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Territorial redefinition and the governance of mountain regions

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Abstract : The claim that mountain regions have a specific character is today at the heart of a number of collective actions. The process of distinguishing territories redefines the status of mountain areas, reformulates the issues and content of projects that concern them, and redefines the actors involved and the relations they foster. All these changes have implications for the governance of territories. This article, which discusses ac-

tors' positions and the legitimization of mountain entities, is not based on a particular case study but refers to a variety of examples taken from different mountain areas of the world to illustrate the processes underway.

Keywords : mountains, governance, organisation, network, legitimacy.

Collective action and mountain areas

Collective action has been perceived as a decisive parameter in the organisation of mountain communities (Bozonnet, 1992: p.99). As Debarbieux and Price have noted (2008), the communal management of resources (high mountain pastures, forests, water) observed in societies has mainly been explained by the need to collaborate in a restrictive environment offering limited resources. Cooperative action thus represents a rational response to a natural environment. Thus, as early as 1936, the geographer, Roderick Peattie, outlined this deterministic perspective by noting that, in relation to the Alps, "individual ownership of alps runs counter to the geographical set-up of the valley economy. The common ownership seems to have been decreed by Nature" (cited by Viazzo, 1989: p.24). Conversely, mountains were also seen as a hindrance to collective action. By virtue of their climates and topography, as well as having been used as so-called natural borders when national frontiers were drawn up, mountains are perceived as barriers to social and commercial relations (Fourny and Crivelli 2003). The idea of closed mountain communities, a perspective called into question by the work of historians and ethnologists, has contributed to such an interpretation. Within the framework of this article, and in keeping with the general perspective of this special issue, attention is not focused on collective actions simply because they were conducted

in mountain areas but more specifically on actions underpinned by a common reference to mountain areas. In other words, at the heart of the study are mountain areas as a conceptual category shared by several protagonists. It is therefore “mountain areas as institutional realities for societies (translation)” that are at the centre of the analysis (Debarbieux, 2001: p.107).

Today, with the increasing recognition of the global importance of mountain areas (Debarbieux and Price, 2008) and the international interest stimulated by the Alpine Convention – a source of inspiration for similar initiatives in the Carpathians, the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Altai mountains – one cannot help but notice a multiplication of initiatives bearing the “mountain” label, an indication of the power of collective mobilisation around “mountains” as an entity (German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, 2004; Debarbieux and Rudaz, 2008). Without wishing to present an exhaustive topology, the motivations underlying collective action in mountain areas are numerous. For some observers, mountain areas appear in need of collective action as a response to the threat they are under as a natural environment. The creation of the *Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative*¹ - a joint US and Canadian organisation founded in 1997 with the aim of preserving the ecosystems of the mountain region concerned – is based on this vision. For others, the perceived threats are socio-economic in nature and mountain areas require measures to be maintained as living areas. This perspective, specially formulated in the context of the post-war economic boom, remained very present in the demands of interest groups among mountain populations and gave rise to public policies and institutions designed to make up for “lost time” in terms of the development of mountain regions in relation to the rest of the country, following the example of the *Appalachian Regional Commission* established in 1965 (Bradshaw, 1992). One very modern trend, intended to be transversal in relation to the two preceding objectives, proposes an integrated approach under the name of sustainable development. *The Conférence Transfrontalière Mont-Blanc (Mont Blanc Transborder Conference)*, a discussion forum for local authorities within the Mont Blanc area (*Espace Mont-Blanc*²) and aimed at developing and protecting the trans-border region of the Mont-Blanc massif, boasts such an approach (De l’Harpe, 2005). Finally, other initiatives to promote tourism are designed to provide greater visibility for a coherent area, such as the *Espace Saint-Gotthard*³, coordinating the work of 60 local tourism promotion organisations within the region.

Such collective actions are helping to underline the specific character of mountain regions. The fact of belonging to this geographical category lies at the heart of the discussion and provides a basis on which collective action is building part of its legitimacy. Mountain areas are thus acquiring a special status and are a product of territorial reorganisation or reconstruction. By definition, collective action requires

1 • <http://www.y2y.net>.

2 • <http://www.espace-mont-blanc.com>.

3 • Projekt Raum- und Regionalentwicklung Gotthard (<http://www.san-gottardo.com>).

coordination among the different partners involved and hence at least a minimum form of organisation (Snow et al., 2004). The latter may become formalised by establishing a structure to coordinate the work of partners. Such a structure is vital in the identification of the processes in a collective action. The analytical framework proposed puts the accent on the profiles and roles of the different actors involved (organisations, associations, institutions) as well as the relations and methods of organisation among actors (networks). Following the recommendations of Funnel (2001), it is finally a question of examining the impact of territorial reorganisation, project redefinitions, actors and their relations on the governance of mountain territories. This article does not concern any particular case study but takes several examples from different mountain regions of the world to illustrate the processes at work. Owing to the author's personal background, however, alpine and North American examples are predominant.

Mobilisation and forms of organisation for collective action

The claim that there are problems specific to mountain areas is at the heart of the collective action that this article focuses on. For many initiatives, it is the similarity of the problems confronted by actors that justifies cooperative action. Participation is therefore based on the fact of belonging to a community of problems. The specificity of these problems is related to belonging to a "mountain" environment or communities. Organisations defending the interests of mountain populations are set up on such a basis ... Geographic proximity is not therefore a determining factor. Thus groups can join forces in a movement that transcends borders in the name of a common mountain reference, following the example of the *European Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Regions (1991)* or the *World Mountain People Association (2002)*. Participation in such organisations enables actors to increase their political opportunities by opening doors to decision-making and to reorganise relationships with their interlocutors (Keck et Sikkink, 1998). Rudaz (2006) has stressed the importance for regional and national pressure groups of participating in the "Europeanization" of mountain issues.

Although the classical mountain organisations concentrate their energies on obtaining recognition of mountain specificity in the political arena, one cannot help but notice that the new organisations are focusing on the sharing of experiences. The dimension of the project overrides that of pure legitimization (Castells, 1999). Political lobbying gives way to local development operations. Organisational structures are more flexible, facilitating the passage from a hierarchical structure to one that favours interaction between all members of the network, without necessarily passing through a central node (Diani, 1992). In line with analyses on social movements, these measures to promote collective action are characterised by their promotion of horizontal relations between actors (van Kersbergen and van Waarden 2004). Such relations may become institutionalised, taking on the form of an organisation aimed at supervising the network in question. New participants emerge, so that the network becomes an actor in its own right.

*Alliance in the Alps*⁴ (1997) and its Central Asian equivalent (*Alliance of Central Asian Mountain Communities*⁵, 2003), two networks of mountain communities promoting sustainable development, are illustrative of this trend. Although they claim to be ready to lobby for mountain populations, in reality it would nevertheless seem that this type of action is marginal in their programme, as this focuses mainly on local development. Thus the profile of members in these networks is characterised by their innovation rather than their representativeness (Nikonova et al., 2007). It should however be pointed out that for the network initiators and organisers, the aim is not to restrict action to projects involving its members but to extend the development model tested locally to other communities, and ideally to the entire mountain range or region concerned. Inspired by these two initiatives – Alpine and Central Asian –, a similar project was started in the Caucasus, promoting the notion of a development laboratory in an even more explicit way. With the aim of promoting sustainable development in the mountain region of the Caucasus, and with the help of German cooperation, eight villages spread over four countries in the South Caucasus region (Russia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) were selected as “demonstration models for sustainable development” (German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, 2004). These laboratory villages were officially organised in 2006 in the form of a network to share experiences: *Caucasus Mountain Alliance*⁶.

In other cases, the relevance of collective action is not based so much on the actual specificity of a “mountain” problem as on the recognised need for joint management of a shared geographic entity. Thus certain institutions have been set up with a view to coordinating the management of a mountain region, determined according to functional criteria, criteria that, as we shall see later, are subject to discussion. This recognition of the interdependence among parties is at the source of collective action (Young, 1997). The scale of a mountain, a massif, or a mountain range would seem to provide a relevant framework for identifying problems and proposing solutions. Such a perspective appears suitable for dealing with three types of problems. Firstly, there are those problems that threaten, in a specific or particular way, an entire mountain range. The initiative promoted by the *International Commission for the Protection of the Alps* to assist the Alps in emerging as “a model region for climate protection” is based on such a perspective⁷. Secondly, there are those problems that would have repercussions on another part of the mountain range. The management of alpine transit traffic is such a problem, where the closure of a pass or tunnel would impact on the other transit routes, as was seen with the Mont Blanc tunnel catastrophe on March 24, 1999. Thirdly, mountain ranges may be threatened by the cumulative effect of local problems, an observation that was behind the US decision, for example, to take global action concerning the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

4 • <http://www.alpenallianz.org>.

5 • <http://www.mtnforum.org/mo/index.cfm?PID=agoca>.

6 • Information may be found at <http://www.rec-caucasus.org>.

7 • *Climate Pact for the Alps*, www.cipra.org.

With a view to promoting shared management, it is important to ensure the cooperation of organisations that are active locally within a mountain range or massif. Such a development would meet the need to coordinate actions that are currently undertaken in a disparate and independent manner by the actors involved, actors who, most of the time, do not know each other. It is a question of ensuring that the latter collaborate within a common reference framework, in our case a geographic entity characterised by a mountainous environment. The *Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative* illustrates this perspective particularly well. Armed with its slogan “making connections, naturally”, its mandate is based on “connectivity” between both actors and natural habitats. Its first role is to facilitate contact between the local groups active in the nature conservation projects within the region concerned. During debates preceding the creation of the *Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative*, there was heated discussion over the choice of a centralised or decentralised organisation, with the latter option finally being chosen (Clark, Gaillard, 2001).

Legitimacy of actors and entities

One of the main arguments developed in this article is that the definition of a territorial issue reconstructs relations between actors and, as a result, the actual governance of the territories in question. The different initiatives undertaken in the Sierra Nevada mountain range (California⁸, United States), chosen as a relevant entity for planning the region’s development and its use of resources, is a particularly interesting example of the emergence of new actors and conflicting issues in relation to development. Since this case is dealt with in more detail by Jörg Balsiger in this same issue, we will restrict ourselves here to two points of interest to us: actors and issues. The desire to protect the Sierra Nevada, at the beginning of the 1990s, gave rise to three conferences that in turn generated three, then finally four, organisations. Under the auspices of the State of California⁹, the *Sierra Summit* took place in November 1991 “in an effort to launch a consensus-building process for improving the management of natural resources in the Sierra Nevada” (Sierra Summit Steering Committee, 1992: p.2). This initiative led to a vast study, the *Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project*, being carried out that resulted in the creation of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy in 2004, a state agency responsible for overseeing management of the mountain range according to sustainable development criteria. In response to the *Sierra Summit*, the environmental protection and nature conservation organisations, associated with citizen management groups for the catchment basins, launched the *Sierra Now* conference in August 1992 and created the Sierra Nevada Alliance, an alliance of NGOs active in the region concerned. In turn, in response to the Sierra Now conference and the creation of the *Sierra Nevada Alliance*,

8 • The Sierra Nevada range is mainly situated in California, with a smaller extent in Nevada. The initiatives mentioned here are Californian and therefore respect the borders between the two States.

9 • More specifically the Resources Agency of California, seconded by the California Environmental Protection Agency, the Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) and the U.S. Forest Service.

supporters of the “wise use movement”¹⁰ set up the *Sierra Economic Summit* that led to the creation of the *Sierra Communities Council* (Duane, 1999). There were thus three very different organisations involved: a state agency, an NGO and an association of local interests, even though the latter, as Thomas suggests (2003), is more of a mouthpiece for forest industry lobbies. Finally, in 1994, the *Sierra Business Council* was set up with the aim of providing a bridge between the extremes by integrating members of the two “camps”.

This detailed example of the Sierra Nevada shows how organisations pursuing different objectives can come together around the same subject, a subject that raises different issues depending on the paradigm adopted. Different actors with conflicting perspectives demand to have a say in the matter. Some actors may emerge and seize the opportunity to redefine the reference framework for discussion so as to get involved in the debate. The Alpine Convention was the opportunity for Europe to claim its rightful place in the management of the alpine arc (Raffestin and Crivelli, 1992). In the majority of cases, this shake up of actors gives rise to opposition from the local authorities in place, which are generally reticent to share their decision-making power when it concerns the future of their region. A struggle then ensues over the legitimacy of actors, where conflicts arise over concerns such as the historicity of territorialities and usages, the competence or incompetence of groups, or the knowledge they have of the territories in question.

The question of legitimacy is central to the issue of governance (Van Kersbergen and Van Waarden, 2001). Although the legitimacy of actors is a subject of discussion, that of the geographical entity, the mountain area, is rarely questioned. As with every territory for which development measures are planned, the definition and delimitation process is essential in appreciating the relevance of the entity under consideration. The delimitation proposed most often calls for biophysical criteria, so that the entity becomes “naturalized”. Thus an organisation was set up with the aim of promoting the sustainable development of the “Andean ecoregion”: *El Consorcio para el Desarrollo Sostenible de la Ecoregión Andina*¹¹ (1993 – Posner, 2000; Cisneros et al., 2004). Delimitation of the area concerned by the *Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative* relied for part of its legitimacy on the migrations of the large predators. A she-wolf, named “Pluie”, whose migrations were followed over two years by means of a transmitter collar that could be heard over the entire territory in question, cutting across jurisdictional borders, was chosen as a symbol of the relevance of the entity proposed (Chester, 2006).

Delimitation processes are not always free of political implications, however. Analyses of the delimitation of the areas of application of international mountain conventions have clearly shown the interests of certain partisans for restricted or extensive delimitations. Thus the extent of possible modifications to the delimitation of the area of the Carpathian Convention¹² according to national interests has been demonstrated by Fall and Egerer (2004). To successfully complete the environmental assessment of the

10 • “Wise use movement” is a term defining a movement that developed in the US in response to radical environmentalism and is aimed at promoting reasonable use of the environment and Nature for the benefit of Mankind. It is often assimilated with anti-environmentalism.

11 • <http://www.condesan.org>.

12 • Framework Convention on the Protection and Sustainable Development of the Carpathians.

Carpathians¹³, an area was delimited, even though the area of application of the Convention was not defined. The lack of official delimitation did not prevent the signing of the Carpathian Convention by the contracting parties in 2003. In discussions on the delimitation of the area of application of the Alpine Convention¹⁴, a so-called “average” area was chosen, taking into account the major longitudinal valleys and inter-alpine basins, but excluding the pre-alpine regions (Bätzing, 1993). This latter decision was motivated by the desire to avoid integrating the major valleys in the pre-alpine regions that would have very quickly been able to impose their decisional power on the whole of the alpine arc. Paradoxically, certain mountain pressure groups, concerned about seeing the status of their habitat reduced to that of “Indian reserves”, expressed the desire to see these same towns integrated in the area of application (Rudaz 2005). The areas delimited are thus subject to discussion, as Whisnant has observed for the Appalachians: “Appalachia’s boundaries have been drawn so many times by so many different hands that it is futile to look for a correct definition of the region. Depending upon which boundary is accepted, the region includes from 190 to nearly 400 counties in from six to thirteen states” (Whisnant, 1994: p.134). At the first meeting of what was to become the *Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative*, organised in Kananaskis (Alberta, Canada) in December 1993, a workshop was set up to discuss the limits of the area concerned by the initiative. The participants, mainly environmentalists and scientists, were able to draw the region’s limits on a series of maps, each according to his or her own criteria¹⁵.

These new institutional delimitations did not necessarily correspond to the scales at which planning and development were considered at the local level. Craig Thomas made the same point during preparation of the plans for the bioregion of Klamath in California, observing that “the geographic scale of Klamath did not mesh well with existing social planning processes at the local level” (Thomas, 2003: p.153). Within this alpine framework, it cannot help be noticed that many communities are not even aware of the existence of an Alpine Convention, even though they are within the official area covered by the said Convention. Initially, local populations were little concerned by the Alpine Convention but this changed following the awareness and information campaigns conducted by the mountain lobbies, whose vehemence contrasted sharply with the indifference of local populations (Rudaz, 2005).

13 • Carpathians Environment Outlook (2007):
<http://www.grid.unep.ch/activities/assessment/KEO/index.php>.

14 • Convention on the protection of the Alps.

15 • Interview with David Mattson (U.S. Geological Survey-USGS), Cambridge, 13 June 2008.

Conclusion

Collective action based on common interests in mountain areas provides an opportunity to go beyond the jurisdictional frameworks usually mobilised to address issues relating to mountain areas, whatever the scale, following the example of the Alpine Convention that has been able to transcend national borders. The “mountain” entity may thus prove to be a precious stimulus for cooperation. The geographer, Bruno Messerli, has even gone as far as to suggest that the mountains are the only entity that can sufficiently focus cooperative action between the different Himalayan countries (Messerli, 2006). However, these initiatives also often give rise to conflict. Indeed, with the emergence of new reference frameworks, issues are reformulated and new stakeholders emerge. This redefinition of reference frameworks and the modification of the interests at stake help reorganise the terms of governance of mountain territories. Such reconstruction is not necessarily met with enthusiasm by the actors in place, namely local communities, who quite naturally are not eager to share decision-making when it comes to defining methods of planning local development and resource use.

To conclude, the fundamental role played by exogenous forces in the processes observed should be underlined. Claims for recognition of the specific character of mountain areas are part of interaction with the exterior and collective action among mountain actors increases visibility. On this point, it may also be noted that financial support from the outside is often necessary for the political construction of mountain entities as well as the creation of organisations, and is considerable. The ability to mobilise financial resources depends on the legitimacy of the entities and projects proposed as well as the symbolic power associated with the mountain territories in question, such as the Alps or the region that extends from Yellowstone to the Yukon. Indeed, with the construction of these “new” entities, a definite enthusiasm may be observed that is linked to the discovery of a new territory or a new “frontier”, in the North American sense of a land to be conquered. These new contexts for collective action are based on earlier territories, a little like a palimpsest, dear to the geographer, which it is important to take into account.

Translation: Brian Keogh

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