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Alpine Metropolis. Towards a New Partnership Between Towns and Mountains?

Marie-Christine Fourny

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- 1 This issue encourages us to reopen the discussion on the relation between towns and mountains, in light of metropolisation. Why *reopen* the discussion? Nearly 20 years ago now, the *Revue de Géographie Alpine* (which had not yet been renamed *Journal of Alpine Research*) devoted two successive issues to the Alpine town. The relation between towns and the Alps was broached in two different ways: on the one hand, through Alpine identity, and on the other, through economic development. The economic angle made it possible to examine the effect of milieu and in particular the mountain morphology through the prism of polarisation models. It led to a mixed observation, showing that though it was possible to outline “specific Alpine factors, such as relief, traditions, accessibility and weak population density” (Perlik, 1999), the trajectory of these towns did not differentiate them from other similarly sized entities in Europe.
- 2 The second volume broached the representations and discourse leading to the identification of Alpine towns. It once again demonstrated the impossibility of defining common characteristics among Alpine towns, and even the challenge of delimitating Alpine towns faced with the dilution of urban features or the variability of regional divisions. Above all, the Alpine quality appeared to be a political, social or scientific construction, brandished for its ability to generate mobilising affiliations and valorising representations. The Alpine town was a performative argument, on which a political or ideological project could be based, whether relating to territorial appropriation (the Alpine “capital”), to a “club” (network of cities) or to the promotion of sustainable development (the “Alpine Cities of the Year” label).
- 3 Ultimately, both issues demonstrated that the meaning that could be given to the Alpine town was not – or was no longer – an economic or a functional one, but a symbolic one, and was found in the belonging and in the power of images rather than

in the exploitation of the mountain's natural or human resources. In other words, *the Alpine town*, as understood at the end of the twentieth century, could not be confused with *the town of the Alps*, as understood at the beginning of the very same century.

- 4 Contemporary urban evolutions have since placed the issue of metropolisation centre-stage. In the different Alpine countries, large or medium-sized metropolitan areas, of Munich, Milan, Turin, Geneva, of the Alps region, etc., cover mountainous spaces not only through economic or land-based interdependencies, but also from a legal, strategic and cultural point of view. Territorial reforms, in particular in France and Italy, have also conferred metropolitan status to vast urban spaces, which, for the most part, include mountain communities. At European level, the macroregional strategy for the Alpine region (EUSALP) reorganises the political limits of the Alpine region, including metropolitan areas. Furthermore, the cultural, landscape and recreational values of the mountain hold increasing importance in the economic development of piedmont conurbations, and continue to make valley slopes spaces in which urban areas can be created. In some ways, metropolisation demonstrates the vivacity of old issues which, far from being solved, are now raised with more acuity: protection of natural resources, land preservation, cultural trivialisation, economic future, etc. But it is not only a matter of heightened intensity: the phenomenon, by its very scope, entails a complexity and an originality of urbanisation processes, which suggest a deep transformation of the relationship between urban areas and mountain spaces.
- 5 Therefore, this issue calls into question the existence and the forms of a new territoriality: is the "mountain-metropolis" merely a larger Alpine town or does this merge between mountainous spaces and urban spaces lead to unprecedented creations? What does it mean for the transformation of political, social and economic relations between towns and mountains, both imaginary and in respect to the territorial action that brings them up-to-date? The "new partnership" mentioned in our title is a hypothesis that refers to the implementation and the management of a territorial integration, which the Alpine town or the metropolis would represent: can this be seen as overcoming the centre-periphery hierarchy or the dissociation between town and nature? Beyond knowledge of the process itself, these questions also have an epistemological significance. Management of urban regions requires new narratives on which the unity of these complex territories can be based. Yet these narratives convey discourse and representations relating to the towns and mountains whose relationship they define. Though the reshaping related to metropolisation in mountains produces new territories, it can also give new meaning to the generic categories of town and mountain. Indeed, cognitive representations guide their development, but in a reciprocal manner, public action changes representations through discourse or through the practices that it induces (Debarbieux and Fourny, 2004). Therefore, can metropolisation redefine the geographical objects that it redesigns? The work carried out on the processes to build the image of towns and mountains demonstrates that these notions refer to inherently opposite geographical categories (Debarbieux, 1999): their attributes, their geographical limitations and the defining values to which they refer are drawn from a relationship based on otherness, which is specific to the modern representations of the world, and from the opposition between the civilised world *and* the untamed world. The mountain-metropolis is therefore something of an oxymoron! But what are the effects on metropolitan construction? Is a partnership between opposites possible when organising and designing a territory? Or does this process, which associates metropolisation and mountains –and which is surprising given the

representations inherited both from a scientific and social point of view–, call for a new definition of the notions “urban”, “mountainous”, and even “territory”? This epistemological significance is proven throughout this issue; we will discuss this in more detail.

- 6 All of the articles defend the idea of a major reorganisation of territorial relations. Manfred Perlik opens the discussion with a perspective that is both regional and long-term and that demonstrates the obsolescence of the centre-periphery model, yet without all of its characteristics having disappeared. Monographs confirm this view. Authors agree unanimously that the relationship between town and mountain is no longer a dual one, with a confrontation of two geographical categories, but instead with their articulation. The resulting shape takes many names: metro-mountain, mountain-metropolis, metropolitan mountain... all of which reveal a still unstable conceptualisation but which seek to describe integration. In the words of F. Corrado, it is a matter of identifying a “tailored” entity that promotes exchange whilst recognising differences and viewing them as added value. The urban areas in question: Grenoble, Chambéry, Annecy, Nice, Trento, Turin, Pinerolo are French and Italian, and therefore part of national contexts marked by territorial reform and by the creation of a new status for metropolises. Case studies are clearly in keeping with this framework and analyse the relationship between town and mountain through modes of action that accompany institutionalisation. Consequently, most texts refer to development procedures or to planning: F. Corrado and A. Bertolino examine various strategic plans, F. Balaye, L. Bienvenu, P-A Landel and G. Debizet examine TEPOS (Positive Energy Territories) approaches, E. Roux analyses diagnostics, C. Ambrosino and J. Buyck reflect upon soil projects... The issues raised are therefore not those raised in 1999, on the future or the specificities of the Alpine town: these exist *de facto*. But this decreed mountain-metropolis must be built, and all of these authors demonstrate its empirical development through the practices and discussions related to its operational planning. Yet, analyses reveal –here again, unanimously– the complexity of representing and constructing this new territoriality. They demonstrate the absence of a model, an incomplete thought process. The analysis of methods of action is therefore all the more important than the references that should be sought or redefined: Alberto Magnaghi’s bio-regions are cited by F. Corrado and G. Dematteis, C. Ambrosino and J. Buyck examine the relevance of soil projects, inter-territoriality is often discussed. Though clearly without constituting a sufficiently mature framework to lead to operational application.
- 7 However, the outlines of dual territoriality have started to appear through successive local experiments. Authors therefore share a relational view of spaces: a heterogeneous territory requires interactions, in the absence of similarities. These relations are described in terms of exchanges and not through an unequal relationship based on power, as is the case for the centre-periphery relationship. G. Dematteis insists on reciprocity and suggests indicators of such reciprocity, E. Roux states the need for inter-knowledge, F. Balaye and *alii* refer to Rosavallon’s “equality-relationship”, M. Perlik calls for solidarity, A. Gretter examines the associative and cooperative models that the management of old or new common goods is capable of renewing. The semantic corpus used itself reveals this transformation of territorial representations that Federica Corrado hopes will arouse a new strategic view.

- 8 The implementation of this relational conceptual framework translates into the apparition of new operators, objects, media or indicators through which relations can be identified and built. As regards the organisation of spaces, C. Ambrosino and J. Buyck suggest structuring this town/mountain entity by relying on empty and intermediate spaces. The advantage of this is that it reverses the central position held by urban areas: the town is naturalised instead of the periphery being urbanised, or at the very least envisioned through the urban prism. Corrado touches on cooperation at borders, Bertolino defines Pinerolo as a centre for the coordination of relations between spaces, thus defining it based on its role in exchanges and not on a position of strength. These modalities not only translate a reticular approach to space, which is not new, but also reveal, on a deeper level, a perspective that could be described as *tissular*. Beyond the circulation system that is the network, it is a matter of weaving geographical continuities, providing a common *ground*, as demonstrated by Ambrosino and Buyck. This requires working on the organisation of areas or, to use Deleuze's words, as quoted by these two authors, to reflect upon the *folds* of the territory, folds which invite us to observe multiple angles and constantly changing territorial positions, who see the territorial tissue as a flexible form rather than a structure. The exchanges analysed in articles also make it possible to consider the idea of symmetry in relations. Though the topics of energy, water resources, food, leisure may not establish true reciprocity, they at the very least establish bidirectional flows, from which the notion of ecosystem service stems. The mountains specify this system through their verticality. In a territorial analysis falling within an ecological paradigm, slopes give a strategic value to higher spaces, when considering, for example, water, the view (see panoscopy¹), or temperatures.
- 9 More particularly, several articles question the conditions for the creation of a territorial structure based on a relational paradigm. These pass through a measure of exchanges, that G. Dematteis reports on by using the reciprocity indicators created for planning in Turin. They require particular governance, like that built in the TEPOS projects, or in the participatory processes in Trento. But beyond representation in terms of exchanges and reciprocity for energy flows or ecological systems, beyond the specific engineering required for implementation, what can be said for the cognitive and cultural disparities? Roux demonstrates inequality in the planning culture and methods of action, M. Perlik questions the ability for mountain spaces to launch autonomous projects: how can Alpine identity be expressed in a way that is not synonymous with withdrawal and opposition? In particular, he broaches this issue under the angle of regional construction. Does the formation of metropolises as part of different national or international networks not risk causing segmentation between competing regions? The notion of macroregion could counter this centrifugal movement. G. Dematteis recalls that a model based on reciprocity will not appear of its own accord. Mountains can be seen as a resource, exchanges can be broached from an ecological point of view, provided that actions are carried by commitments towards the environment. The example of the Nice metropolis by Lauranne Jacob is an illustration of this. According to her, the imposition of projects answering urban demands has increased in the metropolitan mountain zone. She reveals that there is a risk of a new dualism between a "cultural" centrality and a functional periphery, as stated by G. Dematteis. Reciprocity of transactions should therefore be put in place on a political level. F. Balaye, L. Bienvenu, P-A Landel and G. Debizet provide an interesting principle using the notion of communality, "understood as the ability to deliberate together, that

is to debate, decide and then act". More generally, it requires that the mountain communities be territorially *capable* (Sen, 2008; Debuissou, 2014) of building symmetrical political and cultural relations.

- 10 Ultimately, the topic of metropolisation in mountains places mountains in an unexpected position: as a laboratory for a renewal of metropolitan territory. This topic brings into play the transformation of relations between centre and periphery, dependant on the transformation of geographical value paradigms. Factors of change are not unique to mountains, but the symbolic power of mountains, combined with strong aesthetic, sensorial and recreational qualities, as well as with specific ecological systems, can increase the value of its natural environment, enabling these regions to take on a new position.
- 11 This renewal is not only political, but also geographical. The relation between nature and culture no longer seems to have to fall more within a division of space and differentiate between the categories of town and mountain. In the implementation of a metropolitan territoriality, the presence of mountains allows us to bring nature down, both symbolically and physically, to urban areas and, paradoxically, to build, in these areas, a way of proceeding towards and reflecting on sustainable towns.

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NOTES

1. *Panoscopism* is a neologism defined by the abuse of placing new constructions at high points, that dominate the landscape, without worrying about the view that these constructions create for others. (Rozenholc and Céleste, to be published in 2019)

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Marie-Christine Fourny is a professor at Grenoble-Alpes University and member of the research unit PACTE. She coordinates the LabEx Innovation in Mountain Territories (ITEM), whose research themes focus on the forms and capacities of mountain regions to adapt to global change. She is particularly interested in the effects of new representations of mountain environment in territorial recompositions.