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Fallow Mountains or Mountain Fallow Lands?

Editorial

Gian Paolo Torricelli and Sylvie Duvillard

- 1 This issue on “mountain fallow lands” neatly follows on from the concerns raised in a previous issue regarding the effects of climate change in the Alps,¹ which for at least the past two decades have appeared to doom the practice of skiing and snow sports in mid-mountain resorts (see, for example, Gauchon, 1986). In the summer of 2016, when the journal’s editorial board members were deliberating over themes to address, the conversation settled on “tourist wastelands” and their by-products, the closing of sports facilities, hotels and restaurants and the halting of ski lifts. These areas piqued our interest not insofar as they represent a new phenomenon but because they are a lingering indicator of the desertion of the mountains, which the press had also echoed,² but about which there was not – or no longer – any discourse (or debate) in the social sciences and, as a result, virtually no recent publications on the subject in the field of geography.
- 2 The issue that had to be tackled first and foremost was their specificity in the mountains; in other words, how and to what extent does the mountain define, or even generate, its fallow lands (or wastelands). To answer these questions, it was necessary to define more clearly what is meant by a “mountain fallow land”. Given the current crisis that many mountain regions are facing (as in the Apennines, which, unfortunately, are not addressed by the articles in this issue), we could have spoken of “fallow mountains”. It was a trap in which the architect authors of the “urban portrait of Switzerland” fell with their notion of “Alpine fallow lands” (*alpine Brachen* in German, or *friches alpines* in French) in reference to zones “(...) of decline and gradual recession. Their common feature is steady emigration (...)” (Diener, Herzog, Mieli, de Mauron, Schmid, 2006, p. 930).

A wasteland is a space that has been rendered obsolete, not a region or a valley that is simply in decline

- 3 Generally speaking, a fallow land (or a wasteland), including brownfields, is a (or a series of) abandoned object(s) comprising a delimited space that is not maintained and does not have a specific function. The term originally comes from agriculture: “(...) it is the tract of land that is left fallow, without any crops. Around 1460, the word first took on its figurative meaning: that which is left uncared for and untapped” (Raffestin, 2012, pp. 166–167). It has to be said that fallow land in agriculture is not always the result of permanent abandonment; the goal used to be (and sometimes still is) to leave the ground unused in order to restore its productive abilities. In the crop rotation prevalent among the agrarian systems of the 19th century, the practice of fallowing (i.e. leaving the ground uncultivated) bears the imprint of this history, but its meaning has moved far away from what is nowadays understood as a “wasteland”. The wastelands mentioned here, in fact, all involve the erasure of (social, economic or political) functions based on practices that are specific or at least related to the mountain environment.
- 4 A wasteland is a manifestation of the suspension of human activity, or even, more generally, a change in territoriality, as Claude Raffestin asserts. In short, it is something that has been rendered obsolete and, in principle, has no value in use. Evidently, the wasteland is not a geographic space: We clearly see that a valley, a city or even an entire region, with the exception of unlikely catastrophic situations, could only be called a “wasteland” in the context of applying a purely linguistic metaphor.

The former lives of mountain wastelands

- 5 The wasteland (or rather its space) signals a change, and our mountains are clearly full of such “signals” that take the form of sanatoriums, forts and barracks, heavy industry and remnants of agricultural and pastoral land use patterns. What do these “mountain wastelands” have in common with and what differentiates them from each other? Although far from exhaustive, the articles in this issue give us an overview of the similarities and differences between these abandoned spaces and goods in mountain regions. These texts encourage a classification of wastelands according to the functions they used to have. So, let us start with this approach.
- 6 First of all, there are “tourist wastelands”; these have been studied the most and have perhaps also become the most widespread, in part because of the rise in temperatures and because of snowfall, which is more and more unpredictable at elevations below 1,700–1,800 m. Various other causes are also to blame, and the reader will discover them in this issue – from the public’s loss of interest in winter sports to, according to the provocative and stimulating thesis of Philippe Bachimon (see his text in the “Mountains in fiction” section), the contemporary development of indoor facilities in urban and metropolitan areas near mountain ranges. Several articles in this issue mention the abandonment of the mid-mountain. Auvergne (see the text by Michel Lompech and Daniel Ricard), in particular, appears to have been affected by these cycles of abandonment that afflict tourist facilities; the mountains of Lombardy have

faced similar effects, with the difference that here it is not only tourist facilities but whole segments of the local economy that close (see the article by Luisa Pedrazzini). Stphanie Mouret's contribution on the closed roads of Vercors also falls into this category of tourist wastelands; on the contrary, however, it shows how these infrastructures can find a value in use thanks to the region's young people and the recreational practice of *Urbex*, which consists of taking leisure trips to abandoned places.

- 7 Owing to the suspension of iron and steel activities in the 20th century, among others, "industrial wastelands" lie scattered across the vast valley floors of the Alpine Arc and in many other mountain ranges. By drawing up an extensive typology of these industrial wastelands in the Alps, Marcello Modica allows us to see both the scale of the phenomenon and how widespread these abandoned or shuttered facilities and goods are. A more isolated observation with respect to the Lombardy mountain area can be found in Luisa Pedrazzini's article, which underscores the difficulty of converting most of these spaces.
- 8 "Military wastelands" are caused by geopolitical changes, such as the erasure of the internal borders of the European Union, which has rendered the forts, barracks and other bunkers on the highlands of the border regions obsolete. The articles by Fabien Jakob and Stphanie Lotz show how new (tourist, cultural or "diplomatic") uses can take advantage of these wastelands' potential, at least for the conversion of the most accessible parts of these fortified but today mostly unused spaces.
- 9 There are also "medical wastelands", as seen in the "localities" section: Sanatoriums whose goal was to assist in the fight against tuberculosis and whose therapeutic practices became obsolete in the middle of the 20th century with the spread of penicillin are found across the southern slopes of the Alpine Arc. The two short texts by Juliette Gauchon and Gian Paolo Torricelli give somewhat different perspectives on the same phenomenon: the brutal re-appropriation of these abandoned medical buildings, which, since the time of their abandonment in Ticino and Isre, seem to have taken on new social, artistic and even "heterotopic" functions for young people and adolescents in search of discovery.
- 10 Finally, there are "agricultural wastelands", which take on a different meaning when they produce other "natural" spaces. This happens very often in the case of grazing land that is abandoned before being overtaken by afforestation. They can also be reused in the state they are in, as can be seen in the Andes and on the shores of the Mediterranean. Michel Vaillant and Marc Oswald propose a double decentring – one that is disciplinary and geographic in nature. In their capacity as engineers in agricultural development, they separate wasteland (temporarily and voluntarily abandoned) from depressed areas (abandoned for good, without any reversal any time soon) in Ecuador's Upper Canar Valley. By contrast, in a region such as the High-Tell in Tunisia, which is relatively isolated from urban centres, Ayari Hamza shows how agricultural wastelands are created during cycles that follow the rhythms of abandonment and (at least partial) recapture of the mountain that, for their part, depend on socio-economic and political cycles at the national level.

Life cycles and trajectories

- 11 This list of mountain wastelands, drawn up according to their former values in use, reveals at least two points they have in common with each other: One is the business cycles that produce them and can be summarised by the *investment-exploitation-abandonment* triad, and the second is their transformation potential, which, while very uneven, is often at the core of the contributions in this issue.
- 12 Firstly, wastelands of all kinds are always part of a “life cycle” that influences their *developmental trajectory* and depends on the social circumstances that generate activities, produce goods and lead to buildings being constructed and, because of (social, political and economic) changes, bring them to a halt or abandon them altogether (on this point, see also Janin and Andres, 2008).
- 13 Secondly, their potential for conversion seems to be specific to each case and is certainly tied to their position, visibility and accessibility but clearly also to each cycle. However, these life cycles are not limited to those of abandoned facilities, activity spaces and residences but also relate to the social, political, economic and cultural contexts and rhythms that produced them. Thus, the spread of wastelands can be accelerated by a lack of access. And yet, while one can compare brownfields to tourist wastelands as proof of the end of unprofitable activities in the mountain, a complete waste for the investors (even with public aid), this cannot be the case for “military wastelands”, whose trajectory is inserted into different life cycles: those of state administrations that succeed each other over time and implement policy on the national level. Nor can they be compared (or only partially) to the sanatorium wastelands, whose life cycle ended with the spread of antibiotics but can sometimes, thanks to their location, take on new values in use in the 21st century.
- 14 So, should we rather refer to mountain fallow lands according to the cycles in which they are inserted? If that were possible, it might be easier to assess their future potential for creating new values in use, for example, as public or collective spaces or more simply as common goods or even elements of memory.
- 15 There seem to be three large groups of temporal cycles into which we can insert the trajectories of mountain wastelands:
 - *The cycle of the Nation-State border*: Its legal, military and fiscal functions have undergone successive changes since the end of the old regime. It is, in fact, the cycle of the “territorialisation” of the State and plays out at the national (and international) scale but has ramifications, at the local scale, for the border regions and towns that are situated in the mountain ranges.
 - *The cycle of industrial capitalism*: Particularly evident in the Alpine space since the end of the 19th century,³ it also includes the countless rail and road crossings and movements of agro-pastoral decline and abandonment of the mountain, following the changes in production methods. This cycle continued during the *trente glorieuses* (roughly 1945-75) with, on the one hand, the gradual and selective abandonment of industrial activities (in the 1960s and 1970s; see the article by Marcello Modica) and, on the other hand, the continuous increase in investment in real estate and tourist facilities (in many cases, strongly supported by the institutions), which would be gradually but selectively abandoned from the 1980s and 1990s.
 - *The cycle of sanatoriums and healthcare facilities*: Born out of the medical policies of the State and the Church between the end of the 19th century and the end of the 20th century, these spaces, if they were not transformed into wellness centres, have sometimes found a new

social function thanks to novel practices like *Urbex* or even heterotopic functions for groups of young people and adolescents who transform them – according to Torricelli – into “spaces of possibility”. These are limited cases, however, on which, as things stand, we can only construct hypotheses that deserve further study.

- 16 These cycles have different social times and rhythms but seem to influence wastelands’ potential to be converted. Thus, it is not only the wasteland’s location and visibility that define the challenges and the potential for re-use. While old sanatoriums are sometimes used in new ways, industrial wastelands and abandoned ski lifts do not, in principle, demonstrate any potential for conversion (or if they do, it is limited, as is the case with listed industrial buildings). The only way out is to dismantle and raze them, which, in many cases, is complicated by a lack of funding. By contrast, wastelands that depend on political cycles, especially fortifications and, more generally, military wastelands, as well as the specific case of the roads in Vercors, seem to have a much greater potential for re-use, either because they belong to the State or because of their architectural features and setting, which potentially increase their importance as historical and cultural heritage.
- 17 We wish you an enjoyable read.

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NOTES

1. *Journal of alpine research/Revue de géographie alpine*, numéro 103-2 | 2015 “Impact of climate change on mountain environment dynamics” DOI : 10.4000/rga.2805
2. See, among others, an article entitled “À Borée (Ardèche) on pleure les neiges d’antan”, which appeared in the daily *Le Monde* on 7 January 2017, and another in *M Le magazine du Monde* on 11 March 2017 under the headline “Fausses pistes”.
3. Similar cycles are observable in the Chilean and Argentine Andes.

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