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Die Anden—Ein Geographisches Porträt

By Axel Borsdorf and Christoph Stadel. Berlin, Germany: Springer, 2013. 453 pp. US$ 109.00. ISBN 978-3-8274-2458-7.

This very nice book presents a general picture of the multifaceted notion of "the Andes." It is organized on the basis of a good old Humboldtian geographical tradition that remains unbeaten despite its age: By joining together increasingly fragmented and often disconnected published bits and pieces of research on the Andes, the book gives its readers an idea of how inspiringly attractive science can become when we get a chance to look at the "whole picture." The authors carefully assemble the whole picture of the Andes by reconstructing the main features of past and present factors shaping nature–society relationships, and give important hints on how this all relates to future development challenges.

From the beginning, the well-known and highly recognized authors make it clear that "the Andes" today cannot be understood in terms of a mountainous region strictly defined by altitude or any other biophysical indicator. Rather, "the Andes" are a starting point for acknowledging the manifold entanglements of mountain regions with their surrounding lowlands or coastal areas. This view of the Andes as a network seems also to have guided organization of the book's chapters. Although it moves from a presentation of biophysical factors, processes, and spaces to cultural, demographic, economic, and political aspects, there is no hierarchy between the different perspectives. The book's organization thus matches a "modern" understanding of nature–society relationships in terms of coevolution. The book also shows that this "modern" understanding of nature–society relationships benefits from the "old" Humboldtian integrative and transdisciplinary geographical tradition. This provides a very good basis for processing fragmented scientific insights further towards understanding the potentials and limitations that shape the future development of the Andes.

The introductory chapter presents an excellent overview of one of the most impressive features of the Andes: diversity in all its biophysical, socioeconomic, and cultural dimensions. It concludes by asking whether the region's great socioecological diversity is a potential or a handicap for development. The authors suggest that the type of development does not depend on the region's geography as such (geodeterminism): Whether a country is poor or rich depends on the degree to which its societies are able to regulate or "domesticate" the different phases of capitalist economic development towards the public good, rather than directing "development" profit maximization into private or public corporations. Chapter 2 contains inspiring insights into the complexity of biophysical factors and processes related to the highly diverse natural patchwork of Andean spaces. The last part of this chapter deals with natural risks, thus linking up nicely with the human side of Andean geography, which is addressed from Chapter 3 onwards. Based on well-documented examples of protected areas, this chapter shows how close so-called "traditional" indigenous and local forms of resource appropriation are to modern ways of conserving biodiversity. Instead of building on the globally dominant "fortress approaches"—which see human beings as the main enemies of biodiversity—both indigenous and modern approaches are struggling for recognition that even if it seems more complex, a combined approach of enhancing biological diversity via the promotion of cultural diversity is a more sustainable way of organizing nature–society relationships in the long run.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide a deeper understanding of the extremely rich cultural diversity of the societies living in the Andes. It is clearly shown that "Andean culture" is not just an undefined epiphenomenon of otherwise "westernized" people; culture has to be understood as a process that constitutes one of the main political resources through which Andean people re-create principles of development that underpinned their ancestors' lives in the past, as a basis for orienting themselves in search of their own place in today's global societies. Chapters 6 to 8 cover important issues regarding the coevolutionary process of emergence and the main features of today's rural and urban housing structures, as well as their intimate relationships with key economic sectors and activities and the related transport infrastructure.

Chapters 9 and 10 provide very useful insights into what the previously presented and illustrated characteristics of the Andes mean for understanding, and acting upon, the political–geographical overall conditions and their manifestations at the level of nation-states; consideration is also given to the different ways in which these states adopt the roles of victims and actors of "globalization." Chapter 10 concludes with a highly relevant overview of the main economic, social, political, cultural, and ecological challenges for future development. It is precisely here that one weakness of this volume becomes more clearly visible. While the book does an excellent job of covering the ways in which the ups and downs of Andean history have been expressed in a dialectical process of colonization, resistance, and constant re-creation of identities, ecological places, and political organizations. These are increasingly taking on board their own values, derived from an innovative collective reconstruction of "our common past" as guidance for "our common future". While the book shows how this is expressed *at local levels*, the analysis of the political

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constraints that such bottom-up social reconstructions meet when they attempt to link up with national political and economic structures, which are essentially still colonialist, is unfortunately not well developed.

This means that the book's conclusions on the supposedly caudillo-like government styles of Hugo Chavez or Evo Morales fail to go beyond echoing trendy, but scientifically widely unsubstantiated opinions. The authors do not address one of the hot topics of current Andean and South American political debates: how to overcome the generally heavily delegitimized systems of "representative" democracy, public administration, and justice that are still too prone to manipulation, corruption, and benefit capture by elites. The new and more independent governments are challenging powerful national and geopolitical structures and elites that have proven, both in the past and in the present, to disrespect democratic decisions by the use of manifold forms of symbolic, political, and physical aggression. Efforts to remain strong in the face of these attempts to frustrate a historic transformation, not only at the local, but also at the national and continental levels, should not simply be reduced to the notion of caudillism. A more balanced analysis must also consider Latin and South American countries' efforts to achieve coexistence based on cooperation and solidarity rather than on competition. A chapter on the most recent geopolitical initiatives, such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), which are striving to add a component of political unification to the economic unification of the Andes that is taking place, for example, through the Southern Common Market MERCOSUR and the Andean Community, would have helped to overcome this deficiency.

The book ends with a nice epilogue by Bruno Messerli that links the portrait of the Andes to the wider universe of mountain regions by highlighting how mountains became a global focus in policy-making through longstanding inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration between members of the scientific community and private and public organizations interested in furthering the sustainable development of mountain areas worldwide.

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