



## **No Friends but the Mountains: Dispatches from the World's Violent Highlands**

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## No Friends but the Mountains: Dispatches from the World's Violent Highlands

By Judith Matloff. New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017. 253 pp. US\$ 28.00. ISBN 978-0-465-09788-3.

For several decades, the National Rifle Association's unofficial slogan "Guns don't kill people, people kill people" has prompted heated debate between gun control advocates and opponents. At issue, as psychologist David Kyle Johnson (2013) reminds us, are the subtle but fundamental differences between ultimate, intermediate, and proximate causes. Veteran war correspondent Judith Matloff's book *No Friends but the Mountains* is a fresh reminder of the perils of skirting around these differences. As a consequence, properly contextualizing the book's central premise that mountains breed violence requires advance clarification to readers contemplating her book: mountains don't cause violence, people do!

In a short introductory chapter, the author correctly notes—sadly without reference to such insightful and highly relevant scholarly studies as Hope Nicolson's *Mountain Gloom*, *Mountain Glory* (1959), Mathieu's *The Third Dimension* (2011), or Debarbieux and Rudaz's *The Mountain* (2015)—that mountains are largely in the eye of the beholder. Brushing over "the many topographical variations," Matloff proceeds to introduce the environmental determinist arguments that underpin her book, arguments she claims "have made somewhat of a comeback, especially among anthropologists" (p 6) due, in part, to the popularity of Jared Diamond's works. Never mind that anthropologists, among others, have severely criticized *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Diamond 1997): to wit, having guns and steel is hardly the ultimate cause of the colonial and imperial

havoc that white Europeans wrought on much of the rest of the world.

Echoing Ellen Churchill Semple (1863–1932), Matloff suggests that "mountainous topography not only yields common concerns, it breeds similar characteristics as well" and refers to "ample evidence that the severe weather and physical barriers of mountain regions give rise to mental toughness, self-sufficiency, insularity, and a talent for improvisation, among other traits" (p 5). Matloff explains that Semple was a student of Friedrich Ratzel and that her survey of the world's elevated zones features both simplistic reductions and a paternalistic tone characteristic of the period's writings. What is equally important to know, however, is that Ratzel's social Darwinist views of geopolitics, famously including the concept of *Lebensraum*, also influenced his student Rudolf Kjellén and later Karl Haushofer, two men who provided Adolf Hitler with the intellectual basis for his genocidal madness (little of it perpetrated in mountains). In other words, the purported comeback of environmental determinism is not simply a matter of academic vogue. It is a development that we should all be deeply concerned about.

Readers equipped with this minimum of context can more critically appreciate the rest of the book. The subsequent 7 chapters are dedicated to conflicts in one or more mountain regions and national and subnational territories: the Dinaric Alps (Albania), Sierra Madre (Mexico), Andes (Colombia), Himalayas (Nepal), Caucasus (Chechnya and Dagestan), Kashmir (India), Green Mountains (Vermont), Hindu Kush (Afghanistan), Lyngen Alps (Norway), Pyrenees (Spain), and Swiss Alps (Switzerland). Each chapter combines background knowledge about the respective conflict setting, not so useful maps (the one of Switzerland is appallingly oversimplified), and accounts of Matloff's encounters with various protagonists.

The numerous, frequently risky encounters reveal the author's skills and make the book come alive. They demonstrate Matloff's commitment to give voice to the many ordinary and extraordinary people who have suffered, and continue to suffer, from conflicts in mountain areas. Most of the conflicts take place in developing countries. In comparison, the struggle of shepherds against the state-sponsored introduction of Slovenian bears in the Pyrenees appears innocuous but is no less real than, say, the Nepali Rai's opposition to a dam on the Kosi River that threatens their very existence. Matloff's interviews generally include both sides of a conflict divide, showing, for example, that soldiers can sometimes be found in the role of victims, especially when sent utterly unprepared to operate under harsh conditions.

The diversity of voices and corresponding interests and contexts is where a constructive critique of environmental determinism must begin. Failing to recognize gloom and glory as 2 sides of the same coin reinforces stereotypes about mountain people, slotting them into fuzzy categories that are then mobilized, alternatively, to label some people criminals and others liberation fighters. Instead, Matloff keeps insisting on the omnipotence of topography, which becomes the trope that ultimately explains everything, including ethnic diversity and social fragmentation (are they really higher than in any metropolitan area?) and violent conflict (did the lion's share of casualties during the last 150 years or so not occur in plains accessible to large armies?).

*No Friends but the Mountains* examines some conflicts in some parts of some mountain regions. The author is at her best when engaged in journalistic reporting. Her account of travels to a psychiatric ward in Kashmir, the Colombian army's mountaintop outpost of Marquetalia, or the Arctic Allied Training Center in Åsegården make for very

interesting reading indeed. For the more demanding readers of this journal, however, the book lacks the depth and rigor that the topic deserves. Suggesting that politicians can make progress only by granting mountain people more autonomy is an unsatisfactory substitute for a concluding chapter. Reducing the causal chain between geography and violence to such simplistic connections as the North Caucasus origins of the Boston Marathon bombers or the Afghan sources of 9/11 does nobody a service—least of all

the men, women, and children living in mountainous regions.

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