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Lever le voile : les montagnes au masculin-féminin

Foreword

Casting new light on masculine and feminine mountains

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Foreword

Casting new light on masculine and feminine mountains

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Harry Forster

- 1 Nowadays no one would dare disregard women's contribution to mountain life. As long ago as the 1960s various articles in the *Journal of Alpine Research* discussed the part played by women in mountain activities, but this is the first time that an issue has been devoted specifically to the issue of gender and mountain life. An opportunity to note – if need be – that relations between the mountains and their human settlers take both genders, masculine and feminine, despite the fact that scientific literature has tended to depict this world from the perspective of male narratives, representations and practices. But make no mistake, our purpose is not to demand some sort of catching-up process, reinstating a female angle on the highlands or advocating a neo-deterministic approach. The aim of the articles in the present issue is to signify an understanding of the mountains by means of gender-based approaches; to grasp representations, practices and stakes, which bring into play masculine and feminine strands of mountain life; to decipher feminist struggles, women's emancipation, conquests and setting of new targets to gain recognition for their work, status and bodies in the mountains; but also to understand male and female interaction, in social, cultural and economic terms, and its effects, organizing, ranking, publicizing and transmitting all too frequently stereotyped gender representations and practices, which fashion mountain society; lastly to add to work on mobility, economic activity or indeed sport from the perspective of gender. All these views contribute to enriching analysis of the mountains in the social sciences and bringing new impetus to cultural and social investigation of the many identities present in the mountains.
- 2 In the 20th century the mountains, as described by Raoul Blanchard in his account of the discovery of the Alps (1962), featured as a (feminine) object of seduction, to be

discovered, loved and conquered: “As a native lowlander I felt a bit at a loss before the Alps. I was ready to love them; rather, I already loved them, but I barely understood them ... I saw ‘virgin spaces’”. Looking at articles in the *Journal*, the monographs on Alpine regional geography generally dealt with women in terms of basic gender-based distinctions and according to their domestic duties. For instance, in 1919, in an article on pastoral activity in Dévoluy, Philippe Arbos wrote: “the wife [...], who got ahead of the sheep by taking the train to the nearest station, opened the windows of the chalet, the door to the stable and aired the straw mattresses in the sun. Meanwhile the shepherd set up the fences” (Arbos, 1919). Later it was as much women’s domestic role that was emphasized as their productive function; but their professional activity as such stayed well out of sight. Concluding her analysis of changes in glove-making in Grenoble, Germaine Veyret (Veyret, 1941) highlighted the unregistered piecework done by women: “A final feature of the past which should be mentioned before concluding is the persistence of work done by women at home. Industrial concentration is tending to put an end to such work in the countryside, but in Grenoble itself it remains an essential feature of glove manufacturing. Women still see it as a way of occupying their spare time while increasing the household’s resources, and glove manufacturers find it advantageous to employ this floating labour, which can be used on the spot according to demand.” Adopting a new approach to female labour, Danielle Mingasson (Mingasson, 1968) published the first article in the *Journal* to focus specifically on the issue of women, addressing the “characteristics of women’s employment in the Grenoble urban area”. From this point onwards attention focused on the conditions of salaried workers and the productive functions of women in certain Alpine valleys. In the 1970-80s work by Geneviève Durand adopted this angle, but broadened its scope to include highland massifs. Her articles put the accent on the part played by women in mountain craft-working, but they overlooked the issue of recognition for women’s part in highland life. For example there was little mention of feminist struggles in these areas (in particular efforts to obtain legal recognition for their status as joint partners in mountain farms).

- 3 Supplementing this work, but from the perspective of the geography of representations Hervé Gumuchian and Jean-Paul Guérin (Gumuchian, Guérin, 1976) drew attention in their study of mountain sports to gender stereotypes, pointing out the restrictive role given to women in the transmission of sporting practices: “Although women can become instructors, there are two specific categories reserved for women: ski-nursery minders and children’s instructors (which became an official title in France in 1970). They may give lessons in the basics of skiing, up to and including turning”. The authors advocated rising above such conventional representations. During the following period the expanding tourist development of the mountains contributed to the recognition of women’s part in everyday life and reception services associated with the travel trade. For example, Jacky Herbin (Herbin, 1980) explained: “the tourist trade seems to be a powerful factor in the metamorphosis of regional society: in particular it is contributing to growth of the service sector, a shift to salaried employment [...], to women’s promotion and emancipation”. Pursuing this line of investigation, other articles – such as the one by Lydie Pezelet (Pezelet, 1996) on self-catering gîtes in the High Atlas – focused on the part played by women in various tourist activities, bringing out the domesticity effects linked to the travel trade in various mountain settings.
- 4 This (far from exhaustive) review of past articles in the *Journal of Alpine Research / Revue de Géographie Alpine* shows the timid attention paid to gender-based analysis in

scientific output on the mountains. The present issue aims to cast more light, without attempting to explain all aspects of gender-based analysis as applied to the highlands. The articles in this issue adopt three main perspectives.

Transgressing boundaries between genders: the relation to slopes and the mirror effect

- 5 The relation to slopes and to verticality has been compared with physical conquest and/or male symbolism, setting aside significant implications for women in everyday life, in culture and the links they create in the highlands. Often presented from the point of view of male narratives (explorers, mountain guides), the highlands are also, though perhaps in a more intimate way, the subject of female narratives – exploration and discovery, transgression and/or real-life adventures, such as those recorded by Alexandra David-Néel.
- 6 Gender-based codes, norms and values were and still are expressed in the way mountains, their culture and practices are represented. The expression – in literature, film or art – of male and female figures enables us to decipher the *imaginaire*, symbols, norms and values expressed on and in the mountains. The local media also acted as a vector for resistance to bodily emancipation, to women skiers and more specifically to their participation in competition skiing. In the 1930s the local press [in the French Alps] depicted women skiers in a “fixed body”, wearing garments associated with the current fashions, resulting in a certain aestheticization of the female body. Michaël Attali, Natalia Bazoge, Sandrine Jamain-Samson and Jean Saint-Martin analysed this representation of women skiers in a historical perspective, an approach which endorsed analysis of the recomposition of gender in the highlands through sporting practice. Women played a role in this process, without gaining recognition as experienced athletes. On the contrary their activity was perceived as being atypical in social terms, but also from the point of view of sport and/or symbolism.
- 7 The narratives of women pioneers (guides and climbers) evoke this singularity by showing how women mountaineers diverted male norms (virility, performance). They also evoke the way in which women guides and/or climbers adopted male corporeal norms in order to gain recognition. Obviously these representations contributed to a posture of observation and narrative patterns in which the masculine side was overplayed. Delpine Moraldo adopts this line in her text on women climbers. Furthermore the role of “mentor” played by experienced men reinforced the gender effects of such over-playing. As Rozenn Martinoia explains, the heroic male stereotype among professional guides, associated with their status as points of reference and repositories of skill, prompted women guides to identify with these figures, through a mirror effect. They developed careers modelled on those of their male counterparts, even with regard to fleeting sexual entanglements between women customers and guides. Moreover this construction also reveals domination effects for women guides, often traditionally perceived as assistants dependent on male technical know-how, and perpetuating amorous relationships between (cultivated) initiates and newcomers (in denial of themselves).

A shift in perspective to observe gender effects: from trades to the in-place economy

- 8 The fundamental role played by women in managing agricultural spaces and/or systems in the highlands (pluriactivity, diversification, pastoral activities) has been emphasized and gained recognition thanks to the work of trade federations, non-government organizations and researchers. Work done in the 2000s (Françoise Gerbaux, 2000; Emmanuelle George-Marcelpoil and Sophie Louargant, 2005) demonstrated the predominant economic, cultural and social role of women in mountain farming and in the creation of new activities. The assertion of a professional status in activities related to the travel trade and culture found expression in the innovatory launch of women's networks organizing the sale of products and/or services. This led to recognition by organizations such as Fédération Française d'Economie Montagnarde, the Federation of Nature and National Parks of Europe, France's Association Nationale des Elus de la Montagne, Mountain Wilderness and the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps (CIPRA), and thus to a re-evaluation of women's status and role in the mountains.
- 9 Magali Talandier has taken a fresh look at this topic, revealing the existence of a substantial in-place economy associated with an increasing proportion of women among the working population. The author emphasizes the vulnerability of certain jobs traditionally held by women in the mountains, notably textile, while demonstrating the economic effects of gender-differentiation in the economies of highland areas of France.

When public intervention strengthens gender effects in the mountains

- 10 The mountains have been and still are the scene of streams of traffic, migration or multiform mobility (on a daily or seasonal basis). Such migration and mobility concern both sexes and bring into play many forms of reality. Through travel, to or from work or amenities, women play a part in transferring, mixing, disseminating and drawing together learning and know-how. They also draw attention to crossings, transgression and emancipation, thus changing their relations with the male world. All these forms of movement have had socio-spatial and territorial impacts. Since the 1990s the European Union has supported initiatives to boost the employability and mobility of women in rural and upland areas. Observations that women are largely restricted to the service sector have simply reinforced deterministic gender-based configurations. Thierry Amrein's account of conditions in the Swiss Alps throws light on such trends through analysis of measures to assist women's mobility in the mountains.

The first issue of the *Journal of Alpine Research* / *Revue de Géographie Alpine* dedicated to gender ... but certainly not the last

- 11 This issue emphasizes the value of research into gender issues, as applied to highland practices and customs. Other cultural and social dimensions will no doubt form the basis of future contributions to the Journal. The present issue proposes studies which fit into the larger picture of research into gender, combined in particular with territorial resources, employment and women's trades in the highlands. Socio-historical items relating to sporting practice and mountaineering supplement this gender-based analysis. Lastly, more unusual items on amorous relations between the sexes as part of mountain jobs offer an incentive to analyse this deployment of genders in other Alpine and mountain settings. The present research certainly opens the way for fresh forms of reflection.
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