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Des montagnes en crise : quelles réponses par l'innovation sociale ?

Reconsidering Social Innovation: What Can We Learn from Mountains?

Preface

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Reconsidering Social Innovation: What Can We Learn from Mountains?

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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“Severely disrupted by far-reaching socio-economic and environmental transformations, these [mountain] territories offer an excellent field of study to examine the current adaptation and/or innovation mechanisms, on the one hand because environmental constraints play an amplifying role, and on the other hand because their divergence from the industrial-Fordist model, which used to be a handicap, can nowadays look like a source of inspiration” (Attali, Dalmaso and Granet-Abisset, 2014, p. 6).

- 1 Global changes are becoming more and more visible every day. We are moving at high speed towards “planetary boundaries” (Steffen *et al.*, 2015), at which point our lifestyles and our lives will be dramatically threatened, while wealth is increasingly financialised and polarised (Carroué, 2015). Since its inception, the Laboratory of Excellence for Innovation and Mountain Territories, which partnered on this issue, has been receptive to the emergence and analysis of innovative dynamics in mountain territories, both as

an *amplifier of* and as an *alternative to* global dynamics. The aim of the articles in this issue of the Journal of Alpine Research is to analyse in more detail the mountain territories' responses to local manifestations of this dual contemporary environmental and socio-economic challenge and to do so through the prism of social innovation processes. This notion is deployed to analyse emancipatory processes within very diverse contexts and issues, for example in both urban (Tremblay, 2007) and rural areas (Klein *et al.*, 2015) and in the fight against discrimination (Jaurand and Leroy, 2009). But what are the solutions and answers that these processes bring to the mountains? And furthermore, how can contemporary mountainnesses ('montagnités') contribute to an understanding of social innovation processes?

Mountains as spaces for social innovation

- 2 The concept of innovation initially referred to technological progress and economic development (Schumpeter, 1990). In the late 1980s, moving away from these objectives alone, social innovation started (and has continued) to be examined, particularly within the Center for research on social innovations (CRISES) in Quebec. A social innovation can be defined as "an intervention initiated by social actors to respond to an aspiration, meet a need, find a solution or take advantage of an opportunity for action in order to change social relations, transform a framework for action or propose new cultural orientations" with the goal of "contributing to the well-being of individuals and communities" (Saucier *et al.*, 2007, p. 390). This idea, which is firmly linked to the human development approach (Sen, 2003), focuses both on the social purpose of innovations and on the social dimension of their dissemination and appropriation process. The territory is a socio-economic network characterised by the geographical proximity of its members. Consequently, territorial anchoring and interrelationships can facilitate the dissemination and social appropriation of the novelty, thereby becoming an innovation. However, the supra-territorial social, economic, political or environmental contexts in which these processes take place also have a positive or negative influence on them (Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2014).
- 3 Over the past decade, as global changes have reshaped our relationship with the world, many questions, proposals and controversies have bubbled up regarding the future of mountain territories in the 21st century and relate to issues as diverse as the governance of protected areas and borders (Jacob, 2017), the city-mountain relationship (Dematteis, 2009), infrastructure projects (Sutton, 2011), the vulnerability of these territories (Richard *et al.*, 2010) and sustainable transitions (Buclet, 2015; Sandhu and Sandhu, 2015; Soubirou, 2018). Which of the social innovation processes today are helping to produce 21st-century mountainness? Which routes do mountain territories choose to take in the face of the twin global challenges of biosphere degradation and rising socio-economic inequality? How are the orientations and aspirations of the citizens living in these territories collectively translated into action? And what are the processes that make it happen?
- 4 In this issue, Jean-Baptiste Grison and Pierre-Antoine Landel's article describes the socially innovative processes by which a socio-economic wool sector in crisis has been revived in the Massif Central (France) by generating territorial dynamics that go beyond the scale of this sector alone. In the same vein, Alessandro Gretter, Cristina Dalla Torre, Federica Maino and Andrea Omizzolo invite us to consider new farming,

which here concerns wine-growing activities, as a collective activity that helps to better meet the (above all, demographic) needs and challenges of rural mountain communities. Lastly, Elisa Ravazzoli, Cristina Dalla Torre and Thomas Streifeneder examine the transformative dimension of the dynamics of social innovation in the mountains. To this end, they describe the effects of two cooperative projects: an ecotourism project seeking to promote the socio-economic integration of refugees in the province of Brescia in Lombardy; and a childcare project on farms in isolated mountain areas in the province of Bolzano in South Tyrol.

Mountains as spaces for rethinking social innovation in the Anthropocene

- 5 Global changes are on the rise in the mountains and have particularly devastating (Richard *et al.*, 2010) and visible consequences. The unfortunate case of Walter Bonatti is one example of this: The mountain climber saw a landform named in his honour disappear in his lifetime.¹ Because they are vulnerable, mountain areas now have a liminal dimension (Gal and Fourny, 2018) that heralds the larger-scale effects of global changes. But mountain territories are also innovative spaces because people there already have to take measures to adapt. In addition, the material framework for political decision-making (e.g. building a tunnel or an artificial ski slope) is already one in which the environment is pushed beyond its limits – or rather, the limits that we as humans, consider socially, politically or economically acceptable.
- 6 As a result, mountain territories allow us to think about environmental and socio-economic issues together. They prevent us from dissociating them from each other because the stakes of contemporary kinds of mountainness intertwine these two dimensions – just like our new era, the Anthropocene. In this respect, these territories invite us to come up with an eco-centric social innovation, where humans are only one of the meta-categories of actors in a territory that has become a socio-ecosystem. In turn, the non-humans in these socio-ecosystems are no longer simply resources or contexts but become actants, even actors. In this issue, Yann Borgnet's article entitled "From uncertain space: spatial trajectory of a social innovation 'by withdrawal'. Study of the composition of the Association of Lodges and Huts in Queyras (Hautes-Alpes, France)" proposes to take a step in this direction by considering snow as an actant.
- 7 That is a very stimulating perspective, both scientifically and politically. As it has now become inevitable that people have to adapt to global changes, the effect that the activities and evolutions of non-humans have on our lives is increasingly evident. In this context, eco-centrist (or at least not implicitly Promethean) perspectives on human activities have emerged in the academic sphere since the late 2000s, particularly as a result of greater attention being paid to the knowledge produced in and by the South. This is the case, for example, with the contributions in the *Manifeste pour une géographie environnementale* edited by Denis Chartier and Estienne Rodary in 2016 (Chartier and Rodary, 2016) and, more broadly, the research conducted in the field of environmental humanities. Today, researches about social innovation processes has everything to gain by not ignoring this important project.

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NOTES

1. In the Mont-Blanc massif, the western face of the Dru suffered a major landslide in June 2005 that carried the “Bonnati pillar” away with it. Fifty years earlier, it had been named in honour of the famous mountain climber Walter Bonatti, who had successfully reached the top after six days of solo climbing.

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