

**Ben Anderson**, *Cities, Mountains and Being Modern in fin-de-siècle England and Germany*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, xii + 302pp. £64.99 hbk. £51.99 eBook.

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‘Mountaineers were urban people’, Ben Anderson tells us in this stimulating and conceptually sophisticated book. A foundation stone for the entire edifice of his argument, it is a statement that might seem surprising given the obvious association between alpinism and the untamed outdoors. Indeed, the development of mountaineering as a leisure activity can be read as representing a rejection of urban modernity, a conviction that the busy, bright-lit world of shops, restaurants and metalled roads was somehow degenerate, and that an antidote to it could be found in muscular exertion in places such as the Swiss Alps, the Italian Dolomites and the English Lake District.

Anderson overturns this perspective and does so convincingly. Building on the work of scholars such as David Matless, he rejects the idea that cultural interest in landscape and the rural was evidence of a reactionary, nostalgic or somehow anti-modern perspective. On the contrary, rambling and mountaineering were essentially – indeed quintessentially – *modern* activities, and as such were intimately connected with the urban cultures from which they sprang forth. Derring-do on ice-bound rock faces, as well as less adventurous walking along well-marked upland paths, is thus rendered an important subject not only for devotees of the somewhat recondite subdiscipline of mountaineering history, or for scholars of leisure and tourism, but for readers of this journal too. The boundaries between town and country – and their associated cultures and value-systems – were far less distinct, and far more porous, than is often assumed.

If this describes the stall set out by Anderson, the wares he exhibits take the form of case-studies of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English, German and Austro-Hungarian experience of mountaineering modernity. Fusing discursive analysis with a materialist attention to ‘affect’ and lived experience, Anderson’s discussion focuses on the cities of Manchester, Munich and Vienna, and the imbrication of their urban cultures with European mountain landscapes. In doing so, he offers what he describes as a ‘metanational’ history: ‘a history beyond, rather than between, nations and states, and one that accepts what has become known as the “shared” or “entangled” character of histories of locality, city, nation and region’ (p. 11).

Pursued over the course of seven thematic chapters, this approach succeeds admirably. While Anderson’s analysis does not ignore the nation, neither is it constrained by it – as perhaps might have been the case had he adopted a more conventional comparative method, which often assumes a static national unit or context as the basis for comparison. Anderson begins with a discussion of the transnational associational culture from which mountaineering emerged, demonstrating its roots in the social life of towns and cities: organizations like the *deutsche und oesterreichische Alpenverein* or the Co-operative Holiday Association (CHA) were expressions of an urban civic culture. Yet at the same time, in extolling the benefits of countryside recreation, they offered a critique of the urban life of

which they were an integral part; this, Anderson argues, should be interpreted not as a desire to turn back the clock to a bucolic past. Rather, 'they criticised the city as not providing the material and mental experiences expected by modern individuals, as not fitting the urban citizen adequately for the stresses and problems of modern life, and as failing to provide material environments that would allow a practice of modern selfhood to emerge' (p. 83).

Driven by this critique, mountaineering and rambling groups sought to construct upland landscapes as environments in which the modern-day urbanite might be made, or re-made, through healthful (re)creation and – in the case of the CHA, in which women were heavily involved – the performance of a domesticity founded on a progressive idea of partnership between the sexes. This new and distinctly modern understanding of the mountains was not a matter of mobilizing any pre-existing romantic aesthetic, which Anderson (perhaps unduly) sees of little account. For him, the exhibitions in Munich and elsewhere that 'turned the high-Alpine landscape into a worldwide product for mass consumption' were instead 'more closely aligned to a positivist, enlightened fantasy of total knowledge and control' (pp. 106–7).

The material corollary to such hyper-rationalist cultural constructions was the disciplining and 'modernizing' of the mountain terrain itself, through the establishment of networks of huts, paths and other elements of tourist infrastructure – a process that was linked to an understanding of mountain populations as 'backward' and in need of 'development' through the agency of urban middle-class domination. Such power dynamics, Anderson argues, were also at play in mountaineers' changing attitudes to guides, typically ordinary local men. The development of 'guideless' climbing as an expression of a rational masculinity 'in which new bourgeois competencies of risk assessment could be acted out' meant a diminution in the status of these guides, who lost their 'roles as the leaders of mountaineering trips at the very moment that that position gained priority in catalogues of first ascents' (pp. 185, 203).

Taken as a whole, Anderson's account convinces. His metanational approach provides a useful counterbalance to studies that overemphasize the strength of the connections between landscape and nation. That said, it is likewise possible to exaggerate the internationalism of fin-de-siècle mountaineers and ramblers, and the urban cultures of which they were a part. After all, places like the Alps and the Lake District were invested with strongly patriotic meanings at this time. This is evident not least from visual culture – art and photography – which perhaps does not get as much attention as might be expected in Anderson's book, and which likely would provide evidence of the persistence of romantic (if not necessarily ant-modern) ways of seeing. Still, this is a minor quibble. *Cities, Mountains and Being Modern in fin-de-siècle England and Germany* makes a major contribution to scholarship, and specifically to our understanding of the relationship between enthusiasm for the countryside and urban modernity, a relationship that – far from being antithetical – was more usually mutually supportive in nature.

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