

## Mountain the teacher - Mountain taught

ISAH International Conference, Grenoble: 8-10 September 2022

*«The Alps are a light. They teach, and help you capture the solidarity of the globe» Jules Michelet, *La montagne*, Paris, 1885, p. 41.*

The mountain, as Michelet pointed out, is always an initiation, but it is no less a school *per se*. A mountain teaches, informs and educates those who are ready to listen. The mountain is a teacher inasmuch as it permanently dispenses lessons on nature and on itself to anyone who experiences it. From time immemorial, it has been a space of adjustment if not, perhaps, also a space of innovation. For this reason, the mountain becomes a territory taught in and for its material and human reality.

This dual dimension is worth considering in time and in space if we want to understand how the mountain may take on – in turn, or concomitantly – the role of teacher and of subject taught. Hence, in centuries gone by, mountain dwellers, guides and local mountain guides, so often disparaged by those who looked on them patronisingly from the outside, have acted as teachers for travellers, tourists, pilgrims, sportsmen, scholars, and even kings, who came up from the lowlands to cross their spaces, in the same way as in times gone by one set sail under the care of sailors.

Mountain societies have always been able, through practice and experimentation, to make good use of vernacular knowledge, accumulated and disseminated. At the same time, from early on people have been keenly aware that they were nurturing a form of education mediated by the school, notably in the high Alpine valleys. Tied in as it was with the local socio-systems, this very appetite for education became an engine for its preservation, and so helped to structure the migratory movements and feeding the “Alpine paradox” of the link between literacy and altitude.

Moreover, the mountain looks like an open-air laboratory, not simply an object of science, but also a study ground for researchers through the centuries. Consequently, nature is a testing ground, a maker of information, whether we are dealing with archives, of all kinds — written, oral, visual or material— or manifold data, including physical and physiological ... In our day, still, the mountain remains an awesome training ground for the most diverse professions and trades, ranging from tourism to the military, from agropastoralism to wellbeing, from sport to architecture... It provides a framework for technical and psychological knowledge, for ways of doing and ways of being.

While the mountain teaches lessons on itself, it also provides information on the societies that inhabit it and on those who observe it and believe that they know it.

On the strength of its peculiar features, the mountain becomes a subject matter for those who are responsible for coordinating, developing, defending, selling, or painting it ... They end up producing speeches and pictures, surveys and reports, consistent with respect and understanding of this environment; or, conversely, they end up distorting it, by imposing their own blueprints out of step with the realities of the regions and their communities.

What sort of societies does the mountain produce through its teachings? What exactly does the mountain teach and in what way does it stand as a sort of school of thought? What role does nature –harsh, wild and laid bare, as it were – play in this teaching? Is it the specific place itself, vertical and mineral, that hones our sensibilities? Is it its hazardous nature that incites the bold and dooms the reckless? Is it its diversity and its variability, exacerbated by the contrast of its altitudinal zonation and highly-defined seasons, which continuously refresh our view? One thing is certain: it is purely through their ability to learn a lesson from the environment that men are able to survive in it, if not to enjoy it, even to thrive in it. But what mountains are taught? What realities of nature and of mountain societies are being communicated? What use is made of this teaching? And what development plans, what educational plans, what values is it expected to convey?

This ISAH Conference aims to bring together knowledge from all possible fields. Thus, it aims to show, over the long period (Middle Ages – 21st century) and from a broader view of the territory (deep-rooted but no less open to the outside, especially through mobility), how and why the mountain, defying the tyranny of the environment, or perhaps driven by it, has always been a training space, as much for body and soul as it for the senses, for the individual as much as for the community. In this respect, through adjustment dynamics bound to be put in place in the various periods, depending on the economic, political, social and cultural contexts, mountain regions may equally become a role model for other regions, influence them and turn into subject matters. We shall address issues related to renewals – visible or not visible depending on different temporalities – of forms and modalities stemming from these teachings.

We welcome papers on other mountains of the globe, too. Indeed, the Alps can be a privileged laboratory; but not the only one for this approach.

Besides, it is a matter of calling not merely on the scientific knowledge, but more broadly on all fields of knowledge associated with a place or specific educational context.

### **Day 1: Mountain as teacher: The school-mountain or «the mountain's my teacher»**

During the first day, centred around the mountain as a forge for specific areas of knowledge, a space for innovation and adjustment, we will tackle the various categories of knowledge provided by mountains. Without pretending to be exclusive or exhaustive, let us mention, for example, “indigenous” forms of knowledge, such as risk culture, preservation and thrifty use of resources, military know-how (cartography, battle training, ...), knowledge relating to body-physical sports-performance... or again the mountain as a university of life with youth organisations, or more recently the mountain as post-cancer place of healing. Likewise, we will look at the mountain not only as a supplier of knowledge, but also as a factor in the development of academic institutions ...

### **Day 2: The mountain as is taught:**

The second day will centre around another set of topics, including the specific nature of small mountain schools as well as the latest places of education and training, such as sport-studies high schools, the EMHM, the PGHM, or more specialised institutions (e.g., *École des Houches*, ...). We will also turn our attention to some institutions where the mountain is taught either as an academic subject or in view of development, and/or where the mountain is adopted as a source and means of information and education (nature reserves, conservatories, museums, ...).

**→ To put forward a paper, please submit title and an abstract (2500 characters incl. spaces) by 31 January 2022 to: [anne-marie.granet@wanadoo.fr](mailto:anne-marie.granet@wanadoo.fr)**