

Determinism in the mountains: The ongoing belief in the bellicosity of “mountain people”

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Conflicts in mountains have increased in the last 50 years, with serious violent conflicts now almost twice as likely to occur at high altitude. (UN FAO, 2004)

... because mountain territories are often border zones between states, they are often the scene of many wars or guerrilla warfare. Thus, 80% of the world's conflicts are played out in mountain regions. (World Mountain People Association)

Mountain people are often the same everywhere ... Mountain people are clanny. They are closed to outsiders. They are warm and free with kith and kin but withdrawn and silent and wary with strangers. They keep their emotions to themselves, especially those of a most private nature. (Lincoln, 2002, p. 147)

It is over fifty years since Sprout and Sprout's ground-breaking study of the relationship between environment and conflict. One of their most important arguments was that policy decisions are influenced by what they refer to as the “psychological environment,” the idea that policy may not directly be influenced by environmental factors (such as terrain, forests, roads, etc.), but by the importance policymakers *imagine* those factors to have. This psychological environment still plays a large part in analyses of mountains and conflict today, and is accepted largely uncritically both in literature and in popular discourse. This article presents some of the ways in which mountainous regions have been linked with conflict and argues that we need to be more careful in looking at such regions.

A brief history of mountain determinism

The idea has emerged that there is a “mountain people;” a people living in mountainous regions which is imbued with certain qualities relating to their likelihood of engaging in conflict. Recently, the belief has developed that there is great commonality between mountain peoples all over the world; indeed, such is the effect of mountains on human beings that mountain *peoples* are one *people*—mountain people. The foundations for this argument date back to antiquity but became particularly prevalent in travel-writing of the nineteenth century. Such writing at best gives a romanticized idea of people in mountain regions; at worst, it becomes scientific racism. For the most part, it is geographically deterministic and is based on

pop psychology, stereotypes, and a curious interpretation of Darwinism. Nevertheless, these romantic ideas pervade contemporary understandings of people and conflicts in mountain regions and indeed have recently come full-circle to redefine the self-identities of people living in mountainous areas.

The specific linkage between mountain people and wars also dates back to antiquity. Strabo's *Geography* establishes one of the central ideas that has exercised subsequent writers on the subject: that something inherent in the nature of mountains affects the human condition, and that this changed lot leads to war. This one idea remains constant through the history of geography, the creation of political geography, and the changes in the politics of geography. Positivism, anthropogeography, Darwinism, environmental determinism, scientific racism, and a retreat to modern political geography are all stops along the way, and at all of them, the question of Sprout and Sprout's “man-milieu” relationship remains central.

Mountaineers

The people living in mountains are referred to as “mountaineers.”¹ Paradoxes abound in describing this “people.” The descriptions are often contradictory and sometimes lead into scientific racism. Mountaineers have been described as:² Savage, yet of rigid morality; revolutionary, yet conservative; covetous, yet provident; democratic, yet opposed to civilization; passionately independent, yet of arrested political development; honest, yet piratical; lawless, yet united; healthy, yet closely intermarried.

The flurry of adjectives continues: Mountaineers are warlike, courageous, wretched, brigands, brave, lovers of liberty, half barbarian, isolated, poverty-stricken, reactionary, exponents of retarded civilization, rude and simple, proud, vigorous, rustic, honorable, industrious, frugal, and even short.

Many such notions can be disregarded quickly. However, many of these ideas are central to modern discourse on conflict in mountain regions. Firmly held beliefs regarding mountain people today are often based on nineteenth century romanticism. In order to come to a better understanding of the relationship between mountains and conflict, it will be necessary to piece apart these ideas.

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Mountain determinism: The frozen sheep's tongue

In the crudest form of environmental determinism, environmental factors have a direct effect on human behavior; accordingly, humans lack agency. The upshot of this is that human history can be explained and human future can be predicted (Sprout and Sprout, 1957, p. 312). Some of the foundations of this determinism can be found in the Renaissance. Bodin, for instance, argues that because of their environment, mountain people³ have a naturally savage nature which cannot be easily tamed (Bodin, 1583b, pp. 155-156). Bodin, like all of us, is conditioned by his times, one aspect of which is Renaissance (or indeed Galenic) physiology. Human behavior is determined by the four humors (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile); those in colder climes are more phlegmatic. They have a “more vehement internal heat” giving them “much greater strength and natural vigour” (Bodin, 1583b, pp.146-155). This allows a contrast between, on the one hand, the proud and warlike people of the north/mountain people, with the inhabitants of the valleys, who are ordinarily effeminate and delicate (Bodin, 1583a: V, pp. 694-695).

Montesquieu takes this line of reasoning a step further and, bizarrely, looks at a sheep's tongue under a microscope, before and after freezing it. He notices pyramids between the “papillæ” which he assumes to be the “principle organs of taste.” When frozen, the papillæ diminish and the pyramids disappear, rising and appearing again when warmed up. From this, he argues that nervous glands are less expanded in cold countries and that, therefore, the people have “very little sensibility for pleasure”; those in temperate climes have more, whereas those in hot countries have the most (Montesquieu, XIV, p. 2; Rousseau later came to similar conclusions in his 1781 work). Montesquieu relates his frozen sheep's tongue observation to agriculture (in warm climates, people will not bother with agriculture: XIV, p. 6); alcohol consumption (they drink more in the cold north, in proportion to latitude: XIV, p. 10); food consumption (XIV, p. 10); passage of laws (XIV, pp. 14-15); plus two books spent relating climate to slavery (XV-XVI). None of the modern authors uses a frozen sheep's tongue in their research. Yet many of the authors adopt a similar level of determinism. Montesquieu's line of reasoning is included here as a reminder of how shaky the foundations of determinism can be.

Such determinism can be found in media discussions of the former Yugoslavia. Gearóid Ó Tuathail quotes ABC News:

There are countless explanations for the volatility of the “Balkan Powderkeg.” Historians variously blame disputes over resources, ancient hatreds or meddling by Great Powers intent on keeping the region unstable. But geography is also a powerful clue: Lying south of the Danube river, the Balkans region, like Afghanistan, is composed of scarce fertile valleys, separated by high mountains that fragment the area's ethnic groups, even though many have similar languages and origins. (ABC News 1998, in Ó Tuathail, 2001, p. 797).

Here we can see that the environmental factors are being used to explain the conflict. Indeed, Ó Tuathail makes the case that Colin Powell argued “consistently that the topography precluded effective military action by NATO” (2001, p. 803). Ó Tuathail argues that it is not the mountains themselves, but people's preconceived notions of mountains which were used to create the image of the region as a powderkeg.

Different types of mountain

Hommaire de Hell was a nineteenth century travel writer who made some important observations which are often forgotten by more recent researchers. Importantly, he argues that the physical nature of the Caucasus chain is quite different to that of the other European chains:

The Alps, the Pyrenees, and the Carpathians, are accessible only by the valleys, and in these the inhabitants of the country find their subsistence, and agriculture develops its wealth. The contrary is the case in the Caucasus. From the fortress of Anapa on the Black Sea, all along to the Caspian, the northern slope presents only immense inclined plains, rising in terraces to a height of 3000 or 4000 yards above the sea level. These plains, rent on all directions by deep and narrow valleys and vertical clefts, often form real steppes, and possess on their loftiest heights rich pastures, where the inhabitants, secure from all attack, find fresh grass for their cattle in the sultriest days of summer. The valleys on the other hand are frightful abysses ... This brief description may give an idea of the difficulties to be encountered by an invading army (Hommaire de Hell, 1847, pp. 297-298).

Reclus (1876) makes similar observations on the different types of mountainous terrain. Consequently, different types of mountain may have different types of effect on different types of conflict. Yet a considerable body of recent empirical research on mountains and terrain⁴ is based on a simple binary: A region is either mountain, or not mountain. This is important, as it has implications for conflict analysis. Radvanyi and Muduyev point out that:

[m]ost authors who purportedly analyze “the Caucasus” are actually writing about the piedmonts, unaware of reality in the mountains proper. In fact, in most cases (especially with regard to Dagestan) it is necessary to separate the mountain communities from those of the piedmont, where the “rules of the game” are quite different (Radvanyi and Muduyev, 2007, p. 174).

The authors also point out that “[a]mong the shortcomings of conventional geographical determinist discourse is the frequent use of the adjective “mountainous” to describe the entire region without qualification or nuance” (Radvanyi and

Muduyev, 2007, p. 158). Zürcher (2007) makes related points on different types of mountainous terrain affecting conflict in different ways in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Chechnya. This is an extremely important point. Much existing research only presents a region, or indeed a state, as “mountainous” or “not mountainous.” This problem is summed up well by Farer, who quotes a member of the 1867 British Expeditionary Force to Ethiopia: “They tell us this is tableland. If it is, they have turned the table upside down and we are scrambling up and down the legs” (Farer, 1979, p. 11). It is unfortunate that much recent research has not been able to capture this sort of distinction.

The problem can also be seen in reverse: Regions which are not technically mountainous can still be very rugged. The Chittagong Hill Tracts provides a good example here. While Khan (1972, p. 9) describes the terrain as being “exceedingly irregular,” much existing research regards the region as being nonmountainous (Gerrard, 2000, for example, ranks the whole of Bangladesh as zero percent mountain). Yet Rashid (1999, p. 147) points out how ideal this terrain was for guerrilla activities, van Schendel, *et al.* (2000, p. 209) point out how useless Land Rovers were in this terrain, while Olsen (1996, p. 163) argues the terrain was too dangerous for a presidential visit. Again, much recent research ignores these arguments and simply regards the region as “not mountainous.”

Conclusion

Aron (1966) suggests that it is impossible to evaluate the effects of the environment: “Neither isolable nor specifically determinant, the action of the geographical environment is exerted continually, without our being able to measure its limits” (Aron, 1966, p. 188). This argument could perhaps be taken a step further: The action of the geographical environment is exerted continually, *without our even knowing it*. Sprout and Sprout presented their arguments on the “psychological environment” in 1957, yet this psychological environment still continues to hold sway in discourse on mountain regions and conflict. Two thousand years ago, Strabo told us that there was something about mountains that changed human nature. Over 400 years ago, Bodin told us that mountain people are naturally savage. More recently, in 2002, Lincoln argued that mountains lead to genetic change. Mountains will have effects on human behavior. Some of these effects may relate to factors associated with conflict. Yet it is the argument of this article that now that conflict researchers are in a position to test the relationship between environment and terrain empirically, we must do everything we can to recognize that some of the beliefs we hold dear may be built on foundations which are considerably less firm than the mountains.

Notes

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1. The literature in English is uniform in its usage of the word “mountaineer” to describe people living in mountains, thereby offering no clear distinction with those who climb them. The German literature does offer this distinction: While those who climb mountains are *Bergsteiger*, those who live in mountain chains are the *Gebirgsvölker*, who, in cases like Switzerland, live in *Gebirgsstaaten*.

2. Several of these descriptions are given by multiple authors. To avoid over-referencing in the text, the descriptions are drawn from the following: Aron (1966, p. 183); Bodin (1583a, pp. 156, 694); Darwin (1874, pp. 50-52); Demolins (1901, p. 424); Febvre (1932, pp. 196-199); Goldenberg (1994, p. 3); Griffin (2003, p. 118); Hommaire de Hell (1847, p. 299); von Humboldt (1849, p. 304); Johnston (2008, p. 326); Lincoln (2002, p. 147); Lunn (1963, pp. 13, 18); Montesquieu (1748, XIV, p. 2); Omrani (2009, p. 180); Radvanyi and Muduyev (2007, p. 165); Ripley (1899, p. 81); Russell (2007, p. 59); Semple (1901, pp. 589-594; 1911, pp. 20, 35, 586); Speckhard, *et al.* (2005, p. 134); Spykman (1938, p. 20); Strabo (2.5.26, 3.3.5); von Thielmann (1875, p. 257); von Trietschke (1897, pp. 101-102); Wordsworth (1984, p. 330); Ziring (2009, p. 72).

3. Bodin is more precise than recent English writers: He refers to those “qui demeurent aux montagnes” (those residing in the mountains). The term “alpenisme” only really emerges in the later part of the nineteenth century after the establishment of the Alpine Club and as with the German, the term is never confused with those who *live* in mountains.

4. The two most notable papers are Fearon and Laitin (2003) and Collier and Hoeffler (2004). Several papers have since depended on these two papers, including de Rouen and Sobek (2004); Blimes (2005); Snyder and Bhavnani (2005); Hegre and Sambanis (2006); Lacina (2006); Brancati (2007); Carey (2007); Fjelde (2009), and Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner (2009).

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