



The Alps: an environmental history - by Jon Mathieu

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The Alps: An Environmental History. By Jon Mathieu

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Jon Mathieu is to Alpine history what Werner Bätzing (eg Bätzing 2015) is to Alpine geography—that is, arguably the most accomplished and influential scholar of our time in his discipline. Is Mathieu to the Alps what Braudel is to the Mediterranean? Only time will tell if this book will have the same impact for the history of European civilization and for historiography as *La Méditerranée* (Braudel 1949). It is not that there is a lack of references to the French *maître* in this book. The index mentions 6 places, including 3 long passages, where Mathieu tries to do justice to Braudel's infamous dismissal of the Alps as being at the margins of European history. Mathieu is not the first scholar to dispute Braudel's provocative assertion, but *The Alps* is arguably one of the most eloquent arguments against it. It differs from Bätzing's perspective as it does not claim any centrality of the Alps for European history. Rather, it adopts the viewpoint of the exceptionality of the Alps from all perspectives, portraying the region as a laboratory where the past, present, and future of Europe are forged.

The Alps is the updated, expanded, and abridged version of Mathieu's extremely well documented masterpiece *History of the Alps 1500–1900: Environment, Development, and Society*, published in German in 1998 and English in 2009 (Mathieu 2009). First published in German, *The Alps* is now available to a global audience thanks to a translation by Rose Hadshar. This book, based on an extensive review of German, French, Italian, and English literature, as well as, of course, a variety of historical documents and other sources, succeeds in the difficult task of producing a balanced overview that looks at the Alps as a whole. If examples from Switzerland are slightly more prominent than those from other countries, this is understandable, as the author is from this country, where he has been working for decades, first in Lugano and now in Lucerne. In any case, the book covers all parts of the Alps, from France to Slovenia, and from Italy to Bavaria.

Starting from the premise that conducting a historical overview—from prehistoric times to modern days—of an area that stretches over 1200 km must be undertaken

selectively, Mathieu chooses to combine a rapid chronological history of the Alps with a thematic analysis of specific historical and geographical aspects such as religious culture, social inequality, migration, and agriculture. By adopting a thematic approach, which is increasingly frequent in contemporary historiography, this book manages to capture key aspects of Alpine history through select glimpses. If it is not always clear how episodes and examples were selected, they are always significant and, altogether, help make sense of Alpine history. This narrative choice means that the author does not get lost in a chronological narrative that would probably have missed many significant aspects. His synchronic approach may disorient the reader at times but brings forward all the elephants in the room of Alpine history. One example is an interesting analysis of Hannibal's crossing as a founding myth of Alpine history, analyzed not only as a historical fact but also as a symbol in different times of Alpine history. A chronological approach would probably have missed this important dimension.

By analyzing the economic, social, and environmental relationships between the “core” area of the Alps and its periphery, Mathieu also argues that the exceptional nature of the Alps rests in their historical connection with economically dynamic surrounding areas, such as Lombardy, the Lyon area, and the Upper Rhine, among others. In this regard, the methodology used is particularly interesting, as it highlights the complex and nondichotomous interactions between the Alpine mountain range and surrounding urban areas, as well as between human societies and their natural environment.

Paradoxically, *The Alps* misses out on the dimension that perhaps most readers would look for: environmental history, as per the subtitle in the English version, which is slightly misleading. The German version has a different subtitle, which better reflects the contents of the book: *environment, culture, history*. In fact, Mathieu reduces the environment to the geographical scope of the Alps as a given mountain area and to the social construction and practices of this area over time. There is very little in this book about the natural history of the Alps, whether nonanthropogenic change or the several more or less recent anthropogenic changes, some due to local and regional dynamics, such as forest cover and biodiversity loss, and others due to global driving forces, such as climate change. The author may have done so to avoid any suspicion of environmental determinism, putting forward the work of the men and women who contributed to shaping collectively, and sometimes individually, the history of this mountain range. However, to live up to its subtitle, this book should have engaged more with environmental change, particularly the impact of endogenous and exogenous environmental change, on Alpine history. The author already goes outside of his disciplinary comfort zone when he engages, for instance, with the role of the process of European integration. He should perhaps have done this even more to deal more with the environmental dimension.

The bottom line about this book is that it helps make sense of Alpine history. It is remarkable as it looks at what the Alps have in common: much more than what divides them. *The Alps* is highly accessible as it is relevant to both the informed and uninformed reader. Its chapters can be read as standalone thematic contributions to the overall history of the Alps. Braudel may have inspired Mathieu, but the result shows the exceptionality—not the marginality—of this mountain range. Thanks to scholars such as Mathieu, but also Bätzing, Viazzo, Debarbieux, and many others, the Alps are no more at the margins of European scholarship. The Alps and their peoples, with their rich and inspiring history

and environment, make an exceptional contribution to European history. *The Alps* does an excellent job highlighting these contributions, where they come from, and, perhaps, where they are going.

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