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Zwischen Wildnis und Freizeitpark: Eine Streitschrift zur Zukunft der Alpen

[Between Wilderness and
Leisure Park: A Pamphlet on the
Future of the Alps]

By Werner Bätzing. Zurich,
Switzerland: Rotpunktverlag, 2015.
145 pp. € 9.90. ISBN 978-3-85869-
648-9.

Werner Bätzing's book *Die Alpen—Geschichte und Zukunft einer europäischen Kulturlandschaft* (Bätzing 2015) may be as significant a work as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* or Leslie Stephen's *The Playground of Europe*. In parallel to producing its recent fifth, revised edition, the well-known German Alpine researcher has written a shorter and more political book, in which he predicts a dark future for the European Alps and argues for a fundamental reorientation of Alpine development. His starting point and motivation was the current dispute about the future of the Alps, which has succeeded a long period of broad agreement that the Alps are a relevant part of each Alpine country's national living and economic space and must be developed as such. While this approach was consistently confronted with criticism from environmentalists, that is not where Bätzing sees the reason for the current dispute. In his view, the broad consensus on development in the Alps was gradually eroded by the growth of neoliberal thinking since 1989.

The book begins with 11 hypotheses about nature, the economy, and politics. Bätzing reminds readers of the current situation, which he has dealt with in detail elsewhere: The Alps have lost much of their earlier economic and political importance. Compared to the major economic centers in today's global-

ized world, they have become virtually insignificant. This has led, on the one hand, to the abandonment of land use and the emergence of new wilderness areas in remote regions and, on the other hand, to urbanization and urban sprawl in and around the Alpine economic centers. Bätzing argues that, in the course of this development, we are losing a wealth of experience and knowledge about how to shape mountain landscapes for human use without destroying them. He extrapolates the current development into a "dreadful" future in which the Alps are divided into urbanized areas on the one hand and wilderness on the other, while their uniquely diverse cultural landscapes are lost forever.

Wilderness is a theme that runs through the book. On the one hand, it represents the changes in nature and the environment brought about by the disappearance of traditional agricultural production. Having become too expensive to compete with modern intensive agriculture in the lowlands, traditional farming activities are abandoned; bushes and shrubs spread on the uncultivated fields and meadows, soon followed by forest. This development affects animals too: Predators eradicated in the 19th century, such as wolves, bears, and lynx, are returning to the Alps and expanding quickly because they find habitats that offer good chances of survival. On the other hand, the expansion of wilderness at the expense of human land use also affects the Alpine economy and culture. Formerly productive agricultural areas are losing their relevance. Most hydropower plants have become largely automated and provide few jobs. And tourism is increasingly pulling out of the landscape, concentrating in highly "upgraded" tourist ghettos instead.

Which prospects survive, given this initial position that speaks of little hope? Bätzing first formulates 5 mainstream possible outlooks, which he then discards to present his own vision. He begins with the realistic

scenario of "connection with modernity," which was widespread in the 1970s and 1980s. It is based on a strategy of expanding the dynamic economic development of the large Alpine towns, major valleys, and tourism centers to municipalities or regions that have not yet profited, for example by building highways and infrastructure, engaging in active site marketing, and linking remote valleys to ski resorts. Second, he describes the neoliberal scenario of "all for the metropolises." Under this scenario, the aim of equivalent living conditions in all subregions of the Alps, important within a social market economy, loses its significance. Instead, nations increasingly invest their financial resources into strengthening the position of metropolises and big companies in a globalized market, in which the Alps barely play a role. Third comes the hedonistic scenario of "fun in the leisure park." In contrast to earlier times, Bätzing sees the urban population's admiration for the beauty of mountains dwindle, necessitating the development of new and artificial attractions, such as spectacular skywalks and suspension bridges. Nature and landscapes no longer appear to provide an adequate basis for tourism, so they are rebuilt and "upgraded" for contemporary recreational needs. Regions with little or extensive forms of tourism are least prepared for these challenges and thus suffer most from the changes. Fourth, Bätzing describes the scenario of "water tower and energy source." This scenario is based on a strategy of increasing water and energy storage capacity in the Alps through technical measures, so that the Alps can retain their traditional function. This is in line with the current shift in European energy policies. Fifth comes the radical environmentalist scenario of "all wilderness," which Bätzing attributes to a new understanding of nature conservation in the Alps that has developed and spread since the mid-1990s. Unlike previous

conservation approaches that aimed to protect nature by making the economy more environmentally friendly, this new approach aims to remove human influence and leave nature to its own dynamics, thus fostering new wilderness. This scenario seems to be gaining popularity but is refused by many inhabitants of mountain regions.

According to Bätzing, these 5 possible scenarios may also occur in combination with each other. He regards all of them as “dreadful,” because they all lead to the disappearance of an ancient living and economic space. To underline that none of these scenarios are desirable to him, Bätzing then presents his own, admittedly anachronistic scenario, in which he envisions the Alps as an attractive place for its residents.

For Bätzing, the emerging widespread destruction of the traditional cultural landscapes of the Alps is symptomatic of a fundamental problem: Modern economies, predominantly driven by urban areas, impair the natural and cultural foundations of human life. Consequently, he develops a vision of the future that consciously breaks with the central truisms of the modern world and enables us to imagine other, positive opportunities for the future. Bätzing emphasizes 5 key aspects of his alternative outlook. First, he highlights cultural values as a key factor: Not money and economic aspects, but culture should be the prime concern in the future development of the Alps. Economic activities, such as the production of regional quality products, can generate the necessary means to live a meaningful and responsible life. Second, he underlines the value of decentralized potentials: The use of decentralized resources should be seen as an opportunity rather than a disadvantage. He points out that Alpine products have a large market in the

European cities and in tourism, but he warns against the mistake of trying to compete with industrial mass production in terms of price and quantity. Third, Bätzing emphasizes nature protection through adapted use, with a primary focus on preserving environmentally and socially suitable land uses on areas as large as possible. This should be coupled with efforts—backed by the Alpine Convention and using national and regional spatial planning instruments—to stop the ruinous competition in Alpine tourism and with environmental regulations in the urbanized areas of the Alps. Fourth, multifunctional uses should be prioritized over monostructures. Multifunctional uses—such as different combinations of employment, for instance, in agriculture—were traditionally common in the Alps due to the small size of many Alpine farms and municipalities. Bätzing argues that such models provide a substantial basis for the future development of the Alps. Fifth, emphasis should be put on specific solutions for the Alps rather than globalized standard forms of production. Humans will never be able to fully control nature in the Alps; any new uses must therefore be developed case by case. Standardized solutions, though widespread in today’s globalized world, do not fit the Alps.

Bätzing concludes that the Alps as a peripheral region offer ideal places for good living in Europe. The proposed regional economy could provide an attractive, lively, and multifunctional complement to the fragile global economy and could help to stabilize it to some extent. Thus, Bätzing’s guiding principle of “well-balanced dual use” (“*ausgewogene Doppelnutzung*”)—in terms of endogenously and exogenously driven uses—could represent an important future scenario not

only for the Alps, but also for other regions in Europe.

This book makes an important contribution to the discussion about the future of the Alps. Bätzing consistently shows that current developments have no future; in fact, he extends this conclusion to current developments in Europe (and the world) as a whole, arguing that the same undesirable future scenarios must be expected at these larger scales as well. His own vision of well-balanced dual use takes another direction: In this vision, the main objective is not to maximize economic profits, but to further develop the Alpine living and economic space in a way that keeps it attractive for its residents. But does the “Alpine way of living and working” (“*alpine Lebens- und Wirtschaftsweise*”), so often quoted by Bätzing, effectively exist in this form? Or is it, much like the mainstream scenarios, the product of an ideology—which, in addition, is out of synch with present-day reality? Has abandonment not already become a fact in many parts of the Alps? Why should new wilderness not be seen as something positive, a new quality in light of the fact that our society has become largely urbanized even in the remotest Alpine valleys?

As for Bätzing’s concluding suggestions: Are they realistic? Is there enough potential for regional quality products, in terms of both demand and production? How much employment can they effectively provide for the Alpine population, which currently numbers 17 million and continues to grow? And where is the political basis for this approach? We will hardly find it within the Alpine regions themselves; perhaps it exists in towns and suburbs outside the Alps. Yet we know that the people of the Alps will be wary of letting urban lowland populations force their vision of the future onto them,

however meaningful it might be. The great variety of different ways of living and working, determined regionally and locally rather than by globalized norms and standards, make a future in the Alps (and elsewhere) worth living. This connection between modern and traditional approaches has long been found in many places in the Alps. In this sense, Bätzing's emphasis

on specific solutions for the Alps must be understood as fundamental criticism of a universally spreading globalized economic and social model.

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