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Preface

Land management at the heart of the future of Alpine territories

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Preface

Land management at the heart of the future of Alpine territories

Sylvie Duvillard

- 1 The time is right and, legitimised by nearly a decade (2001-2008) that was marked by the steady rise of property prices, the land issue has emerged once again. Whether it is through "summits"¹ or press articles², the mountain and the Alps in particular have come under close scrutiny. The situation here is quite delicate.
- 2 Local communities and Alpine companies are torn between the desire to preserve a strong mountain identity and the fear of an economic (agricultural, tourist) and/or demographic abandonment. Some municipalities are currently examining how to maintain an active population at a time when the land and home ownership of this population is facing keen competition from leisure investments (holiday homes). The issue of the continuity of public services and small shops selling basic items has thus been raised, also bringing up the issue of the survival and life of municipalities. Others are pondering on the place of agriculture, the preservation of the environment as we realise that climatic change will, in the long term, compromise the tourist development of their territory.
- 3 It is as if the problems of today and the uncertainties of tomorrow have been absorbed into the property issue. This is linked to the awareness that a certain number of problems in the mountains take on an unavoidable property dimension, in the same way as the problems encountered in the cities. It is the cause as well as the consequence and is today presented as irreducible to the solutions. But which solutions?
- 4 It is also the question put to the scientific community. In this issue, the researchers are concerned with one question: **Between political and market trade-offs, is it possible to identify specific land management modes in mountain areas?** The objective is to highlight the experiments launched by local communities in the Alps to act at different levels on the development challenges seen through the prism of tenure. Do the various alpine contexts have tools or rules that have currently been set up in the mountain territories to deal with tenure challenges?

- 5 The editorial team was surprised by how difficult it was to collect scientific articles on the association between the theme of land ownership and the mountain, which goes to prove the difficulty in addressing a subject considered as sensitive.
- 6 **Land (le foncierin French)** is sensitive because of its scope, and refers to a materiality, the land, whether built-up or not, on which rights are asserted. In the first article, C. Herrera analyses the ambivalence of the word to show the ambiguity of the meaning given to land ownership in France: to be a land owner is to own the rights to a space. The most significant of these rights is the power to sell the land (Comby, 2008). We're tempted to say "that is all" because the rest falls under the authority of government, which is the only body that grants owners the possibility to do or not to do.
- 7 Land is therefore a sensitive issue because it is by essence a **political object**. And yet for all that, does it come under a veritable political project (C. Herrera)? Switzerland has embarked on this path with the development of tourist resorts. C. Clivaz and S. Nahrath show how the mountain tourist economy endorses the land challenge: between competing social groups that are obliged to cooperate, the return to existing land instruments serves a real development political project that consists in keeping down the spread of holiday homes.
- 8 It is a sensitive issue through the **market value** of the space that has been thus appropriated. Another acceptation of the word "land" groups together all the manifestations and consequences of the market value of an area. Within the term, the land is transformed into ground and soil, which, albeit immovable property, can be reproduced and exchanged (Comby, 2008). Therefore, when we evoke the value of land, we need to distinguish the property **market** (developed land) from the land market proper, which only concerns land bought and sold at a freely negotiated price (Comby, 2008). This issue deals only with the real estate market (I. André-Poyaud, S. Duvillard, A. Lorioux).
- 9 Lastly, land is a sensitive issue because the space has turned out to be a **social** stake within a **housing** production and distribution system, including within a cross-border area (M. Tranda-Pittion).
- 10 The contributions collected in this journal, all shed light, in their own way, on one of the facets of the term "land". However, they all do so from a geographer's viewpoint. As an object, land is scientifically established in the field of geography only through development. This places it on the margin. It is more of an explanatory variable than an object of study in its own right. Although devoting a whole issue to this may be a challenge, it is the best way to push our researchers to explore certain avenues more in depth.
- 11 C. Herrera builds a **theoretical field** based on the notion of territorial land resource, signifying the use of a renewed reference system for the management of space in mid-range mountain areas, which will push for a change in the scale of intervention.
- 12 The case of Switzerland illustrates this need: if the Federal law on land-use planning of 1979 is not efficient in the Swiss mountain tourist cantons, the tourist economy suffers all the more so since land is not, is no longer or not yet considered to be a territorial resource (?). C. Clivaz and S. Nahrath show how local policies try (apparently rather in vain) to change the use of land (holiday homes) without changing the scale of intervention (supracommunal) – meeting the point of view of C. Herrera – or without changing the legal rules that apply to land. The authors also concur when they

- underline the conflict between **specific interests and the general interest**, opposing, over and above specific national characteristics, private ownership and political management, which is the only guarantee of the general interest. C. Clivaz, and S. Nahrath evoke the "triumphant power of land owners" and decry the state-led protection of land rent.
- 13 They question research by highlighting a little-studied **category of stakeholders** (land), the category of holiday residents. The (temporary) use made of property depends on the type of owner based on the place of residence. This use can turn out to be very detrimental to the local economy and the landscape (environment). However, the respective weight of the various categories has to be assessed and that is what the authors (André-Poyaud, Duvillard, Lориoux) try to do in an article where the question of **market observation** gives preference to a socio-qualitative analysis at the intercommunal scale, i.e. at the level where they consider that solutions could be found. In the Mont-Blanc region, the weight of residents from outside the municipality in the group of buyers has a strong impact on the housing capacities of local residents who keep on postponing their home ownership project. M. Tranda-Pittion demonstrates the same process with **housingproduction** in the Geneva basin but raises the question of the part played by differing housing policies in Switzerland and France. The author shows how, on a large scale (canton of Geneva), an informal, virtuous circle preserves land resource by controlling urbanisation to the general satisfaction, pushing the housing question across the border. J. Comby points out that there are no good or bad land policies, but rather, policies that are more or less suitable.
- 14 The project has been launched. It has not provided answers as quickly as was expected; land considered as a resource is now emerging as an issue. All that remains is to stabilise this notional link. In fact, it is possible to perceive why the notion of land resource includes the upheaval of values (representations) as well as a shift in the paradigms of public action. The authors (Clivaz, Herrera, Tranda-Pittion) stress that there is a wide range of tools that can be used for policies. In particular, stakeholders of Alpine areas, once they objectively present the importance of the land dimension in the management of their territory, look for solutions adapted to a specific area, the Alps.
- 15 Today, the land issue in the Alps has become focused on overall territorial challenges, raising the issue of the future of mountain areas. Implicitly, in its issues, the Journal of Alpine Research, has, from the epistemological development of geography, already defined today's challenges from a different angle.
- 16 The study of land property in the French Alps was first assessed from a historical viewpoint: M. Bonnemaïson (1952) presents the structure of property and its evolution in a small village of the Grésivaudan valley since the 18th century. R. Mériaudeau (1986) changes the scale. In his PhD thesis, he tackles the Savoie region, placing the emphasis on the strength of collective property in the mountains. He declares in an article published in 1989 (Mériaudeau, 1989) the specific characteristics of the French mountain through dominant public appropriation in the alpine parts.
- 17 **Public land control** was (and remains?) a trump card for public bodies when the French "*Plan neige*³" was materialising. From then on, geographic research came within the framework of the **spatial planning trend**: Rémy Knafou (1978) analyses the establishment of tourist resorts in the Northern Alps. Land control was the main element for differentiating the processes involved in the enhancement of "white gold" in France.

- 18 While tourism and urbanisation made fine bedfellows at the time, things seemed to have changed today. Pierre Préau (Préau, 1982) revisits the case of the Savoie region using a demographic approach and raises the question of the **status of these areas** (are they rural or urban?) where mass tourism has developed. The **identity issue** overshadows the land dimension to which it is linked. The land issue has now crept back. First in 1984, where, according to Pierre Préau (Préau, 1984): the tourist portion of the alpine area has become a residential space marked by "renewal and turbulence instead of the themes of tradition and stability that once prevailed".
- 19 From the late 1980s, the **social consequences** of the massive developments of previous decades became of concern to researchers and threatened the territorial buildings. For J-P. Bozonnet (1989), small land ownership is one of the hallmarks of the mountain's territorial identity. However, it is in Switzerland that a direct link is made between the loss of identity (especially landscape) and urbanisation, the most criticised form of which is the **holiday home**. G. Rudaz (Rudaz, 2002) worries about the spread of the Crans-Montana ski resort and its attendant ill, the loss of a mountain identity. In France, the only researcher who has been studying holiday homes since 1996 is J. David (David, 1966). French researchers have focused on the economic impact of the vicissitudes of the property market. T. Duboeuf (Duboeuf, 2006) and V. Renard (2008) address the issue of the sustainability of the mountain tourist economy. Duboeuf calls for a new land management system while Renard sets mountain development against land economy.
- 20 The two authors prefigured this issue, where the articles also propose to decision-makers to reposition the land issue at the heart of territorial policies. Then, maybe, the problems of today and the uncertainties of tomorrow will be absorbed into the land issue. The lines are shifting in the mountains. Like elsewhere, the return of the land issue is a fact and we must remain attentive to the implementation of land management policies because resorts can in their turn become the "ideal place where transformations are reflected and not (?) the sluggishness of civilisation" (Giudici, 2000).

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NOTES

1. In 2007, Chamonix hosted the 9th tourism summits called "le Foncier : du « boum » au déséquilibre des sites touristiques": Land: from the boom to tourist imbalances.
2. *Télérama Magazine*, August 2010, p. 50 (Too much skiing; after 40 years of the white gold rush, the mountain is suffering from urbanisation).
3. The "doctrine" reached its climax with the development of the *Plan-neige* (snow development plan) that was as ambitious as it came late. It was designed in 1970, when the press was already attacking the urbanisation of high-altitude areas; see Knafou R.

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