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Frontières mobiles : déclinaisons alpines

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Brian Keogh

- 1 This special issue of the *Journal of Alpine Research - La Revue de Géographie Alpine* focuses on the link between mountains and borders in a context where the very notion of border, traditionally seen as a basis for categorisation and delimitation, is being increasingly called into question by today's multiple flows of goods, services and people. A number of different trends are at work, producing borders that are more fluid, open or fuzzy. As a result, the spatial expression of the border is increasingly difficult to define, a challenge that we place at the heart of the issues addressed in this special edition of the Journal. The idea of adapting and applying the notion of the “mobile border” (Amilhat Szary & Giraut, 2011) to mountain territories is an opportunity to review the construction of spatial categories that serve us in our thinking about the conditions for producing social relations in places characterised by specific environmental conditions (not only climatic and topographic, but also cultural). Although the question of the border does not require redefining mountain areas, it nevertheless suggests starting from a constructivist approach to this type of space (DEBARBIEUX & RUDAZ, 2010). The purpose of constructing the analysis from a particular type of space is not so much to characterise a type of border determined by this context as to reveal the original characteristics of the components of our political and scientific alphabet.
- 2 Although the link between borders and mountains is not new, its expression has generally been in terms of the fixity imposed by topographic barriers. It is this stability, in particular, that justified the idea of the “natural border”: modern states were more willing to base their territorial construction on something natural in that it was supposed to reflect a divine will. The ideal of a topographic border based political order on a sovereignty of divine right (Debarbieux 1997). Today, the natural environment is

more often mobilised to construct cross-border links, particularly through numerous environmental conservation projects (Fourny 2005). Borders are typically subject to constant processes of deterritorialisation-reterritorialisation and debordering-rebordering, processes which select them, place them in new hierarchies, and also make them more diverse in their forms and materialisation.

- 3 Questioning the fixity of the border in mountain areas may begin by an examination of those tenets often considered to be self-evident: in its most standard form, even the international border is found to be subject to a certain mobility when based on natural discontinuities whose form may evolve. This is the case of thalwegs, which fluctuate with changes in river courses. Climate change may also be responsible for topographic change, for example with the melting of glaciers along which borders have been established, thus making it necessary to review the position of a border that is dependent on the location of a summit, pass or watershed. The location of the top of a ski lift in the Zermatt / Breuil-Cervinia resort complex is probably going to change countries following unexpected border renegotiations within the European Union<sup>1</sup>. This type of link between geopolitics and the environment needs to be examined in greater detail in the context of conservation policies that remain largely based on fixed zoning of the territory. This is particularly important in light of the migration of ecosystems linked to global climate change.
- 4 The notion of the mobile border, however, takes on another dimension when one considers that border functions no longer tend to be constrained to the established limits of national sovereignty areas, but to be pushed back and forth, and become spatially projected, multiplied or diffused. The function of control, in particular, may be disseminated within a national territory, and no longer fixed *at its entry point*. This trend is illustrated in biometric, numeric and smart borders. Borders are increasingly organised in networks, promoting the idea of reticular borders, located at communication hubs. Whether it is in airports, railway stations, or following mobile teams of customs officers, migrations and transactions are now controlled by “mobile borders”. One may therefore wonder how the context of mountains influences the conditions governing the exercise of delocalised border functions. What is the “barrier effect” or “refuge” value of a mountain area?
- 5 Enlarged cooperation projects, of both the cross-border and trans-national type, profoundly modify the conditions of governance in mountain areas crossed by borders. Although the *Journal of Alpine Research / Revue de Géographie Alpine* would like to devote more space to a political analysis of the status of mountain areas in power strategies at different scales, this issue is not a mere collection of texts on the “geopolitics of mountain areas” in the true sense of the term (cf. Hérodote 2002): it seeks rather to continue the work and to update discussion on the specificity of mountain borders (*Le Globe* 1997 & 2005, *RGA* 2003, *Cahiers de Géographie* 2004), on the one hand in their different spatial expressions and, on the other, in the resulting political relationships with the territories. In the present collection of articles focussing on the theme of the “mobile border”, the aim is not to consider mountain areas as the backdrop for power relations, but rather to question the way in which mountains can continue to operate as a support for the construction of the relationship with the other in a world of movement and flows. This is only interesting from the moment that one considers mountain areas also as “fluid” territories, with respect not only to human mobility but also to physical transformations induced by recent global warming. It is therefore a

question of further exploring the idea of the mobile border to see how its application in mountain areas can be used to assess it and contribute to its conceptual development.

- 6 We begin by following the diachronic evolution of the representations on which the construction of political borders is based, whether this be over the long term (M. Bruneau) or more limited time spans (S. Stumpp et J. Fuchs). In his analysis of the relationship between the Pontic Greeks and the border, Michel Bruneau tends to shrug off the question of the avatars of the trajectories of the borderline. His article shows how this cultural group, which "finds itself in the acritical position of border guardian at the extremities of imperial or national territories", follows changes in the borders, but without intervening. The Pontic Greeks bear witness to the power of continually redefining one's own borders, in their case in a diasporic relationship with the mountainous area within which they migrate. The author proposes considering these identity markers as iconographic elements that could constitute "systems of resistance to movement, [...] that are more abstract than material (translation)" ((GOTTMANN, 1952) p.214)); we would tend to consider them rather as components of the mobility of the border. The analysis by Sébastien Stumpp and Julien Fuchs of the representations of the Vosges held by local mountain associations also reveals the different forms of dialogue between the trajectories of individuals or small collective groups and the "major historical events" relating to changes in the French-German border between 1871 and 1918. In this case, it is not religion but outdoor sports activities that provide the backdrop for spatial relations. Although it may appear that the latter do little to delimit territory, they nevertheless provide a foundation for a special relationship with territory (namely through the establishment of symbolic rituals), resulting in a certain appropriation of the latter, which although invisible has significant political significance. The way in which we have to negotiate the approach to and crossing of the border is analysed in terms of its infra-political impact, by mobilising in a relevant manner the positioning of the "subalterns" in borderlands politics (SCOTT, 2008 [1990]).
- 7 The history of systems of complex flows in mountain areas, both formal (seasonal migrations) and informal (smuggling), also provides interesting insights that help in understanding the current adaptations of mountain borders to global security agendas. The notion of seasonality as a temporal component of the mobile border thus appears in the treatment of eco-fronts and borders in central Europe, a topic addressed by Marek Wieckowski. His article reveals how the limits of nature conservation zones situated on the periphery of the national territory come to play the role of political gateways in a regulation system based on a trans-border application of the security standards of the European Union. At the expense of taking into account an important change in scales, a link may be made between this negotiation of limits, whose spatial characteristics are profoundly transformed from the moment of their insertion into the European Union and the debate on the alpine macro-region presented by Marie-Christine Fourny. This author thus shows how two strategic visions of alpine space come up against one another in the construction of this 'project territory' that is both international and inter-regional, depending on whether the actors consider that "piedmont urban space" should or should not be included in it. M-C. Fourny bases her observations on a detailed exploration of the notion of liminality to show that understanding the border requires considering it as a "socio-technical network (Latour, 2005) [, which] enables it to be approached as a collective entity associating objects, actors (the migrant or border police), places and regulations". In this context, the

expression of the mobile border truly reflects a "dynamic relationship with the norm, in the processes of disintegration or integration, in the methods of identification, social interaction, production and contestation (translation)". The article dealing with the way in which two types of mountaineering challenge the route followed by international borders (A-L. Amilhat Szary) addresses this preoccupation with showing how mountains constitute an interesting field of experimentation with a view to better understanding the territorial dimensions at work in experiencing borders. By examining how L. Daudet and J. Harlin used the routes along political divides as sporting challenges, this text illustrates the fact that it is not only borders that are arbitrary, but also every bodily gesture, the spatial expression of which carries with it a potential for both violence and harmony. This would depend on the negotiation of the body as a new "natural border" to be deconstructed like the previous natural border, that is by considering it as the agent of environmental intermediation.

- 8 The articles presented in this special issue provide valuable insights into the fecundity of the notion of "mobile border": the fact of restricting its application to mountain areas in no way takes away from its potential for analysing the socio-spatial forms of the limit. Every article reveals that mountain areas provide an interesting laboratory for a geography of relations: the constraints that they represent oblige the observer to take into account the multiple dimensions of what is generally referred to, after Bruno Latour, as the "non-human" (LATOUR, 2005). Throughout this special issue, it appears that the border is no longer seen as the periphery of a territory, but as a founding element of complex territorialities. In this respect, the border has not only a controlling and limiting function but also plays the role of operator or agent in processes. The approach via borders leads us to question, however, the political dimension of a relational thought: *like it or not*, one has to admit that "the world cannot be flat"!

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## NOTES

1. See the negotiations opened in July 2009 between Switzerland and Italy to redefine the ridge line, following the melting of glaciers between the Matterhorn and the Monte Rosa massif. These negotiations include a discussion on the trans-nationality of ski lifts situated on either side of the Theodul Pass.

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