

Mountain Regions in Swiss Politics and Policies

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Die schweizerischen Berggebiete in der Politik [Mountain Regions in Swiss Politics and Policies]

By Gilles Rudaz and Bernard Debarbieux. Translated from French (see below). Zurich, Switzerland: vdf Hochschulverlag, 2014. 136 pp. CHF 24.00, € 21.00. Also available as an e-book. ISBN 978-3-7281-3604-6

La montagne Suisse en politique [Mountain Regions in Swiss Politics and Policies]

By Gilles Rudaz and Bernard Debarbieux. Lausanne, Switzerland: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, 2013. 128 pp. CHF 17.50. Also available as an e-book. ISBN 978-2-88915-043-4.

This book's main message is the following: Between 1920 and 1980, Swiss public policies on mountain areas were based on an exceptionally strong consensus, in terms of the whole country showing solidarity with the mountain population. This consensus began to crumble during the 1980s and is fundamentally questioned today.

The book is structured to convey this message. Following an introduction to the role of mountains in Swiss politics, it first describes the traditional situation of consensus, which peaked in the period from 1935 to 1945 (Chapters 2 and 3, per page numbers in German version). Next, the authors characterize the new situation (Chapter 4) and take stock of commonalities and controversies (Chapter 5). They close by addressing the international level (Chapter 6).

The authors mention 2 main reasons for the loss of consensus on mountain policies. On the one hand, they ascribe it to “the triumph of neoliberal ideologies” and Switzerland's increasing adoption of the

European Union's goals of “competition, a knowledge-based economy, and innovation” (p 46). On the other hand, it also results from a convergence of living and economic conditions in Switzerland's mountain regions and on the Swiss Plateau (p 88). Its consequences—project thinking, multifunctionality, and reduced importance of mountain-specific topics (p 67)—characterize policy-making on mountain regions as well as other areas of policy-making.

The disintegration of consensus led to the emergence of entirely new perspectives on mountain regions, which often give rise to conflicts—but less in politics than within the population and between different stakeholder groups (p 78). This includes a series of referendums and popular initiatives that are well known in Switzerland (pp 81 ff), as well as new key concepts, such as “alpine fallow lands” (p 77), “wilderness” (p 74), the “Energy Strategy 2050” (p 64), and the “Spatial Concept for Switzerland” (p 61). A “functionalist perspective” that links state support for the development of mountain regions with questions of their performance in the “national interest” (p 68) is new as well and, according to the authors, “not necessarily of benefit to mountain regions” (p 68).

By addressing these issues, the authors—2 geographers from Geneva who are renowned for their work on the Alps and on mountain policies—raise important questions that need to be clarified above all at the public level today. They provide an excellent basis for this task and take care not to voice their own positions too strongly. The fact that the book is considered important in the political context becomes clear already in the forewords by the Director of the Swiss Centre for Mountain Regions (SAB) and the Executive Director of the Swiss Inter-academic Commission for Alpine Studies (ICAS), who encouraged and supported translation of this book from French into German.

The book attempts to explain the background of as many political and policy examples as possible. None-

theless, their wide range of topics probably makes it difficult for readers who are not experts on the topic or not very familiar with Swiss political structures to follow the book's densely packed argumentation. This is somewhat regrettable, because dissent among experts is usually minor, whereas Swiss society at large—where there is marked dissent about the issues discussed in this book—is not among the book's target audience. Likewise, international readers who are not familiar with Switzerland will find it difficult to follow the line of argumentation, as the book addresses many issues specific to the country and explains these specificities only briefly.

Finally, one more thing stands out in this book. The authors rightly emphasize straight at the beginning that the great political relevance of mountains is specific to Switzerland (p 15). This is certainly a reason to concentrate on Switzerland when discussing national-level mountain policies. But when it comes to the last 20 years, it would have made sense to put Swiss debates into a broader context, such as European mountain policies or mountain policies in the European Alps. Comparison would have helped to show whether there are specifically Swiss discussions and solutions and what they look like, or whether they do not exist or even do not make sense. Chapter 6, which looks beyond Switzerland, does not attempt such a comparison but rather describes international developments from a Swiss perspective. In a nutshell: This is a small, but very important book, which—concerning recent developments—perhaps remains focused a little too narrowly just on Switzerland.

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