BioOne COMPLETE

A Moving Border: Alpine Cartographies of Climate Change. Edited by Marco Ferrari, Elisa Pasqual, and Andrea Bagnato

Author: Florin, Ian

Source: Mountain Research and Development, 39(2)

Published By: International Mountain Society

URL: https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm238

BioOne Complete (complete.BioOne.org) is a full-text database of 200 subscribed and open-access titles in the biological, ecological, and environmental sciences published by nonprofit societies, associations, museums, institutions, and presses.

Your use of this PDF, the BioOne Complete website, and all posted and associated content indicates your acceptance of BioOne's Terms of Use, available at www.bioone.org/terms-of-use.

Usage of BioOne Complete content is strictly limited to personal, educational, and non - commercial use. Commercial inquiries or rights and permissions requests should be directed to the individual publisher as copyright holder.

BioOne sees sustainable scholarly publishing as an inherently collaborative enterprise connecting authors, nonprofit publishers, academic institutions, research libraries, and research funders in the common goal of maximizing access to critical research.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

Mountain Research and Development (MRD)
An international, peer-reviewed open access journal
published by the International Mountain Society (IMS)
www.mrd-journal.org

A Moving Border: Alpine Cartographies of Climate Change. Edited by Marco Ferrari, Elisa Pasqual, and Andrea Bagnato

New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2018. 228 pp. US$ 30.00. ISBN 978-1-941332-45-0.

This fine edited volume results from a research project on the movable borders across the Italian Alps, initiated and implemented by Studio Folder, a Milan-based design agency. Taking its name from the Latin word for *borders*, the *Limes* project was devised in 2014 to survey the fluctuations of Italy's northern borders with Austria, Switzerland, and France, which are legally defined by the water divide separating the drainage basins of Northern and Southern Europe. In addition to studying Italian archives, the project team placed Global Positioning System (GPS) sensors in a glacier of the Ötzal Alps to monitor the drift of the watershed line. In doing so, *Limes* has questioned the self-evidence of natural borders and shown how global warming challenges western conceptions of national territory. The project results were presented at the 2014 Biennale di Venezia and the exhibition "Reset Modernity!" in 2016, in the form of an automatic pantograph that plotted a map of the border in real time.

A Moving Border: Alpine Cartographies of Climate Change documents the *Limes* fieldwork and investigates the theoretical questions emerging from it. Edited by Marco Ferrari, Elisa Pasqual, and Andrea Bagnato, the main part of book consists of an introduction and three sections addressing different theoretical aspects of the moving borders concept. Each section includes an introductory text by the editorial team and a contribution by an academic. The volume is interspersed with an atlas and collections of commented archives from Italy's national mapping agency (surveyors' journals, photographs, border treaties, etc.) that nicely illustrate the day-to-day activities of boundary-making in the Italian Alps since the 1860s.

The editors intend to speak to a wide audience about the implications of climate change for political borders, following the idea—stated by Bruno Latour in the foreword—that artists are essential in the definition of scientific and political problems. The book will appeal to the readers of this journal, as it is concerned with the role of mountains in boundary making. While someone already familiar with the topic will not find much theoretical novelty, the Italian case and the artistic process leading to the volume will be of interest.

In the introduction, the editors recall how a *moving* border was legally institutionalized between Italy, Austria, and Switzerland. Second, they present how they consider the water divide as a socially constructed scientific fact, brought to life by the heightened precision of surveying instruments and the growing geopolitical importance of the Alpine terrain in the post-Schengen European context. The introduction culminates in a claim of the project's theoretical contribution, namely, the assertion that "it may well be argued that the drainage divide does not even exist as a geographical feature in and of itself" (p 22). Sadly, this claim makes no reference to insightful studies on the social construction of borders and liminal spaces in the Alpine context (eg Szary Amilhat 2013; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2015).

The first section examines how the movement of natural features with which certain borders are associated challenges the modern acceptance of the notion itself. The section opens with a brief editorial text tracing the European use of watersheds to define borders to the 1659 Treaty of the Pyrenees, which ended war between France and Spain. Then the geographer Stuart Elden draws on his previous work on *terrain* and *territory* to advocate for a dynamic reading of borders in the time of climate change. He illustrates how so-called natural borders are inherently social constructs, by presenting the human choices and techniques involved in the discussions and contestations of watershed lines in France, Congo, and Thailand. Elden draws on recent European cases to argue that the effects of climate change on coastlines and glaciers force us to read borders as continuous and indeterminate processes that treaties and resolutions can fix only temporarily.

Section 2 focuses on the material and symbolic use of borders in Italy's history. It starts with a contribution of the editorial team on the definition of the Alpine watershed line, which rests on a reductionist conception of geology purposely used by the fascists to naturalize Italy's northern border. In the next chapter, Italianist Mia Fuller presents how figures of the natural border were used in fascist Italy. She reports that, as violent cohesion policies were brought to bear in Sicily and South Tyrol to enforce a linguistic and ethnic unity inside Italy's supposedly natural boundaries, the fascist government considered Eritrea and Libya as *a priori* Italian, in complete disregard of their geographical characteristics.

The third section deals with the tension between representation, measurement, and aesthetics. The introductory text suggests that the legal link between national borders and a drifting watershed line was made possible by the scientific acknowledgement of glaciers' fluidity in the 19th century and the concurrent denial by Italian state functionaries of the existence of human activities in the high Alps. The next chapter, written by the architectural theorist Francesca Hughes, juxtaposes fictional characters and actual scientists to reflect on the importance of aesthetic in the measurement of physical space.

 https://doi.org/10.1659/mrd.mm238

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use

She focuses on the works of 19th-century glaciologist Joseph Vallot and the sucking stones sequence in Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy* to underline that measurement is always a negotiation between a commitment to exactitude and the method's aesthetic lure.

The volume concludes with the *Limes* project report—which recalls the purpose of the project and reflects on the expeditions conducted in the Ötzal Alps—and an interview with the writer Roberto Bui. Using the examples of fascist narratives about the Alps and more recent resistance movements in Tyrol and the Susa Valley, Bui explains how mountains act as prisms of Italy's national history.

A Moving Border offers well-illustrated material on an interesting case, in an attractive artistic-scientific format. Although the volume rightly stresses the importance of considering the effects of climate change in the study of so-called natural borders, it falls short of the editors' theoretical ambitions. Indeed, the social construction and liminality of borders in mountains have long been theorized and illustrated in works such as Debarbieux and Rudaz's (2015) *The Mountain* and a 2013 issue of the *Journal of Alpine Research* dedicated to mobile borders (Szary Amilhat 2013). Engagement with these texts would have helped to better define what is original about this volume. It would also have improved the clarity and consistency with which established concepts—for example, political, natural, scientific—are used throughout the book. Nevertheless, the book is a well-documented analysis of a particular case of mobile borders. Nonspecialist readers will find much to learn about the concept; experts on the topic will enjoy the volume's multidisciplinary scope.

REFERENCES

Debarbieux B, Rudaz G. 2015. *The Mountain: A Political History from the Enlightenment to the Present*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Szary Amilhat A-L, editor. 2013. Mobile borders: Alpine variations. Special Issue. *Journal of Alpine Research* 101(2). https://journals.openedition.org/rga/2073; accessed on 19 August 2019.

AUTHOR

Ian Florin
ian.florin@unige.ch
Environmental Governance and Territorial Development Institute, University of Geneva, 1211 Geneva 4, Switzerland

© 2019 Florin. This open access article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Please credit the authors and the full source.

Downloaded From: https://bioone.org/journals/Mountain-Research-and-Development on 28 Mar 2024
Terms of Use: https://bioone.org/terms-of-use