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Gender relations in French and British mountaineering

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Delphine Moraldo

EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Delphine Moraldo

- 1 Since alpine clubs first appeared in Europe in the mid 19th century, mountaineering has been one of the most strongly masculinised practices. Not only are mountaineers mostly men, but mountaineering involves manly and heroic social dispositions that establish male domination (Louveau, 2009).
- 2 Because mountain activities are a feminine-masculine construction, I chose here to look at the practice of mountaineering through the lens of autobiographies of female mountaineers. In these accounts, women never fail to mention male mountaineers, thus giving us an insight into men's perception of them. They prove to be particularly clarifying in illustrating gender relations in mountaineering. But before looking at the content of these texts, the very small proportion of autobiographies written by women already tells us something about their symbolic place in the mountaineering world. This begs the question of what makes women feel "authorised" to write about themselves and whether their social characteristics are any different from other women.
- 3 Unsurprisingly in the case of a strongly masculinised sport, these accounts are rare. Amongst a corpus of 57 autobiographies of French (29) and British (28) mountaineers from the 19th century onwards¹, feminine narratives are underrepresented to such an extent that I couldn't find more than four of them at this stage of my research: those penned by Micheline Morin (1899-1972), Catherine Destivelle (1960-), Elizabeth Aubrey Le Blond (1861-1934) and Gwen Moffat (1924-). I chose to extend this small corpus with

the biographies of Henriette d'Angeville (1794-1871) and Alison Hargreaves (1962-1995), which contain extracts from their diaries (Cosnier, 2006; Rose, Douglas, 2000).

- 4 These accounts are historically and geographically scattered, bringing into play new interpretative axes which add to the dialectic of the relation between genders: a historical reading and a national reading of gender-related representations of mountaineering. Nevertheless, while keeping in mind that geographical and historical contexts are of paramount significance – it will be necessary to return to it later – it is here the sociological question of representations of relations between genders that will be the central objet of the analysis.

Mountaineers	Social properties
Henriette d'Angeville (1794- 1871)	A French aristocrat, famous for her ascent of Mont Blanc in 1838.
Elizabeth Aubrey Le Blond (1861-1934)	A British aristocrat, famous mountaineer, advocate of female parties and first president of the Ladies' Alpine Club (1907)
Micheline Morin (1899-1972)	From an upper class background, she is the sister of Jean-Antoine Morin, mountaineer, <i>polytechnicien</i> . A member of the Groupe de Haute Montagne, she practices mountaineering in all female parties, then with her husband from 1839. She wrote several books about mountaineering.
Gwen Moffat (1924-)	From an upper class background. She becomes a mountain guide, then a crime novel writer. She practices mountaineering in the UK with the Pinnacle Club (for women).
Catherine Destivelle (1960-)	Her father is an engineer. She becomes a physiologist before undertaking a professional career in mountaineering. She makes numerous solo ascents, amongst them the great north faces of the Alps.
Alison Hargreaves (1962-1995)	Her father is an engineer and her mother a headmistress. A professional mountaineer, she makes solo ascents of the Alps north faces and of the Everest, without oxygen. She dies on K2 (Ketu).

Chart 1. Social properties of mountaineers

Mountaineering as a masculine practice which leaves little room to women

- 5 Statistics of the main national mountain sports organisations provide us with an approximate² measurement of the proportion of female and male mountaineers. In 2010, they show a clear overrepresentation of men: the British Mountaineering Council (BMC) counts 20.3% of women amongst its members, the Fédération Française des Clubs Alpains et de Montagne (FFCAM) 36.4%³. The gap widens for mountaineering. Thus, in France, women represent 25.8% of mountaineers (and ice climbers), but 35.5% of rock climbers and 43.7% of hikers (including hiking with snowshoes)⁴. This type of data is not available in the BMC annual report, but it indicates that women are in a minority among mountaineers, and amongst them scarce are those who, unlike men, select mountaineering as their main activity. Thus one can conclude that the closer one gets to the “pure” practice of mountaineering, the more the proportion of men increases. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that these recent figures are the result of a slow process of feminisation – although purely relative – of mountaineering. The Club Alpin Français (CAF) counts only 6.8% of women amongst its members in 1882 (Lejeune, 1988), 15% of in 1914, and 22% in 1982 (Hoibian, 2009). As for the Alpine Club (AC), its historical British equivalent, it was for men only until 1974⁵ and has since admitted 5.3% of women amongst its members⁶.
- 6 In view of the statistics, mountaineering is a masculine practice. It is also the case when one looks at social dispositions, norms, values, or representations conveyed by

mountaineering narratives. Unquestionably, heroic masculinity is expressed through the ways in which mountaineers tell their ascent since mountaineering appeared. This prevalence of heroic masculine features is visible, for instance, in British as well as in French narratives, through a warlike and conquering rhetoric⁷ (the ascent being described as a “campaign”, a “struggle” to “defeat” or “conquer” a summit), and the parallel which is drawn between the domination of the mountain and the male domination (the “virgin” peaks are “possessed”, “assaulted”, their “prestige lost”, the “virginal purity” of the summit snow is “trampled upon”, etc.). Furthermore, it can be assumed that the highly conquering conception of British mountaineering, practiced, institutionalised, and sportivised in the 19th century by members of a rising economic middle class educated in public schools (where such qualities as endurance and abnegation were valorised) and particularly in favour of imperialism (Hansen, 1991), could have influenced early the “style” of French narratives. Indeed, the conception that prevailed in France, of French mountaineering as a “cultivated excursionism” (Hoibian, 2000), didn’t originally predispose mountaineers to such a display of heroism in their texts. Or, in a more anthropological perspective, one can rather consider (high) mountains as a place of bodily engagement which provides a higher symbolic benefit to men than women (Louveau, 2009). Therefore, it is as relevant to observe what organises narratives from the perspective of the gender differences as from the perspective of the national differences⁸.

Female writers as doubly deviant

- 7 There is an overwhelming overrepresentation of autobiographies written by men (94% of the narratives). From the 19th century onwards, the proportion of female writers (6%) is therefore smaller than the proportion of members of clubs. The sporting properties of authors of autobiographies “focused on mountaineering” could be an explanation: these writers belong to the mountaineering elite, that is, the closed group of “great mountaineers”. For them, writing an autobiography sanctions a high-level mountaineering career. However, women are particularly underrepresented within the population of great mountaineers⁹. This underrepresentation is even stronger than the one of working-class mountaineers (24% of autobiography writers), who represent the other atypical group within the population of mountaineers, composed mostly of members of the upper classes. Indeed, the fact that mountaineering is a masculine practice with heroic connotations makes the transgression of the gender order stronger than the transgression of the social order. It is then not surprising that female mountaineers transgress only the gender order: they all belong to upper classes (Chart 1).
- 8 For women, practising high-level mountaineering and writing an autobiography about it represents a deviant act¹⁰. Does this confirm a more general attitude of transgression towards gender norms? Reading their narratives, it is indeed possible to show that their atypical place in sport is often connected to an atypical social role. These women, although in different ways according to times and countries, question gender norms by practicing mountaineering in an innovative way (and by refusing the place granted to women by male mountaineers), but also by having an unconventional social and family life: for the three mountaineers born before the 20th century, this atypical character results for instance to their emancipation from a traditional family life. Here the

historical comparison allowed by the corpus leads to nuance the idea that all women mountaineers would be as “exceptional” as the pioneers (Louveau, 2009). It is therefore important to take into account the historical and contextual dimensions, as a certain compliance with gender norms can be seen amongst the most contemporary mountaineers.

Transgressive pioneers

- 9 Cécile Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo and Jean Saint-Martin compared the policies of the CAF (1874) and the AC (1857) during their first years of existence and reached the conclusion of the conformity of French women to the normative model established by the CAF: a moderate and temporary feminine practice, under the guidance of a man. This French “feminine excursionism” is opposed to the British model of complete and utter exclusion of women, who paradoxically find there the freedom to practice outside the normative frameworks of a club (Ottogalli-Mazzacavallo, Saint-Martin, 2004).
- 10 However, previous to the creation of the CAF, d’Angeville found herself in a situation of exclusion similar to the one faced by the English pioneers, even though this exclusion was symbolic and not institutional. At the same time, the AC was forbidden to women, amongst them Le Blond. Each of the two women demonstrated a strong will to transgress the gender norms, and they reacted to the masculine domination on the alpine microcosm by satisfying their (deviant) desire for action and risk-taking. D’Angeville was raised by a father impregnated with Voltaire’s philosophy, surrounded by male siblings¹¹, and she rebelled against the catholic orthodoxy immediately after leaving her pension, reading “books of controversy” that were forbidden to her as being “above her age or her understanding”, and criticising the dominated place of women, regretting that “God hadn’t given her moustache” (Cosnier, 2006)¹². She never got married and she climbed Mont Blanc aged 42 without a chaperone (although with guides)¹³. Le Blond, born 67 years before d’Angeville, was also atypical. She got married three times¹⁴, but she never stopped climbing for the sake of convenience, as it could be expected from Victorian female mountaineers¹⁵. She stood out by being the first woman to lead an all-female party, in winter (1900), but also to climb in the Himalayas. By creating the LAC in 1907, she openly denounced the misogyny of the AC. Moreover she practised activities where women were scarce: she was an outstanding ice-skater, a pioneer cyclist, and also a renowned photographer.
- 11 As for d’Angeville, le Blond’s emancipation was made possible by an important personal wealth. This allowed the two women to stay in the Alps for long (and eventually to settle there), the Alps being a place of social and geographical exile that made transgression easier. Pioneers were constantly subjected to criticism and their achievements were questioned¹⁶. They didn’t dare challenge all conventions. For instance, the two women used to wear some sort of trousers during their ascents, but put them on far from the villages.

Morin and Moffat: between conformity and disobedience towards gender norms

- 12 Morin and Moffat practiced mountaineering in the 1920-30s and 1950-60s, and they were also deviant: they openly challenged male domination in mountaineering by

advocating mountaineering amongst women. Morin was one of the first women to climb at a hard level with an all-female party, with Alice Damesme and her sister-in-law Nea Morin. Moffat became the first female British mountain guide in 1953 and climbed within the Pinnacle Club, one of the all-female clubs born after the LAC.

Figure 1. Micheline Morin: cover of her autobiography

Source: bibliothèquedaphinoise.blogspot.fr

- 13 This explicit transgression of the gender order in the field of mountaineering can also be seen in their respective family life. Moffat, who led a bohemian life for several years, was the most deviant. Still underage, she enrolled in the army as a truck driver then deserted to follow a pacifist who taught her climbing, refusing to return to the bourgeois lifestyle of her mother. When she became a guide – a vocation as well as a profession¹⁷ – she was a wife and a mother. Morin got married at 40 to a man who was 15 years younger than her. At this time, she had already made a many difficult ascents. The two women eventually married, which marked the end of all female mountaineering for Morin. Gender transgression existed, but in the context of the 1920-60s it was probably less strong than at the time of the pioneers.

Modern mountaineers: less transgressive than their predecessors

- 14 The fact that mountaineering opened progressively to women and the growing equality in gender relations seem to have contributed to a less transgressive attitude on the part of modern mountaineers, as if these women had succeeded in establishing themselves in the sporting field while respecting gender norms¹⁸. For Destivelle and Hargreaves, being atypical in sport didn't necessarily go together with being atypical in gender relations. Destivelle stood amongst the best female climbers in the 1980s before

becoming an outstanding mountaineer in the 1990s, making notable solitary and winter ascents of the three great north faces of the Alps. Hargreaves was the first woman to make the ascent of these three faces in one season, before being the first woman to make a solitary ascent of Mount Everest, without oxygen. She died on K2 in 1995. Both women were amongst the first professional female mountaineers¹⁹. Despite these achievements (challenging the gender order), none of the two women truly contested gender norms, especially in their family lives. Destivelle, whose manager was also her first partner, married a mountaineer. After her first child was born, she stopped solitary climbing. Hargreaves married an older man; her coach and manager. Although a mother of two, she didn't stop mountaineering, encouraged as she was by her husband to pursue her career. This scandalised the media. Therefore, it is hard to say whether Hargreaves was more deviant than Destivelle, since she followed her manager's and husband's advice.

- 15 Despite the stronger conformity to gender norms for the most contemporary mountaineers, all six women were pioneers in sport, having all pushed the boundaries of what had been authorised and accepted for women to achieve. This is perhaps this status of exception within the mountaineering world (in relation to their dominated and atypical situation) that gave them legitimacy to write autobiographies focused on their mountaineering careers: it seems that female mountaineers have to justify their status of exception in the sport (being a "great mountaineer amongst women" isn't enough, they need to match men's standards) to feel authorised to write about themselves. Unsurprisingly, the ones who write are also the ones who already possess a certain volume of cultural capital (the lack of which would mean a double deficit of legitimacy)²⁰.

The unvoiced gender discourse: female perception of men and male perception of women

- 16 Autobiographies of mountaineers contain indications, anecdotes or statements that unveil the author's perception of the gender order. These accounts reveal the symbolic place of each individual (and his/her gender) in the mountaineering world.

Male perception of women: particular case of British mountaineers²¹

- 17 Along the whole period under study, putting aside the most recent narratives, men see women from their dominant position, which leads, above all, to the absence of women in their writings: in general, women are scarcely mentioned. Reading their autobiographies, it seems that great mountaineers almost never met female mountaineers, and even less practised the sport with them. This is particularly true of working class mountaineers, who adhere to the norm of differentiated role models (Passeron, De Singly, 1984).
- 18 On the 28 autobiographies of British mountaineers that were found, only two, amongst the most recent, briefly relate the encounter with female mountaineers (Venables, 2007; Cave, 2005). In fact, the only visible women in these narratives are often mothers or wives: the latter are never mountaineers, and can be described as opposing their husbands' urge to climb by trying to keep them at home (Fowler, 1995; Kirkpatrick, 2008). For some working class mountaineers, the ideal wife simply doesn't climb

(Haston, 1972; Whillans, 1971). Women, when they are mentioned, are therefore described as passive, in line with gender stereotypes (Héritier, 1996).

- 19 In general, reading these autobiographies gives the impression of an immersion into an all-male world, in which instructors, peers and rivals are men. Femininity appears essentially in metaphorical form: a mountain is sometimes compared to a virgin to conquer, sometimes to a courtesan to seduce (Majastre, 2009).

Female perception of men

- 20 Women's perception of men combines implicit indications and explicit contestation of the male domination in mountaineering²².
- 21 First of all, the authors describe a practice closely controlled by men, implicitly presented as owners of the alpine knowledge, mentors, professors, and protectors. D'Angeville and Le Blond were accompanied by guides²³. Morin, Moffat and Hargreaves were initiated by male mentors. Morin described her first ascent following her brother and a male friend, both acting like guides. Moffat is initiated by a young man, Tom, for whom she deserts the army. Hargreaves is taken in hand by her father, then by a local climber, J. Ballard, who she married, and who led her towards a professional career. As for Destivelle, first initiated by CAF instructors and guides with whom she had close relationships, she met her partner and future manager on the shooting of a climbing movie.
- 22 Unlike male mountaineers, women nurture special relationships – in particular love relationships for Morin, Moffat, Hargreaves and Destivelle²⁴ – with mountaineers. At least for a while, they see themselves as superior. Seeking male recognition, they behave in different ways related to social and sport contexts: while the pioneers wanted to climb *like* men, modern mountaineers claim their will to do *better* than them, and even to be recognised as superior in the mountaineering world.
- 23 The desire to do *like* the men represents a transgression of boundaries between genders which encounters male resistance, especially for the pioneers. It took Le Blond several years to be authorised to enter the men's group in ice skating. Only the later generations can criticise this male domination. Tricks²⁵ were sometimes necessary for these women to practice the way they want; to climb with women (Morin), or to enter the guide examinations (Moffat). Using well-chosen terms to emphasize everyone's place, Morin gives a sarcastic description²⁶ of the unequal relationship between men and women in mountaineering: the man is dominant (he is a "great mountaineer", with a "masculine ego", "demonstrating his muscular superiority") and the woman follows (she is "a beginner", "nice", "charming", "lovely package", "very proud to be guided" and to "wear trousers"). These are fixed roles that the man refuses to switch. Morin calls for an equal relation of friendship within mixed parties. Morin's claims should be replaced within the social and sport context of the time. Whereas explicit contestation of the masculine supremacy is hard for the pioneers like D'Angeville or Le Blond, Morin climbs at a time when female mountaineering is growing and when social issues like women's suffrage start to be seriously discussed.
- 24 The last generation of mountaineers goes further in the contestation, by confronting men in order to be *better* than them²⁷. For instance, Destivelle "exults" when she sees men fail where she succeeded easily, and "loves" to overtake male parties and to "go past them with just a piece of gear every ten meters" (p. 24 and p. 71). Moffat expresses

her satisfaction when she has to pull too confident male clients. Yet even in these cases of contestation, it appears that women are always looking for some masculine recognition, as when they never fail to report men's positive comments about them. By doing so, women reveal their dominated place and their search for recognition. Men's comments on women are also normalizing: the same way Sayeux describes men who compare female professional surfers to men (Sayeux, 2006), "to climb like a man", or "to be as strong/brave as a man" is a compliment which emphasizes each gender's symbolic place and thus contributes to a "naturalisation of the difference between genders" proper to male domination (Bourdieu, 1998): the mountaineer who transgressed "too much" the gender order becomes "too strong" to be a woman²⁸.

Conclusion

- 25 The fact that female mountaineers who wrote their autobiographies are so few in a sport characterized by hegemonic masculinity entails two important correlates.
- 26 On one hand, these women are deviant at the sport level. They all have pushed the boundaries of what had been authorized or thinkable for women to do. This sport atypicality sometimes adds up to a social atypicality, especially when women's place in society is undermined: the pioneers are thus the most deviant of all. They transgress the gender order at the sport level but also in their social and family lives (helped by important amounts of economic capital).
- 27 On the other hand, the question of relations between genders is central in their writings. Whereas men "belong" to this world organised by masculine agents and representations, women, as dominated, question gender relations. These two postures reveal the symbolic places of genders in mountaineering.
- 28 In this analysis, the contextual dimension, although not central, shouldn't be ignored: it's always in the light of social and sport characteristics of a time (and a country) that the deeds of these women should be analysed.

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NOTES

1. The corpus is made up of all autobiographical narratives written by the French and British mountaineering elite – the “great mountaineers” – since the 1840s. There are three levels of analysis of these texts: as sources of factual information, as retrospective narratives of social and sport trajectories, as expressions of mountaineer representations and ethos. A comparison

between England (the country where mountaineering as a sport was “invented” (Hansen, 1991; Tailland, 1996)) and France (where a more contemplative version of mountaineering was preferred for a long time (Hoibian, 2000)) allows to see how two definitions of the same practice have been constructed and have “crystallised” over time, and how they can be reflected in specific mountaineers trajectories. This is a subject explored in a PhD research (in sociology) still in progress.

2. Because not all mountaineers belong to alpine clubs.
3. BMC : Membership Survey 2010, Final Report; FFCAM : data from the FFCAM (2010). The difference between the data can be explained by the fact that not exactly the same sports are taken into account in both inquiries. Nevertheless it is the orders of magnitude that matters.
4. Similar orders of magnitude can be found in the 2010 survey made by O. Hoibian about FFCAM members (Hoibian, 2009).
5. They gather within the Ladies' Alpine Club (LAC), which never counted more than 161 members.
6. AC and LAC : personal counting (Alpine Club Library archives).
7. This rhetoric, omnipresent in British narratives since the 19th century, has its hour of glory in France after the second world war (in books such as *Annapurna, First Conquest of an 8000-meter Peak* (Herzog, 1951), or *The Conquistadors of the Useless* (Terray, 1961)).
8. Even if, as it was said before, there is no question of evacuating the importance of contexts (historical, socio-economic, and national) within which these gender differences apply.
9. The same conclusion is reached when counting women in Wells' *Who's Who in British Climbing*, which lists 680 great British mountaineers from the 19th century to today: there are only 48 of them, that is, 7% of the total (Wells, 2008). Unfortunately I haven't found the French equivalent, but the proportion of female guides (1%) speaks for itself in terms of underrepresentation of women (Louveau, 2009).
10. In sociology, deviance means the transgression of norms, that is to say this type of behaviours going against those considered as “normal” in a given society, and which are sanctioned as such by members of society (Becker, 1963).
11. In an anachronistic way, this reminds the “inversed socialisation” (*socialisation inversée*) described by Christine Mennesson concerning women practising masculine sports (Mennesson, 2006).
12. Extracts from letters written by d'Angeville to her brother.
13. Not until the 1860s was it possible for some English women to practice mountaineering without chaperone (and even without men), for instance the sisters Anna Pigeon (1832-1917) and Ellen Pigeon (1836-1902).
14. She left little room to her marital life in her autobiography (even less did she write about her son, born in 1880) compared to her ascents and travels.
15. As did Ellen Pigeon after she got married, in 1876.
16. After d'Angeville succeeded on her ascent of mont Blanc, reactions went from admiration to resentment for those who thought mont Blanc had been “humiliated” (Cosnier, 2006). This discredit of summits after first female ascents is a constant feature in the history of mountaineering... and in masculine narratives.
17. Earning a living wasn't a concern for her predecessors, who had a significant amount of economic capital.
18. Destivelle's case is particularly interesting here: in the 1980s, she conforms easily to the media expectations by displaying her femininity while climbing (by wearing a pink swimsuit, etc.).
19. And because of that competed against each other for some female first ascents.

20. Feeling « authorised » is a precondition to writing which depends on social properties of the author (Lahire, 2005). By way of comparison, several great (male) mountaineers from working class background have written their autobiography: in this case, the transgression is only social.
21. The references quoted below are taken from autobiographies by British mountaineers, written between the 1870s and 2008, that I analysed more in details than autobiographies by French mountaineers. It is therefore important to warn against any abusive generalisation to the French case. Nevertheless, a quick reading of French texts, and an article by Majastre (2009), confirms the conclusions the study of the British autobiographies led to.
22. About male domination, see Bourdieu, 1998 ; Héritier, 1996 ; Löwy, 2006.
23. Guideless mountaineering was then unthinkable.
24. Because of a too big social distance, this was impossible for the pioneers and their guides. The exception is the aristocrat Isabella Straton, who married her guide Jean Charlet in 1876.
25. Trick (*ruse*), as opposed to “strategy” (*strategie*), is a negative stereotypical feature associated to the feminine (Héritier, 1996).
26. Chapter “*Alpinisme Galant*” (p. 179-184)
27. Often by emphasizing their sport “female” specificities (technique, skills...).
28. Hence some polemics about the contemporary mountaineers described in this article, for instance Hargeaves, mother of two who was criticised for having dared undertaking solitary climbing in the Himalayas, as if femininity and heroism/danger were incompatible.
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ABSTRACTS

From its emergence in the middle of the 19th century, mountaineering has always been a very masculine activity, which is practised by men and which conveys manly representations. The study of the very few autobiographies written by female mountaineers tells us something about gender relations in French and British mountaineering. First of all, the scarcity of these narratives (compared to narratives written by men) is evidence of the symbolical place of women in mountaineering. Then, these texts bring to light the atypical trajectories and social dispositions (each time replaced within the social and historical context of the life of the author) of these women. Finally, they show how female mountaineers consider male mountaineers of their time – men are omnipresent in female narratives, whereas women are almost absent in men’s ones – and reveal implicitly their inferior status. In this study, historical and social context, although not central, is important: each time, it is in relation to the social and sport norms of a time period that one can appraise the place of female mountaineers.

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AUTHOR

DELPHINE MORALDO

PhD student in Sociology, Centre Max Weber, ENS de Lyon (UMR 5283),
delphine.moraldo@ens-lyon.fr