younghusband’s 1904 expedition to Tibet, the authors refer more than once to his ‘conquest’ of Tibet, a term which obscures both the nuances of this incident (the British government rapidly sought to distance themselves from Younghusband’s militant assertion of authority), and the sensitivity of historical and contemporary considerations of Tibetan authority. This is a minor point, but is perhaps illustrative of the fact that a reader interested in the individual examples and contexts raised should take discussions within the volume as introductory rather than authoritative.

Moreover, the specifically modern focus leads – very occasionally – to implications of modern exceptionalism. For example, in their discussion of Muir, Debarbieux and Rudaz suggest that the idea of mountains as ‘complex and original ecosystems’ (p.103) was unique to the nineteenth century, which could certainly be contested in the face of numerous premodern texts which acknowledged both the distinctiveness of mountain environments in terms of the various flora and fauna which they supported, and the value of mountains as a key element of a broader, inter-dependent environment.<sup>3</sup> Once again, this is a minor point, and gestures positively to the *longue durée* questions which *The*

*Mountain* should lead us to ask. What political impact did the mountain imaginaries of the classical, medieval, and early modern eras have in their own time, and how far do they represent the roots of the modern concepts in this volume? Were conceptions of mountains more nationally or geographically diverse before modern globalisation, and could a cross-chronological, comparative approach lead us to suggest that trends of globalisation in modernity have led to peculiarly Western visions of mountains 'colonising' a global imaginary?

In discussing the wider questions which it raises for other mountain scholars, it is important to identify *The Mountain* as representing an important intervention into an increasingly active field. The history of mountains and mountaineering in the modern era has long inspired public fascination and scholarly interrogation. *The Mountain*, however, is representative of a more recent 'theoretical turn' in modern mountain studies, joining, for example, volumes such as Peter Hansen's *Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering After the Enlightenment* (2013) which deconstructed the epistemology of modern mountaineering and its 'summit position' within the context of developing ideas of state sovereignty and individual autonomy.<sup>4</sup> More recently, interest has grown in – to use Debarbieux and Rudaz's term – the imaginary of mountains in the premodern era, with recently published considerations of mountains in Neo-Latin poetry, and with nascent work focussing on the representation of the mountain landscape in classical literature, and the significance of mountain spaces within medieval pilgrimage.<sup>5</sup>

Within this context, *The Mountain* offers a valuable contribution to an ongoing conversation which continues to engage academics and the wider public alike. Despite the minor criticisms elucidated above (and which stand as the inevitable cost of a laudably broad approach) this is a highly impressive volume to be warmly and widely recommended. It has the potential to be of value and interests to students, historians of landscape, modern political historians, and general mountain enthusiasts alike. It is a credit to its authors and its translator, and stands a welcome addition to the growing field of critical, historical mountain studies.

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<sup>1</sup> C. Sauer, 'The Morphology of Landscape', *University of California Publications in Geography*, 2, 1925; with his idea of a 'cultural landscape' further developed by Denis Cosgrove with his concept of landscape as a 'way of seeing'. D. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, London: Croom Helm, 1984, pp.1-4.

<sup>2</sup> The question of wilderness prompted a 'great new debate' across the turn of the twenty-first century, starting with W. Cronon, 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature', in ed. Cronon, *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1995, 69-90, and continuing in eds. J. Baird Callicott and M. P. Nelson, *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1998, and *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate* Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Erasmus Warren, *Geologia: or, a Discourse Concerning the Earth before the Deluge*, London, 1690, pp.147-9, and John Ray, *Miscellaneous Discourses Concerning the Dissolution and Changes of the World*, London, 1692), pp.166-170.

<sup>4</sup> P.H Hansen, *Summits of Modern Man: Mountaineering After the Enlightenment*, Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> W.R. Barton, *Mountain Aesthetics in Early Modern Latin Literature*, Abingdon, Oxon.: Routledge, 2016; multiple chapters in eds. J. McNerney and I. Sluiter, *Valuing Landscape in Classical Antiquity: Natural Environment and Cultural Imagination*, Leiden: Brill, 2016; and the nascent work of Professor Anthony Bale, Birkbeck, University of London: see <<http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/research/tag/holy-land/>> [05.09.2017].