

Making Italians out of rocks: Mussolini's shadows on Italian mountains

Marco Armiero*

Environmental Humanities Laboratory, Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, Sweden

(Received 14 November 2013; final version accepted 14 May 2014)

In this article I use the case of mountains to explore the ways in which the Fascist regime articulated its vision of nature/human relationships. I will show how mountains were considered as creative environments which could produce a special type of people: the *montanari* (mountaineers), meaning with this word mountain villagers rather than mountain climbers. The Fascist regime praised people from the mountains – especially from the Alps – as the true and better stock of Italians; that environment made them strong, healthy, pure, and disciplined, as the rhetoric of the Great War had supported. The Fascist regime celebrated the virtues of *montanari* by birth, those who were born and raised in the mountains, but it also aimed at employing the creative power of nature in its plan to shape the new Italian. In the article I show how the regime employed mountains in its discourses and practices of ‘bonifica umana’ (human reclamation) which involved both body and soul. In the Fascist narratives, mountains were the open air gymnasium for building a stronger man, a living archive of ruralism for reproducing the true Italian, and the secular church of the collective memory for the making of national subjects. The blend of nature, culture, and politics in the Fascist discourse on mountains and people is at the core of this article.

Keywords: mountains; Fascism; ruralism; sport; nationalism

Introduction

In one of the innumerable exhibitions promoted by the regime to publicise its successes and propagandise its doctrine, there was a revealing representation of the Fascist vision of mountains. In a triptych an unknown artist depicted how the Fascist regime was reshaping the mountains: in the first panel ‘a robed arm held a heavy Roman shield in defence of the mountains’; in the second ‘two workers, tensing their muscles in the holy effort, harnessed rivers and left young plants to the land’; in the third panel ‘the figure of a male black shirt soldier of the *Milizia Forestale*¹ towered like a giant, while snowy Alpine peaks and sunny deserts serve as backdrop to witness the ubiquity and fruitful activities of this magnificent creature of the regime’ (Unknown, 1937, 385–386).

Indeed, for those who visited the 1937 agricultural exhibition in Cosenza the Fascist vision of mountains must have appeared dramatically clear before their eyes. Unmistakably, the triptych celebrated the Fascist rescue of the Italian mountains – a pretty obvious task in the totalitarian rhetoric machinery. The shield, the hydraulic works, and the gigantic ranger in black shirt all narrated a story of protection and recovery, while assuming, implicitly, that there was something from which (or whom) mountains needed to be protected. The hydrogeological

*Email: armiero@kth.se

disorder is, rhetorically and physically, at the centre of that composition; protecting and recovering the Italian mountains meant first and foremost securing the plains from landslides and floods. In the light of the Fascist *bonifica integrale* the rearrangement of the mountain slopes was part of the broader struggle against malaria, therefore, a key effort in the regime's politics of land and people.² Actually the very notion of *bonifica integrale* (integral reclamation) implied the overcoming of the purely engineering and agronomic effort focused on the drainage of marshes (Caprotti 2007, 230); rather the Fascist grand plan included a broader improvement of environmental and social conditions. As Ruth Ben Ghiat puts it, 'land reclamation merely constituted the most concrete manifestation of the Fascists' desire to purify the nation of all social and cultural pathology' (Ben Ghiat 2001, 4).

Nevertheless, while the hydrogeological disorder was clearly the metaphorical and material centre of the reclamation narratives and politics, it did not say anything about the agents of that national sickness; was it only a 'natural' fact or rather did humans create it? Who was the culprit of the mountains' maladies? Indeed, it was not clear whether it was a crime or a natural evil and, therefore, whether medication or punishment was needed. After all, the last scene of the 1937 set-up in Cosenza with the gigantic ranger seemed to suggest the significance of the repressive/control apparatus. The contradictory relationship between celebrating and punishing is one of the main traits in the Fascist relationship with *montanari* (Armiero 2011, 7–8).

Nonetheless, repression was not only directed towards people. As clearly seen in the central panel of the triptych nature itself had to be tamed, literally restrained through engineering works. In the Fascist representation of mountain landscape, that is, of the most 'natural' environment in Italy, work and workers occupied a crucial portion of the scene. Instead of the usual contrast between nature and work (White 1995), that narrative embodied the latter in the former, shaping in this way the very notion of 'nature' and 'natural'. After all, what was the image of those bodies, with their muscles tense in the remaking of the landscape, if not another representation of nature? I argue that the naturalisation of people and the 'gardening' of the body through racist discourses and policies bridged narratives over the environment and humans. The hard work of humans includes both the masculine embanking of rivers and the gentle entrusting of tree seeds to the soil; indeed, trees are presented in that scenery as fruits of humans' work, making one wonder about the borders between natural and artificial. The planting of trees refers to the reclamation scheme that was the overarching framework of the Fascist narrative of nature; together with the taming of rivers, those images represent the technocratic control of nature. According to the Fascist vision of nature, defending the mountain, as the shield symbolised, did not imply leaving it as it was; indeed, one may wonder whether the beautiful landscape of the last panel was the backdrop or rather the laboratory of the *Milizia forestale's* heroic gestures. It is clear that the Fascist regime was promoting a hybrid nature made by the hard work of men (indeed a virile nature) (on virility in the Fascist discourse see Spackman 1996); the relationships between the strong men in the middle panel and the beautiful landscape in the last one seem to move in only one direction, that is, from humans to nature. Looking at that triptych, I wonder whether the human figures might instead be considered in a more dialectic relationship with nature; were their muscles and physical prowess also the products of the very nature they were shaping? I argue that the triptych was a representation of the construction of both natures, the external one, in the taming of the environment, and the internal one, in the building of people in muscles, souls and bodies.

In this article I will show how according to the Fascist regime mountains had the power to create the perfect Italian. The celebration of mountain villagers – I shall call them *montanari* – was prominent in Fascist rhetoric; they were represented as sturdy, healthy, disciplined and rooted in

traditional values. In the Fascist narrative people from the mountains had the distinction of genetic advantage, linked to environmental and racial conditions, that is, the exposure to a challenging nature and isolation from other ‘races’. However, as I will show, while preserving the existing *montanari* from extinction, the Fascist regime believed that it was possible to create new *montanari*, exposing people from the cities to the regenerative power of mountains. The discourse and practices of mountain climbing, the narratives of ruralism,³ and the politics of memory of the Great War were the pillars of that Fascist plan, and therefore they are at the core of this article.

Montanari by birth

Mussolini has the relentless step of the hiker; as a true *montanaro*, his ascension knows neither fatigue of the body nor weakness of the will. Behind the leader, the people from the Alps lead the ascent; those are the people who stand firm in the mountains, even if life is hard, the day short, and the valley is cold. At the same time, they assault the mountain and worship it as a coffer containing inexhaustible strength, beauty, and joy. These are hard times, therefore, the right times for the strong people from the Alps who know the ungenerous land, the harshness of the mountain, the danger of avalanche and the torment of frost . . . (Unknown author, 1934, 580)

Among the several characters that Mussolini personified – aviator, sportsman, farmer, driver, to quote only a few – there is also that of Mussolini *montanaro*. The author of that passage, published in 1934 in the magazine of the Italian Alpine Club, noted the resemblance between the leader of Fascism and the typical inhabitant of the Alps: endurance and strength in body and soul, muscles and willingness. The perfect Fascist as well as the genuine *montanaro* were the right people for the harsh times which were coming. The metaphor also suggested that the extreme environment of mountains moulded the material and spiritual qualities of people. However, in Fascist iconography Mussolini as mountain climber never became popular; I could not find any image of Mussolini climbing or hiking on the crests of mountains. Instead the icon of Mussolini the skier – reproduced in so many features and locations – acquired a larger fortune matching the general interest of the regime in promoting sports through the image of its strong and athletic leader. Commenting on the wide appeal of Mussolini’s vacation on Mount Terminillo, the Fascist president⁴ of the Italian Alpine Club stated:

Two days spent by Mussolini on Mount Terminillo are more valuable [to the cause of mountains] than one hundred speeches, reams of essays, and crowds of committees. (Manaresi 1937, 91)

I argue that the dual images of Mussolini the mountaineer and Mussolini the skier evoke the double attitude of the regime toward mountains and *montanari* – on one hand, the ruralistic celebration of the ‘native’, of what was born and moulded into that environment, on the other hand, the dream of driving modernity also there, producing a new landscape and a new Italian. The making of a new landscape occurred in several ways and was deeply embodied into the reshaping of space, meanings and distances – for instance through the construction of roads, cableways, dams and touristic infrastructures. Elsewhere I have analysed how hydroelectric interests and national politics produced capitalscapes made of titanic dams and dramatic injustice, places in which entire socio-ecological systems became gears of industrial machines (Armiero 2011, 173–194). Now I would like to focus on the celebration of the native vs. the production of the new Italian. No other place better than mountains could offer this kind of dialectic; in fact, they were the homeland of ‘native’ *montanari* but they were also the open-air gymnasium and sanctuary where generations of climbers and excursionists were moulded in both body and soul. For the regime *montanari* were both a natural product and a political enterprise.

In the Fascist narrative the celebration of *montanari* descended from two main roots: the experience and memory of the Great War and the ruralist discourse. Both were not original Fascist inventions but rather appropriations of the regime. Above all, they were deeply connected: it was their being *montanari*, that is, rural people in the most radical sense, that made the Alpine soldiers so special. Their daily acquaintance with a harsh environment made them physically and spiritually stronger than city dwellers. In a 1938 radio speech addressed to Italian immigrants abroad, the president of the Italian Alpine Club stated:

We left, as weak and inexperienced children, towards the labours of the Alps: four years of fierce war in the mountains returned us back to our country with strong muscles, a very hard spirit, a large serenity in the soul, a new pride . . . all attributes which would have become extremely useful in the aftermath of the war which decided the fate of Italy at least as the war itself did. (Manaresi 1938a, 189)

Mario Isnenghi has described how the Great War contributed dramatically to the myth of the peasant soldier (Isnenghi 1991), while Antonio Gibelli has stressed the special relationship between the environment of the Alps and the heroic character of the Alpine Military Corps (*Alpini*) (Gibelli 1998, 101–102). The Fascist regime brought this connection between nature and people to its extreme through its ruralistic plan and, more tragically, through racist discourses and policies.

Arrigo Serpieri, undersecretary of the Ministry of Agriculture and mastermind of the Fascist *bonifica integrale*, wrote in 1932:

The rural citizens are the more disciplined, patient, calm, and tough. They are the best soldiers. They are men with a healthy family life. Far from the petty tricks, refined cunning, and cowardly betrayals of the people from the city they are the most honest . . . Where if not among them, will the Fascist army find the mass of its numerous solid and faithful soldiers? (Serpieri 1931, 36)

The Fascist narrative conflated *montanari* – and more broadly rurals – and soldiers. Already in 1929 campaigning for a comprehensive development plan for the Italian mountain areas, Serpieri argued that the recruitment of the ‘sturdy alpine troops’ was at risk due to the crisis of mountain economies; therefore, according to him, supporting *montanari* was a military duty for the regime (Serpieri 1929, 347; on Serpieri’s vision on mountains see Gaspari 1994 and Armiero 2011). In the contemporary literature on mountains, the military argument to ‘save’ that environment and its inhabitants was a staple. Repeatedly the president of the Italian Alpine Club, Angelo Manaresi, warned about the dramatic decrease in the recruitment of *Alpini* due to the depopulation of mountain communities (Manaresi 1939–40; 1939). Those were not isolated voices of individuals; for almost a decade between 1929 and 1938 the National Institute for Agrarian Economy (INEA) had researched deeply into the depopulation of Italian mountains, producing seven volumes mostly on the Alps. That monumental inquiry also had recurring references to the military function not only of the Alps per se – the physical bastions of the nation – but rather of the kind of men they produced. As one of the INEA researchers wrote, ‘supporting *montanari* means to secure the borders. In the Alps the mountaineer is the vigilant guardian of the frontiers as is the sailor on the sea’ (Monterin 1932, 319). Giacomo Pittoni, author of the section on the Venetian Alps, clearly spelled out the connection between nature and the military virtues of *montanari*: according to Pittoni, the extreme environment of the Italian Alps had created a stock of people used to conquering the land and fighting to meet their own needs (Pittoni 1938, 168). Progressively, the rhetoric on the sturdy *montanari* was shifting from a defensive one, celebrating the keepers at the doors of the nation, to a more aggressive discourse which projected the people from the mountains as the ideal pioneers for the new imperial adventure of the regime; as someone wrote in one of the INEA volumes, ‘to overcome the various difficulties offered by the colonisation of wild lands they

[the *montanari*] have the spirit of enterprise and mastery and ingenuity in realising goals and prevailing over any kind of obstacle' (Gortani and Pittoni 1938, 536).

Speaking at the muster of the *Alpini* in Rome in 1932, Mussolini sealed this kind of discourse with his authority:

Be proud of your mountains, love the life of our mountains, and do not be seduced by the so-called big cities, where men live crammed in boxes of stone and cement, without air, light and space and often in poverty. Be proud of your large and robust offspring because gloomy would be the day on which the race of the vigorous *Alpini* came to an end. (Quoted in Serpieri 1932, 7)

In that passage the two master narratives on *montanari* conflated: the ruralist and the warlike. As Mussolini made clear, being *montanari* was the 'natural' condition to produce the *Alpini*. *Montanari* were rural folk, obviously; therefore, they embodied all the special virtues that the regime had apportioned to the countryside in opposition to the vices of the city. However, mountains were not simply any rural place in the Italian countryside; 'nature' was stronger there shaping the socio-environmental conditions and, even more, the narratives about them. The magazine *Il Bosco*, which was the official voice of the Fascist committee for forestry propaganda,⁵ reinforced the idea of mountains as a special socio-environmental place in rural Italy – or more importantly, in the discourse on ruralism in Italy. 'Race and mountain' was the eloquent title of an article published in 1938 in that magazine which synthetised the basic argument: *montanari* were the product of a harsh environment which made them stronger – because they had to fight adverse elements – and 'pure' – because their geographical isolation protected them from mingling with other races. Hence, the mountain environment produced the 'natural' muscles of those people, and it also shaped their soul affecting even their 'genetics', that is, their racial hallmarks, whatever they were. Of course the anti-Semitic discourse could not be missed:

The Semitic invasion, the economists tell us, goes hand in hand with the commercial movement because it is linked to the activities of these nomadic people. But it is right on top of the mountains that merchants have never arrived and therefore the ancient Aryan civilization has typically been untainted. The faith of the mountain people is left alone, granitic, without dispute and desecration, revolving around their church where from generation to generation the priest of Christ has blessed the marriage between people of pure race . . . (Unknown author, 1938, 1)

Another Fascist expert on agrarian issues defined mountains as an immense repository of ethnic energies, a sort of vein of both spiritual and genetic resources for the nation (Remondino 1935, 52). Culture and nature were blended into this Fascist representation of mountains and their people; *montanari* were stronger and purer because of exposure to the *power* of nature and protection from the turn of modern times. Indeed, in the Fascist geography, mountains were a racialised place in which the environment and the body met.

Giovanni Marro, an Italian racist scientist, defined the Alps as the place where the 'grandeur of our people' was shaped (Marro 1940, 293).⁶ In an article entitled 'Natural Environment and Racial Characteristics' another Italian racist scientist Eduardo Zavattari⁷ argued that the variety of the Italian landscape impressed its vigour and strength on the Italian race; it was as if biological and spiritual characteristics had moved from the natural environment to the Italian race, forcing land and people into one narrative (on race and the environment see Armiero and von Hardenberg 2013). The idea that people were affected by environmental factors in both physical and 'spiritual' terms was not a Fascist invention and it was not even the only racist theory in Fascist discourse. The genealogy of this discourse can easily lead to the anthropogeography of Friedrich Ratzel, including the 'racist and environmental determinist' – using Paul Robbins's words (2003, 819) – Ellsworth Huntington with his theories on the influences of ecological factors on the development of races and civilisations.

However, the tragedy of Fascist racist policies went far beyond the rhetoric on sturdy and genuine *montanari* (on racist politics in Italy see Gillette 2002; Cassata 2011); nevertheless, I believe that the connection linking discourses on rurality, body and nature is extremely significant in Fascist politics. On other occasions I have explained the contradictions opposing the celebration of *montanari* and the repressive practices of the regime; from the so-called ‘battle against the goats’, which reduced drastically the numbers of those animals on the basis of their adverse effect on forest ecosystems, the prohibition of emigration, which was such a significant pattern in nature/society relationships in the mountains, the legislation against common uses and property, and finally the outright expropriation of the land and resources and eviction to the imposition of a hydroelectric monoculture (Armiero 2011, chapter 5). In this article I prefer to discuss the contradiction between the all natural/biological discourse of *montanari* and the biopolitical effort to actually produce *montanari*.

Montanari by crook

But if nature was producing the true *montanari*, blending flesh and soul into the mould of an exceptional environment, what was therefore the main duty of the Fascist regime? One should assume that it was mainly probably to preserve both the environment and its bodily products, that is, *montanari*. And indeed, the Fascist regimes did enact a series of measures that aimed to preserve nature and people. As Wilko Graf von Hardenberg explains in this volume, the Fascist regime was interested in national parks, that is, in the matrix of any conservationist narrative, in its own way. Preserving meant essentially controlling; the institution of the Fascist *Milizia Forestale* went precisely in that direction, reinforcing the military and repressive presence of the state in the mountains. The so-called ‘battle against the goats’ that started in 1927 was also justified in the name of conservation; the regime chose trees over goats arguing that the eradication of those animals was necessary for the protection of forests (Armiero 2011, 129–133). Squeezed between taxes and rangers, *montanari* must have felt controlled rather than protected. Certainly it was not a new experience for those people and lands, always considered in need of being controlled and domesticated, in Italy as elsewhere (Armiero 2011 chapter 2; Scott 2009; Whited 2000). Nevertheless, the narratives of domestication had never become so real and powerful as they were during the Fascist regime; furthermore, as a consequence of the Great War and ruralist discourse, people from the mountains were no longer considered – at least not officially – dangerous folks, but rather a ‘genetic’ resource for the grandeur of the nation. Therefore, as for the forests as for the people, the Fascist regime believed that an appropriate dose of control and repression could save them from disappearing from the slopes of the mountains. After all, if the *Milizia Forestale* was able to keep the trees on the mountains, the regime alleged that it could do the same with people. While celebrating the virtues of the rurals against the vices of the urban dwellers, the regime enacted laws to forbid, or at least thwart, emigration and more generally the free circulation of people. With two laws in 1928 and 1939, the Fascist regime tried to close the mountains; in that case preservation meant basically the prohibition of *montanari* from leaving home, which, apparently, made them what they were. As someone wrote in the magazine of the *Opera Nazionale Combattenti*,⁸ ‘to remain rural people is much easier than to become rural people again Ruralism is a form of virginity which does not allow being restored or readjusted’ (Pompei 1936, 3).

Nevertheless, preservation was never a strong concept and practice in the Fascist relationship with nature. Rather than preservation, reclamation was the basic Fascist approach to nature; and the Fascist reclamation project was totally inclusive, comprising land, nature and people (Caprotti 2008).

In the mountains it implied reforestation, hydraulic works and control over grazing animals; but I would like to focus here on mountains not as object but rather as agent of reclamation. In other words, in the Fascist discourse and politics mountains were able to reclaim people, to transform broken city dwellers into strong and healthy *montanari*. As sports in general were instrumental in the Fascist biopolitics aiming at shaping and ruling over bodies (Gentile 2003, 121; Ambrosi and Weber 2004), mountain climbing offered a special contribution to this effort, because, despite other physical activities, it had the goal of moulding both the soul and the body (on the same topic but for Vichy France see Pearson 2008, 93–113).

While trying to preserve the pure race of *montanari*, the Fascist regime was also exploring the possibility of actually creating *montanari* by exposing urban people to the redeeming virtues of that special environment. Mountain climbing offered a peculiar blend of wildness and discipline; it offered the unique opportunity to meet what was perceived as wild nature but through the exercise of a strict, rather military, discipline. Mussolini himself was a member of the Italian Alpine Club, which he used to define as a ‘formidable school of Italianness and bravery’ (De Luca 1935, 542). Mussolini’s dictum clearly expressed the connections linking mountain climbing, nationalism and warlike/virile virtues. I have already stated that the celebration of *montanari* was deeply rooted in the rhetoric and experience of the Great War. In peacetime mountains were perceived as a gymnasium to train future soldiers for the nation; mountain climbing implied physical exercise, bravery and discipline. The connections between mountain climbing and militarism went beyond rhetoric; for instance, in 1936 a general of the *Alpini*, Celestino Bes, was appointed as the adjunct military president of the Italian Alpine Club (Manaresi 1936), while a school in the city of Aosta was dedicated precisely to ‘warlike alpinism’. In an article published in the magazine of the association, Angelo Manaresi listed the aims of that school:

Promote and disseminate, through workshops . . . a fierce and heroic Italian military mountaineering which should be able to overcome even extreme difficulty; offer an alpine culture, which is not only military, but also historical, scientific, and literary, to the officers of the Alpine troops. (Manaresi 1934, 110)

There is no doubt that mountains were the mould for sturdy, disciplined and healthy Italians.

The regime aimed to drive people from the cities to the open spaces where those who had been corrupted by urban culture could be regenerated. However, those healing agents of the mountains were less obvious than one may think. Undoubtedly, physical exercise played an important role; the mountain environment challenged the body, its muscles and resistance. Climbing in the mountains was not for everybody. During the Fascist age, and especially in the 1930s, Italian mountaineering was driven towards an athletic and acrobatic style that emphasized the physical prowess of its practitioners. The exploration of the oriental quadrant of the Alps, the Dolomites, fostered that approach to mountain climbing; vertical walls and ravines made those mountains the perfect training ground for the so-called oriental style, that is, a kind of mountaineering steeped in sports and acrobatics. Indeed, it was during the Fascist regime that alpinism assumed the characteristics of a proper sport with its corollary of races, grades of difficulties and medals. In 1934 the Fascist regime decided to grant the higher medal for athletic merits also to mountain climbers. As Angelo Manaresi explained in the magazine of the Italian Alpine Club, climbing a mountain entailed two races at the same time: the one against other climbers, which could even have a patriotic flavour, and the one against Nature itself. Manaresi closed his article emphatically, stating: ‘Peak victory, austere glory: Fascism, even in this first in the world, recognizes the bravery, the conquest and the conqueror, rewards the soldier in the field’ (Manaresi 1934, 1–2).

The 'sportification' of mountain climbing was not only a matter for the exceptional individual recipients of the regime's prizes. The entire organisation of the Italian Alpine Club, especially in its student sections, was deeply marked by this approach. The Littorio Games, the national tournaments in which Fascist youth organisations competed against each other in sports and physical challenges, included the so-called *Littoriali della Neve*, specifically dedicated to winter sports and mountains activities (on Fascist youth identity see Ben Ghiat 2001, 166–170). On those occasions, not just a handful of extremely skilled *montanari*, but hundreds and even thousands of students were driven to the mountains, or, at least, were forced to deal with the challenges of the mountain environment.

The primary purpose of the *littoriali dello sport* – as someone wrote in 1937 – is to incline all the young students toward mountains, pools, and gymnasiums. The scope is to shape the mass and not to create only a few champions. (Gaifas 1937, 122)

In 1936, 26 universities and four military academies participated in the *Littoriali della neve* (Gaifas 1937, 122); Angelo Manaresi reported that the number of students enrolled in the games grew from 1215 in 1932 to 2392 in 1937 (Manaresi 1938b, 77). On the organisation of free time in the Fascist era much research has been published (see especially De Grazia 1981 and Dogliani 2008); here I could digress but I prefer to stay on my topic, that is, exploring how Fascism conceived of and used mountains as agents of human reclamation. The 'sportification' of mountain climbing employed the nature of mountains, and specifically its wildness and roughness, as the main agent for the making of strong and sturdy Italians. Up in the mountains body and nature were supposed to meet and blend through discipline and exercise. Despite the Fascist fascination with physical education, no gym could have ever provided the same kind of transformative power. From this point of view, the regime's narratives of mountain climbing were indeed one of its most interesting environmental discourses. They were strongly anthropocentric, placing nature at the service of the Fascist production of the 'new man', and somehow also recognising the autonomous agency of nature and its capability to act upon humans. Actually nature vs. human was basically a dialectic relationship; while conquering mountains, the mountain climber was also conquered by mountains. The physical body of the mountaineer became the synthesis of that dialectical relationship.

However, the materiality of bodies and rocks was not the only ingredient of the Fascist recipe for preparing the perfect Italian. Both humans and mountains were much more than that. To mould the soul of the new Italian, the Fascist regime mobilised the mountain environment on a larger scale which went beyond the challenge of climbing on the rocks. Mountains were the last resort of pure rurality; theirs was not only a 'natural' environment but also a cultural, or using the Fascist rhetoric, a spiritual one. It is interesting to note that the binary opposition artificial vs. natural was at work, especially when mountains were conceived of as a spiritual environment; the authenticity of *montanari*'s life clashed with the artificiality of urban life. One might argue, instead, that on several occasions the Fascist discourse on the natural mountain environment became rather indulgent towards human-made transformations, including even the artificial into the natural. On the contrary, no hybridisation was allowed regarding the non-material landscape; the artificiality – symbol of the city – was just a bad habit, a disease that the authenticity of mountains could heal. The plurality of the mountain environment – or better still, of the Fascist narratives of it – also referred to different kind of *montanari*. The athletic mountain climber embodied in muscles and bravery a landscape of rocks, ravines and steep walls; but the Sunday hikers also absorbed the qualities of the mountain environment, although of a rather different type. Being more interested in dealing with the masses than with a handful of exceptional

alpinists, the Fascist regime mobilised thousands of people to explore the mountains without exposing them to the challenges and risks of athletic mountain-climbing.

Indeed it is such a lively, throbbing, new, and unusual experience to see crowds of people invading every Sunday . . . our mountains, forests, ski paths, looking for both leisure and pure air for the lungs, while being used to the unhealthy air of the factories and cities. Until a few years ago it would have been impossible even only to imagine so many placid and corpulent fathers . . . assault the slopes of the mountains with youthful impetus bringing with them children and nephews. Today all this is made possible [by the regime], the miracle of having the people in love with mountains and forests is a reality. (Canestrai 1938, 3)

In this case the focus was not on the extreme mountain environment; the landscape of those Sunday *montanari* was not made of sharp rocks and fearful ravines. Rather it was a peaceful rural landscape in which nature and culture – the forests and the village, the pure air and the patriarchal traditions – both acted upon humans, (re)creating the genuine mountaineer. The newsreels produced by the Luce Institute are an extraordinary archive of narratives concerning the ruralist visions of mountains; they depicted masses of people mobilised by the regime to discover the ‘true Italy’, that is, that blend of nature and tradition which mountain environments embodied. The intellectuals and artists gathering under the flag of *Strapaese* were the Fascist fundamentalists of ruralism; they clearly stated that true redemption for Italians required their return to the countryside (on *Strapaese* see Adamson 1995; Gentile 2003, 61). The rural world they praised combined nature and culture and was embodied in the village, which, of course, they counterposed to the city (Armiero 2011, 145–146; on the construction of the urban environment see Binde 1999). In this sense the human-made rural landscape was not artificial but rather ‘natural’, producing, therefore, people made of culture and nature. The people taken to the mountains by the Fascist leisure organisations were supposed to meet that hybrid environment; the landscape of rurality was made up of a narrative about frugal people, patriarchal families and traditional values. As a well-known expert on forests wrote in 1930:

Far from the tumult, vices, and temptations of the big city, the rural people contain the highest virtues of the Italian race: industriousness, sobriety, fertility, health, physical and spiritual attachment to the land and the love for the Fatherland. (Pavari 1930, 586)

The Fascist rural landscape was basically a narrated space that projected stories about people and their relationships with nature and tradition. However, while the ruralistic rhetoric produced a landscape of familiar stories, namely the patriarchal old village society, the Fascist regime inscribed in that landscape also another kind of story or, better still, of history. Going to the mountains was also a sentimental trip through the history of the nation. Again this was not a Fascist invention: since the 1870s Antonio Stoppani’s *Il Bel Paese* (The Beautiful Country) had educated generations of Italians to explore the nature of the nation, and especially its mountains, as a process of discovery and construction of the national identity (Redondi 2012). However, something enormous had occurred between the publication of *Il Bel Paese* and the starting of the Fascist regime, something that had deeply affected the Alpine landscape and its place in the construction of the national identity. That landscape was literally imbued with the memories of the war which were crystallised into a series of memorials disseminated in the Alps, while new memories were created and carved into the same space (Armiero 2010). Mountains could make people healthy and strong, frugal and disciplined and also fervent nationalists. The pilgrimages to the war memorials and the battlefields of the Great War were not an invention of the Fascist regime but, like many other things, they were incorporated in its omnivorous politics of memory and space.⁹ The regime was able to mobilise large masses of people in this secular rite and to place on it a strong official stamp. The regime concentrated the decisions concerning war

memorials by first appointing the energetic general Giovanni Faracovi as Commissioner for the Honours to the Fallen Soldiers, later in 1931 enacting a specific law. The large majority of the gigantic war memorials of the Great War were built or at least completed during the Fascist age; among others, the memorials of Stelvio (1932), Asiago (1936), Pocol (1935), Castel Dante (1933–1936) and Tonale (1936).

Cesare Battisti, the hero of the struggle against the Habsburg Empire, was appropriated by the regime and his memory was incorporated into the scenography of the Fascist celebration of the war. In 1935 Battisti's body was moved to a dedicated mausoleum built on a hill outside the city of Trento, which became one of the secular temples of the nationalistic religion.¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this article to address the Fascist politics of memory regarding the Great War; rather, I focus on the embodiment of those politics in the mountain landscape and, therefore, on the use of mountains in the making of nationalistic subjects.

Going to the mountains was not only a physical exercise, a return to the rural roots, but also a political act, a matter of national identity. Inviting Italians to join the Italian Touring Club¹¹ camps in the Alps, Ervinio Pocar, an irredentist who had fought in the war, wrote that 'knowing the South Tyrolean Alps was an indispensable national duty' (Pocar 1926, 1080). In another article published in the magazine of the tourist association someone wrote that the excursions in the South Tyrol Alps had to become a national cult (Casamorata 1927, 554). Bringing Italians to those territories was supposed to have a double result: the nationalisation of both places and people. In fact, while those mountains were culturally still hybrid places – since they had been part of the Habsburg Empire until the war – the memory of the war had transformed them into an open-air laboratory where nationalistic narratives and meanings were transferred onto people.¹² The Italian Touring Club, the Alpine Club and several Fascist leisure organisations promoted these nationalist trips to the mountains. Describing a 1926 journey to the Cadore, in the eastern Alps, the magazine of the Touring Club stated:

It was not only a carefree and pleasant excursion. It was above all a pilgrimage of devotion and Italianness On the summit of Grappa everyone kneeled and their faces were drizzled with tears while listening to the moving and penetrating speech delivered by Mario Tedeschi. (Tedeschi 1927, 880)

The Italian Touring Club had brought more than three hundred people there, a great result but still not comparable with the masses mobilised by the regime. According to a newsreel of the Luce Institute 15,000 workers were in Redipuglia in 1931 to hear the speech by Bottai.¹³ One must be always sceptical about the numbers cited by the regime but the images are clear and they show masses of people involved in those events. I can list here the 1935 inauguration of the new war cemetery on the Grappa,¹⁴ the 1938 celebration of the anniversary of the victory again on the Grappa¹⁵ and the 1938 opening of the Path of the Heroes on the Pasubio.¹⁶ Among several other beneficial effects, the mountain environment also had the property of infusing people with nationalist sentiments; if the air of the city made people free, that of mountains turned them into disciplined national subjects.

Conclusions

In the Fascist project of making '*montanari* by crook' the agency of mountains expressed itself through nature, culture and memory; indeed, mountains had height, width and depth. The vertical landscape basically spoke the language of physical power and boldness; the true mountain climber was forged in dealing with the height, its rocks and its voids. However, mountains did not limit themselves to their slopes; they were wide spaces filled with narratives of ruralism and traditions. They were the eye of the needle through which neurotic citizens had

to pass if they wanted to save themselves, or better yet, if the regime wanted to save them. Mountains were also deep spaces in the sense that they incorporated historical meanings, literally inscribed into the landscape. Strata of dead bodies, stories, symbols and monuments built the depth of mountains which the Fascist regime transformed into a hybrid cultural/natural soil in which to grow the new Italians.

Although I have not dealt with the environmental effects of the Fascist political use of mountains, in this article I have shown how the transformations of mountains into factories of new Italians affected not just humans but also nature. The need to bring masses of people to the mountains implied the construction of infrastructure and the expansion of transport systems; the celebration of the memory of the Great War changed the lines and features of so many mountains, imposing massive monuments in the landscape. The ruralist narrative had a rather twisted consequence, translating itself on one hand into autarchy and on the other into the reclamation of the plains, which brought trees rather than people to the mountains.

In this article I have chosen to focus on the Fascist discursive appropriation of mountains exploring the ways in which the regime articulated its vision of nature – in the specific case, mountains – in relationship to its larger (bio)politics of people. *Montanari* were depicted as the right people for the regime; they were as strong and healthy as real men, as disciplined and frugal as the true Italians, as patriotic and warlike as the perfect Fascists. The regime could harvest them for the sake of the nation, but it wanted also to cultivate new ones. In the Fascist imagination mountains were the greenhouse for this experiment; there, like old alchemists, the Fascist organisations aimed to create new people mixing rocks, traditions, and memory. Reality, however, as always, differs from any laboratory, even from those of the alchemists.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks are offered to Valeria Rucco, Alessandro Gualtieri and Rosa D’Elia for their help with the sources. The author is very grateful to Veronika Fukson for her fundamental proofreading of the paper. Research for this paper benefited from the People Program (Marie Curie Action) of the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme; under REA agreement No. 289374—“ENTITLE” (European Network in Political Ecology).

Notes

1. In 1926 the regime transformed the Forestry Corps in the new *Milizia Forestale*. This new agency had a strongly military character with a large number of its members recruited among early Fascists.
2. On Fascism and malaria see Caprotti and Kaika 2008; Dogliani 2008; Snowden 2006, chapter 6.
3. Barrington Moore has analysed ruralism – actually what he has called *Catonism* – in his research on the origins of authoritarian regimes (Moore 1974 [1966], 493–497). On the Italian case see Bevilacqua 2001; Isnenghi 1991; Stampacchia 2000.
4. The Italian Alpine Club was not a ‘Fascist’ invention; in fact it was founded in 1863. Nevertheless, the regime fascistised it, imposing as president Angelo Manaresi, moving the headquarters to Rome, establishing strong ties with other Fascist organizations, and applying the racial laws to its members. On this see Pastore 2003, in particular chapters v and vi and Armiero 2011, 151–152.
5. The Forest Committee, founded in 1928, was basically a propaganda agency dedicated to disseminating ‘forest awareness’ among Italians. Arnaldo Mussolini, Benito’s brother, chaired the Committee until his death in 1931.
6. It is beyond the scope of this article to offer an exhaustive discussion on Italian racism; others have already provided excellent accounts on this topic (Gillette 2002; Cassata 2011). Giovanni Marro published in the main racist journals of the Fascist age, including *Razza e civiltà* and *La Difesa della razza*. In 1940 he published *Primato della razza italiana*, a key text on Italian racist culture.

7. Zavattari was among the scientists who signed the infamous 1938 Manifesto which became the 'official document' of Fascist state racism. On this see Cassata 2011; Dell'Era 2007.
8. The Opera Nazionale Combattenti was founded in 1919 with the aim of facilitating the reintegration of war veterans in society and especially in the labour market after the Great War. The main field of activities of the Opera Nazionale Combattenti was reclamation. See Novello 2003.
9. On the politics of memory after the Great War see Mosse 1990.
10. *Giornale Luce* B0687, 29/05/1935, Italia. Trento. Translazione della salma di Cesare Battisti.
11. The Italian Tourist Club (TCI) was created in 1894 in Milan aiming to join the newly emerging middle-class passion for the outdoors with patriotic effort to unify the country. On TCI see Armiero 2011; Bosworth 1997; Piccioni 2010; Pivato 2006.
12. Obviously the nationalisation of the cultural hybrid areas during Fascist rule went far beyond the nationalist trips organised by leisure associations; see on this De Felice 1973; Motta 2006; Toscano 1975.
13. *Giornale Luce* A0811, 07/1931. Redipuglia.
14. *Giornale Luce* B0755 25/09/1935. Monte Grappa.
15. *Giornale Luce* B1325, 22/06/1938a. Monte Grappa.
16. *Giornale Luce* B1335 06/07/1938b. Vicenza.

Notes on contributor

Marco Armiero is the Director of the Environmental Humanities Laboratory at the Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm. He has been post-doctoral fellow and visiting scholar at Yale University, UC Berkeley, Stanford, the Autonomous University in Barcelona, and the Center for Social Sciences at the University of Coimbra, Portugal. He holds a position as senior researcher at the Italian National Research Council. In English he has published *A Rugged Nation: Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy* (2011, translated into Italian in 2013), several articles and book chapters ('Right to Resist'; 'What happened to the Trash?'; 'Seeing Like a Protester'; 'Enclosing the Sea'; 'Nationalizing Italian Mountains'; 'The Tree and the Machine'); he has co-edited with Marcus Hall the book *Nature and History in Modern Italy* and with Lise Sedrez *The History of Environmentalism*; he also edited *Views from the South: Environmental Stories from the Mediterranean World*. He is senior editor of the journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*.

References

- Adamson, Walter L. 1995. "The Culture of Italian Fascism and Fascist Crisis of Modernity: The Case of Il Selvaggio." *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (4): 555–575.
- Ambrosi, Claudio, and Wolfgang Weber, eds. 2004. "Sport e fascismo." Special issue of *Geschichte und Region/storia e regione* 13 (1).
- Armiero, Marco. 2010. "Nationalizing the Mountains. Natural and Political Landscapes in World War I." In *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, edited by Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall, 298–323. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Armiero, Marco. 2011. *A Rugged Nation: Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy*. Cambridge: White Horse Press.
- Armiero, Marco, and Wilko Graf von Hardenberg. 2013. "Green Rhetoric in Blackshirts: Italian Fascism and the Environment." *Environment and History* 19: 283–311.
- Ben Ghat, Ruth. *Fascist Modernity. Italy 1922–1945*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bevilacqua, Piero. 2001. "Ruralismo." In *Dizionario del fascismo*. Turin: Einaudi.
- Binde, Per. 1999. "Nature versus City: Landscapes of Italian Fascism." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 17: 761–775.
- Bosworth, Richard J. 1997. "The Touring Club Italiano and the Nationalization of the Italian Bourgeoisie." *European History Quarterly* 27 (3): 371–410.
- Canestrari, Renato. 1938. "Folle di giovani alla conquista dei monti e delle selve." *Il bosco* 2: 3.
- Caprotti, Federico. 2007. *Mussolini's Cities: Internal Colonialism in Italy, 1930–1939*. Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press.

- Caprotti, Federico. 2008. "Internal Colonisation, Hegemony and Coercion: Investigating Migration to Southern Lazio, Italy, in the 1930s." *Geoforum* 39 (2): 942–957.
- Caprotti, Federico, and Maria Kaïka. 2008. "Producing the Ideal Fascist Landscape: Nature, Materiality and the Cinematic Representation of Land Reclamation in the Pontine Marshes." *Social and Cultural Geography* 9 (6): 613–634.
- Casamorata, Cesare. 1927. "Alla vetta d'Italia." *Le vie d'Italia* 5: 554–562.
- Cassata, Francesco. 2011. *Building the New Man: Eugenics, Racial Science and Genetics in Twentieth-Century Italy*. Budapest: Central European University Press.
- Cronon, William. 1995. "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 69–90. New York: W.W. Norton.
- De Grazia, Victoria. 1981. *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Dell'Era, Tommaso. 2007. "Scienza, politica e propaganda. Il Manifesto del razzismo italiano: storiografia e nuovi documenti." *Rivista elettronica della Società Italiana di Filosofia Politica*, December. <http://eprints.sifp.it/25/> (accessed June 2, 2014).
- De Felice, Renzo. 1973. *Il problema dell'Alto Adige nei rapporti italo-tedeschi dall'Anschluss alla fine della seconda guerra mondiale*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- De Luca, Gaetano. 1935. "L'alpinismo e il club alpino alla mostra nazionale dello sport." *Rivista mensile del CAI* 10: 542.
- Dogliani, Patrizia. 2008. *Il fascismo degli italiani. Una storia sociale*. Turin: UTET.
- Gaifas, Enrico, Jr. 1937. "I littorali della neve e del ghiaccio." *Rivista mensile del CAI* 56: 122–123.
- Gaspari, Oscar. 1994. *I segretariato per la montagna (1919–1965)*. Rome: Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – dipartimento per l'informazione e l'editoria.
- Gentile, Emilio. 2003. *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing.
- Gibelli, Antonio. 1998. *La grande guerra degli italiani*. Milan: RCS libri.
- Gillette, Aaron. 2002. *Racial Theories in Fascist Italy*. New York: Routledge.
- Gortani, Michele, and Giacomo Pittoni. 1938. "Montagna friulana." In *Lo spopolamento montano in Italia. Le Alpi venete*, 295–563. Rome: Tip. Failli.
- Isnenghi, Mario. 1991. "Il ruralismo nella cultura italiana." In *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea*, vol. 3, edited by Piero Bevilacqua, 877–910. Venice: Marsilio.
- Manaresi, Angelo. 1934. "Medaglia la valore agli alpinisti italiani." *Rivista mensile del CAI* 1: 1–2.
- Manaresi, Angelo. 1934. "Scuola fascista d'alpinismo guerriero fra alti monti sabaudi." *Rivista mensile del CAI* 3: 109–110.
- Manaresi, Angelo. 1936. "Alpinismo guerriero." *Rivista mensile del CAI* 5: 201.
- Manaresi, Angelo. 1937. "Mussolini sciatore." *Rivista mensile del CAI* 56: 91.
- Manaresi, Angelo. 1938a. "Fascino bianco." *Rivista mensile del CAI* 57: 189.
- Manaresi, Angelo. 1938b. "Universitari all'assalto dei monti. Il rostro d'oro." *Rivista mensile del CAI* 57: 77–78.
- Manaresi, Angelo. 1939. "Presentazione." In *Manuale della montagna*, xiii–xvi. Rome: Ulpiano.
- Manaresi, Angelo. 1939–40. "Alpini e alpinisti." *Rivista Mensile del CAI* 59: 413–414.
- Marro, Giovanni. 1940. *Primato della razza italiana*. Milan: Casa editrice Giuseppe Principato.
- Monterin, Umberto. 1932. "Media e bassa valle d'Aosta. Valle di Champorcher e valle di Challant." In *Lo spopolamento montano in Italia. Le Alpi liguri-piemontesi*, a cura di INEA, 219–320. Milan: Treves-Treccani-Tuminelli.
- Moore, Barrington. 1974 [1966]. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin University Books.
- Mosse, George L. 1990. *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Motta, Giuseppe. 2006. *Le minoranze nel XX secolo*. Milan: Franco Angeli.

- Novello, Elisabetta. 2003. *La bonifica in Italia. Legislazione, credito e lotta alla malaria dall'unità al fascismo*. Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Pastore, Alessandro. 2003. *Alpinismo e storia d'Italia*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Pavari, Aldo. 1930. "Genesi e sviluppo della bonifica in Italia." *Le vie d'Italia* 8: 561–573.
- Pearson, Chris. 2008. *Scarred Landscapes: War and Nature in Vichy France*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Piccioni, Luigi. 2010. "Nature Preservation and Protection in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Italy, 1880–1950." In *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, edited by Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall, 251–267. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Pittoni, Giacomo. 1938. "Montagna vicentina." In *Lo spopolamento montano in Italia. Alpi Venete*, edited by INEA, 73–179. Rome: Tip. Failli, Roma.
- Pivato, Stefano. 2006. *Il Touring club italiano*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Pocar, Ervinio. 1926. "La vita del nostro campeggio in Val Malenco." *Le vie d'Italia* 10: 1074–1080.
- Pompei, Manlio. 1936. "Scuola di ruralità." *La conquista della terra* 11: 411–418.
- Redondi, Antonio, ed. 2012. *Un best-seller per l'Italia unita. Il Bel Paese di Antonio Stoppani*. Milan: Guerini.
- Remondino, Carlo. 1935. "Fascismo e montagna." In *La montagna italiana: scritti sul problema montano*, 52–53. Turin: V.M. Briscioli.
- Robbins, Paul. 2003. "Networks and Knowledge Systems: An Alternative to 'Race or Place'." *Antipode* 35 (4): 818–822.
- Scott, James. 2009. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Serpieri, Arrigo. 1929. "Il problema montano e forestale al parlamento." *Alpe* 8: 347.
- Serpieri, Arrigo. 1931. "Introduzione." In Benito Mussolini, *L'agricoltura e i rurali*, 11–50. Roma: tipografia del littorio.
- Serpieri, Arrigo. 1932. "Discorso al congresso della montagna a Sondrio (13–14 december 1931 per iniziativa dei sindacati fascista dell'agricoltura)." *Alpe* 1: 3–7.
- Snowden, Frank M. 2006. *The Conquest of Malaria. Italy, 1900–1962*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Spackman, Barbara. 1996. *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology, and Social Fantasy in Italy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stampacchia, Mauro. 2000. *Ruralizzare l'Italia! Agricolture e bonifiche tra Mussolini e Serpieri (1928–1943)*. Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Tedeschi, Mario. 1927. "Perché il Touring ha organizzato l'escursione alle Dolomiti." *Le vie d'Italia* 9: 878–881.
- Toscano, Mario. 1975. *Alto Adige, South Tyrol: Italy's Frontier with the German World*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Unknown. 1934. "Saluto, dai monti, al duce!" *Rivista del Cai* 53: 570–580.
- Unknown. 1937. "La milizia forestale alla 1 mostra agricola provinciale in Cosenza." *Alpe* 10: 385–386.
- Unknown. 1938. "La razza e la montagna." *Il bosco* 1938: 14.
- White, Richard. 1995. "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living? Work and Nature." In *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon, 171–185. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Whited, Tamara. 2000. *Forests and Peasant Politics in Modern France*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Zavattari, Eduardo. 1938. "Ambiente naturale e caratteri biopsichici della razza italiana." *La Difesa della Razza* 1: 20–21.