

# The Globalisation of Mountain Perception: How much of a Western Imposition?

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## Introduction

"The study of mountain societies has usually carried with it some implicit assumptions", writes Chetan Singh in a recent book on society and culture in the Himalayas: "To begin with is the commonly held view that mountainous physiography was itself a reason enough to delineate highland as distinct geographical regions. Appended to this view is an underlying supposition that mountainous terrains exert an extraordinary influence on humans and therefore nurture societies that see themselves as quite distinct from those located in lowlands. Even unconnected and distant highland cultures are sometimes viewed as having more in common with each other than with their neighbours in the plains. In short, mountains and mountain people across the globe are, in some manner, considered unambiguously different. Their difference from non-highland regions has come to be perceived as the basis of similarities."<sup>1</sup>

This paper looks at ways in which this general view of mountains has emerged in history from the 16th century onwards. I will focus on persons and actions which connected upland areas across the planet. There are mountains scattered on all continents, and it takes some imagination to bring them together and to see them as one distinct region on a global scale. "Universality must be constructed", writes science historian Timothy Lenoir, referring to the production of cultural representations with a general claim.<sup>2</sup> In the case of mountains, this becomes very clear. The idea of viewing these regions as a universal whole does not arise through simple observation. Even when it became possible to observe the planet from outer space, the mountain zones strewn all across the continents did not readily impose themselves as a global object. So how and why did this historical construction come about? If we approach the mountain

topic from the historical side, this question is not without significance.

I will try to give some clues to an answer in a very selective way by presenting three examples—or "historical steps"—from several centuries. The first section focuses on a book by the Swiss humanist pastor Hans Rudolf Rebmann (around 1600); the second one deals with the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (around 1800); and the third one takes up the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the so-called *Earth Summit* in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The first personality is quite unknown even to experts, whereas Humboldt and the *Earth Summit* are famous in various contexts. At the end of this succinct survey on the globalisation of mountain perception we ask ourselves: How much of it should be considered a western imposition? And would it be possible to (re)construct a non-western genealogy of the phenomenon? Such questions lie at the heart of the ongoing debate on global history. So far they have not been raised for mountain regions, which sum up to a fifth or a quarter of the global land surface.<sup>3</sup>

## A Conversation Between Two 'Mountain Kings' (around 1600)

Hans Rudolph Rebmann (1566-1605) originated from an intellectual family in Berne, the capital town of today's Switzerland. He accomplished his studies in Germany and then took up an engagement as a protestant pastor in the small town of Thun at the very foot of the Alps. There, he continued his scholarly activities and around the year 1600, started to compose a lengthy text on mountains. It was published posthumously in 1606 as a book of 500 pages with the title *Neuw/Lustig/Ernstthafft/Poetisch Gastmall/und Gesprächzweyer Bergen/ In der*

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*Löblichen Eydgnosschafft/ undim Berner Gebietgelegen. That is: New/ Funny/ Serious/ Poetic Feast /and Conversation of Two Mountains/ Located in Laudable Switzerland/ and Bernese Territory: Namely of the Niesen and Stockhorn/ As Two Old Neighbours.*<sup>4</sup>

The Niesen and the Stockhorn are two mountains in the Bernese Oberland (highlands). The book presents them as monarchs with a court and with subjects. King Niesen invites King Stockhorn to a feast or banquet and a long conversation among "good old neighbours". The conversation deals first with the creation and the characteristics of the world in general, and then in particular with mountains and mountain peoples in a global perspective. In the European tradition, this book is perhaps the first attempt to sort out the uplands of the known world in that way. The Italian humanist Giovanni Boccaccio had put together names of mountains from antique texts in the 14th century. Rebmann's book, however, offered not a list of names for philological use, but a proper encyclopaedia of mountains for enlarged knowledge. According to the author he had collected information from "all sorts of histories, cosmographies and similar writings". This resulted in a lengthy and far-reaching geography.

Two features of his work seem especially striking to me: first is globalising mountain view, going much further than any predecessor, to my knowledge. Second, the fact that he chose an anthropomorphic approach. The staging of the poem as an encounter between two mountain kings can be seen against the background of the preceding monarchisation in Europe. During the 15th and 16th centuries the princely and royal courts had become much bigger, more organised and more prominent, than in the earlier times. On the whole, however, Rebmann's approach is hard to explain, since the European tradition—in contrast to traditions for example in Asia and Native America—gave few clues for that. In the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era, Christian culture often treated nature in a distant manner. Anthropomorphism is rare in the old literature. The first feature, the globalisation of perception expressed in the book, fits much better into the European culture of the period under the impact of early colonial expansion. The expansion triggered a boom of exchange about old and new geographical knowledge, put down in travel accounts, treatises and maps. Rebmann was very much involved in these intellectual networks.

His involvement is best illustrated by the *Album Amicorum*, his 'Friendship Album'. It stems mainly from 1588 when he was studying in Heidelberg, Germany. The front page shows a self-portrait of Rebmann in water colour. The portrait is a bit washed-out, yet we can discern that he presents himself in the black dress of a

future theologian, in the 16th century fashion dominated by Spanish culture, and with a book in his hand. The 'Friendship Album' includes about a hundred printed portraits of famous intellectuals and—in between them—offers blank pages for personal inserts and good wishes from professors and student friends. Among the portraits of intellectuals one finds quite a few authors who had written about mountains during the 16th century, for example about hiking to a summit or about the geography of the Alps.<sup>5</sup> In Switzerland, at that period, the mountains began to have a patriotic connotation as they were a means to distinguish the emerging polity from the Holy Roman (German) Empire. There are indications that these examples and motives were an inspiration for Rebmann. He portrayed the mountains not as peripheral and poor regions, but as central, useful and rich.

Scholars of his time were informed by new experience and discovery, but they relied also heavily on the religious and intellectual tradition, which they could appropriate and rework. In the humanist wave of the 15th and 16th centuries, scholars were supposed to get acquainted with the authoritative texts from Greek and Roman antiquity, and that they should read and learn the biblical Christian texts in a painstaking way. Rebmann seems to have been rather diligent as indicated, for instance, by a collection of hand-writings, bound together under the title *Historia politico-ecclesiastica*.<sup>6</sup> Let us give just one example out of this bulky volume—a "table of the world's years" (*Tabulla annorum mundi*). It gives a chronology starting from the creation of the Earth according to biblical indications: 1656 years from the creation of the Earth till the universal deluge, as documented by Genesis 5.7 (a passage in the first chapter of the Bible); 292 years from the universal deluge to the birth of Abraham, the first of the biblical patriarchs, as proven by Genesis 11, and so on—up to the present day of Rebmann. This was a rather scientific methodological enterprise. Christianity had something of a book religion, and these textual exercises did also shape his mountain studies.

For the publication of his book he then switched from the scholarly style to a popular format. He used the German language in a regional version instead of academic Latin, and he put the text down as a dialogue and as a poem with rhymes which was not unusual in the period under study. The book turned out to be quite successful. After some years the first print was exhausted, and since the author died early, one of his sons republished the book in 1620, even in an enlarged version. He had found papers that the father had left out in the first edition and included them in the second edition, counting 650 pages.

For our purpose globality is the central aspect—which was the coverage of mountain regions in the *Poetic Feast*? The table gives a quantification of the text's geographical

**Length of Mountain Descriptions in  
Rebmann's Poetic Feast**

Continent Region	Verse lines			
	Edition 1606		Edition 1620	
<b>Europe</b>	5038	66%	6596	61%
Spain/Portugal	118		134	
France	260		300	
Switzerland	2700		4264	
Italy	906		673	
Germany/Austria	398		434	
Central/Eastern Europe	217		160	
South Eastern Europe	350		360	
Scandinavia	16		32	
<b>Asia</b>	1620	21%	2533	23%
Asia Minor	382		384	
Caucasus/Central Asia	115		194	
Israel/Palestine	754		1296	
Mesopotamia	35		108	
Arabian Peninsula	69		83	
Persia/India	235		413	
<b>Africa</b>	372	5%	831	8%
North Africa	221		404	
West Africa	23		101	
East Africa	46		176	
<b>America</b>	205	3%	481	4%
North America	14		18	
Central America	54		158	
South America	104		243	
<b>Islands</b>	412	5%	402	4%
<b>TOTAL</b>	7647	100%	10,843	100%

Sources: Rebmann 1606 (as endnote 4), pp. 146-401, and Rebmann 1620 (as endnote 4), pp. 164-552.

dimension, measured in verse line, the first column representing the 1606 edition, the second column the 1620 edition. The geographical arrangement follows the text: Europe, Asia, Africa, America, plus a special category for islands in different oceans. Australia was still lacking in the European mind at that time.

The imbalance of the coverage is obvious at first sight. Europe takes more than 60 percent of the text, Asia a bit over 20 percent, Africa below 10 percent, and the Americas a few percent only. Within Europe, Switzerland stands out in an extreme way, especially in the second edition with more than 4000 verse lines; Persia and India in the Asian part have a coverage ten times less. The mountains of the Bernese Oberland, the author's home region, are described with the greatest care and detail of all. It is certain that Rebmann had climbed some of them and had a good geographical sense. But except for this

first-hand experience the whole rest of his upland world was based on writings, and they were extremely different for different parts of the world. For Africa, Rebmann quotes only a handful of antique texts (Greek and Roman geographers); for the Middle East this antique layer is completed by biblical indications, and for Europe moreover by new chronicles, cosmographies and travel reports. For the "New World" in the Americas, Rebmann gives no quotes, but short historical indications at the margin, for Brazil for example "found 1504", and for the Andean silver town Potosí: "found in the year 1545".

Rebmann is rather unknown even to Swiss historians. In my view he is both original and interesting. His book is a good example of the ego-centred, proto-national way in which early globalisation often proceeded. The author reflected an expansionist moment when European seafaring made "findings" in many parts of the world, the particularity being that he sorted out the mountains from all other ecosystems.

#### **Humboldt's Mountain World (around 1800)**

In that point Rebmann resembled somewhat the German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt who came two centuries later and serves here as our second example. Humboldt, of course, was no humble pastor in a small town; he was a celebrity from his early years and up to the present day. The literature about him is huge; he is a kind of international figurehead of Germany.<sup>7</sup>

Alexander von Humboldt was born in 1769, a noble from Berlin, where he died ninety years later. He spent much of his life outside Germany: From 1799 to 1804 he undertook his journey to South America, after which he stayed in Paris, the scientific metropolis of that time, for more than two decades. He left behind an extensive body of scientific work consisting of a thousand and more titles in print. This was due not only to Humboldt himself but also to a kind of Humboldt industry—of scientific and technical assistants, independent publishing agents, translators, and intermediaries of all kinds. Most significant for his reputation are, perhaps, the objects named after him: villages and cities, mountains and rivers, parks, caves, streets, economic and scientific foundations; also minerals, plants, animals, and many more. Humboldt received his first namesake when he was 21 years old. Today there are around a thousand appellations deriving from his name, found on all the world's continents.<sup>8</sup>

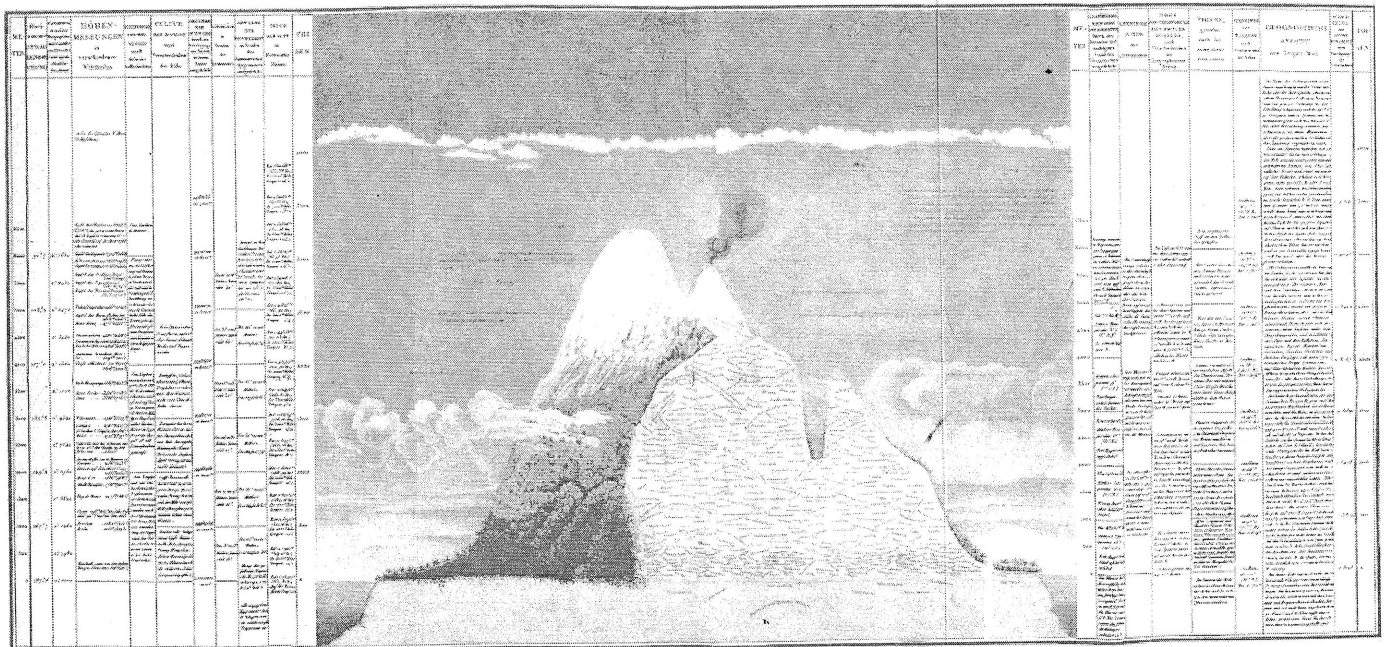
It was the South American journey that made this cosmopolitan noble truly famous. In the company of a French botanist, on board of a Spanish boat, he left Europe in June 1799. The travel took him first to the Amazon (in today's Venezuela) and then to the Andean mountains (in

today's Colombia, Ecuador and Peru). Among many other things, he almost climbed the huge volcano Chimborazo in Ecuador which was held for the highest mountain of the world. Afterwards he turned to Mexico, Cuba, and Washington, where he was received by the president, Thomas Jefferson, an admirer of Humboldt. One should not assume, however, that he had to make do in the New World without any European-style infrastructure. By 1800 there were already more than twenty universities there, run by Catholic orders or bishops; they often exhibited archaic library collections, but in some cases they could also look back on a long history. Of course, Humboldt's South American expedition also had its fore-runners. Ever since the conquest and occupation by Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth century, the continent had been explored repeatedly by travellers.

What interests us here, is the significance Humboldt ascribed to the mountain world. It can be discerned in diverse fields: in his subjective feelings and expressions, his research plans and his scientific methods. His famous book *Ansichten der Natur* (Views of Nature) of 1808 was, for example, introduced by the motto taken from a contemporary literature: "In the Mountains is Freedom! / The whiff of the grave / Rises not into the pure air; / The world is perfect everywhere, / Where no man treads with

his despair". The measurement of altitude belonged to the constant elements of Humboldt's scientific practice. On the trip across Spain to Madrid in 1799, he made such zealous use of his barometer that one historian qualified it as a "barometric measurement campaign". Through the positioning of orientation points, he was then able to establish a land profile with mountain ranges and high plateaus over a distance of 1,000 kilometres. He used a similar technique in other places, and later went on to calculate the average elevation for each continent, along with the relationship between highlands and lowlands. If he once forgot to open his barometer at a prominent location, he would find it worth mentioning years later.

Humboldt was a pioneer not only with measurements, but also in his representation of mountains in the form of elevation profiles. One of the most iconic pieces is called *Naturgemälde der Anden*, a cross-section of the Andes, attached as a large tableau in his 1807 book *Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen* (Essay on the Geography of Plants). It shows the Andean mountain range with its vegetation belts cover, a big summit representing Chimborazo, a smaller one a still active volcano. In a sliced part of the mountain landscape, Humboldt inserted numerous plant names thus stressing the ecological embeddedness of the flora explored in the New World. The columns at

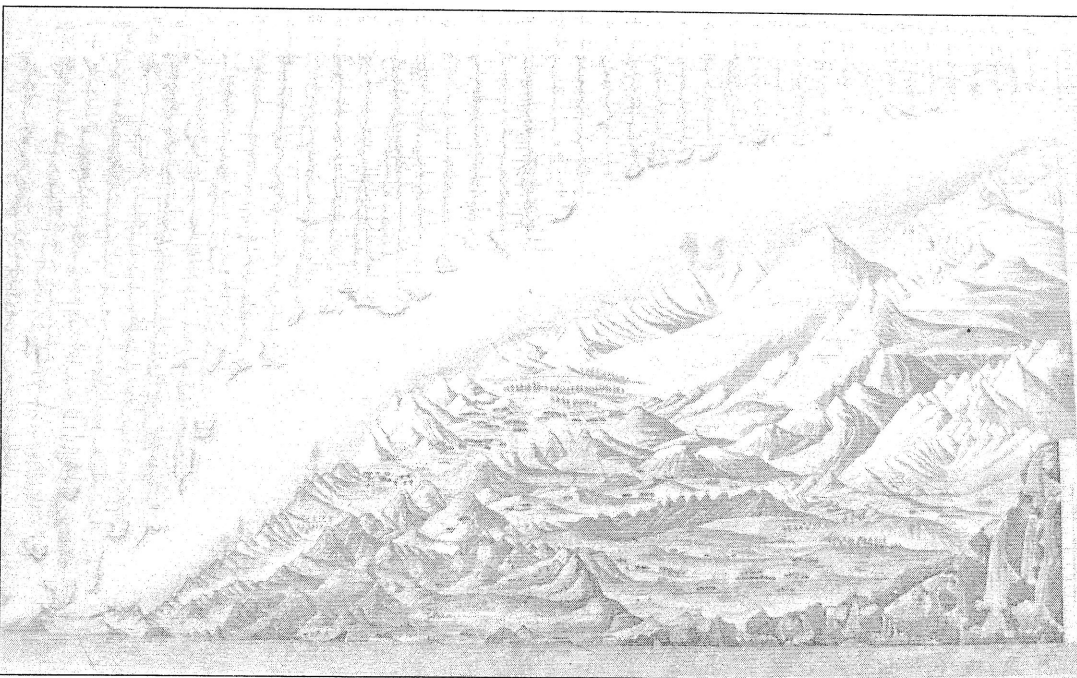


*Geographie der Pflanzen in den Tropen-Ländern;*  
*ein Naturgemälde der Anden;*  
 gegründet auf Beobachtungen und Messungen, welche vom 10. Grade nördlicher bis zum 10. Grade südlicher Breite angestellt worden sind, in den Jahren 1796 bis 1800.  
 von ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT und A. G. BONPLAND.



both side of the tableau give further information of air pressure, humidity, radiation and so on. Significantly, the South American plain is not considered interesting in the tableau.

The tableau turned out to be an inspiration to many contemporaries, for example to Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Germany's foremost poet. Goethe received from Humboldt a personal copy of this *Essay on the Geography of Plants*, sent so quickly after print that it still lacked the famous illustration. "I devoured the book, and wished to make it fully enjoyable and useful for myself and others without delay." Goethe later wrote. Using the book as a guide, he sketched the mountains of the New and the Old World on a piece of paper.<sup>9</sup> In the following period, comparative representations became fashionable both in science and in the private life of the learned bourgeois elite. The *Tableau comparatif et figuré de la hauteur des principales montagnes et du cours des principales fleuves du monde*, printed in Paris in 1829, is a case in point. It shows what the title suggests: a comparative tableau of the altitude of the main mountains and of the course of the



main rivers of the world. The mountains are all lumped together and form a kind of global mountain.

In that global mountain of 1829, the single ranges and peaks are quite naturally classified by altitude. The "birth of altitude" as one principal category in the European mind was a lengthy process starting in the 15th and 16th century.<sup>10</sup> In an early period, altitude was mainly judged by eye; so it depended very much on the visibility of a summit. Mountains were also assessed by simple trigonometric instruments or by hydrographic

observations (the origin and importance of rivers as indicators of altitude). In the age of Rebmman, the judgments about the highest mountain of the world—as seen through European eyes—varied considerably. Some chose the mythological mount Olympus in Greece, others voted for the Tenerifa Peak west of Africa. It was an island that could be seen from a distance of 60 miles and more, and some even believed it to be just as tall!

In the 17th century, the traditional means of measurement were completed and partly replaced by barometers. Thus air pressure became an indicator of altitude and spared the tiresome labour of large-scale levelling. On the other hand, barometric measurements long remained imprecise. For a while, the favor of European scholars now shifted to Tenerifa Peak. Its dominance came to an end in the mid-eighteenth century, when a French scientific expedition noted rather casually the height of the Chimborazo while taking general earth measurements in the Andes.<sup>11</sup> In the following decades, this extinct volcano in Ecuador indisputably held its position of superior rank in the minds of the Western intelligentsia. But in

the 19th century when foreign intrusion became stronger in Asia and when the British and others started systematic land surveys, the attention of the learned public turned east. The earliest news reporting the elevation of certain mountains in the Himalayas appeared in Europe in the 1810s. At first the Daulaghiri became the world's highest peak (noted as such e.g. in the mentioned Tableau of 1829). Then, since the 1850s, the position of world dominance was claimed by a successor, known by many today.

as Mount Everest. Each time the printers had to adapt to the new state of knowledge and change the sheets which were also used as decoration for the living room.

But let us return to our story line of Rebmman and Humboldt. All in all, there was quite a difference between the two examples mentioned so far. For Rebmman around 1600, the mountains were rich and useful, for Humboldt they were interesting and beautiful. Rebmman worked rather exclusively with writings; on that basis he undertook a mind travel to far away upland regions of the world

whereas Humboldt visited some of them personally and was an enthusiastic topographer. Visually the mountains of the world had come together in representations, be it in juxtaposition or lumped together in one world mountain. In this image we see quite concretely how globality was composed and constructed.

### The Mountains as a 'Major Ecosystem' (1992)

Our third station in this short survey is the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, frequently designated as *Earth Summit*. It was held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 and entered the history of international relations as an unprecedented event. The conference broke all records and expanded unexpectedly into a cultural happening of global magnitude. Official representatives came from more than 170 countries, including over 100 presidents and other heads of state. Also in attendance were several thousand non-governmental organisations, some of them integrated within the official conference channels, while others joined together in a colourful and well-attended alternative summit, the so-called 'Global Forum'. A cultural programme with many celebrities provided entertainment and variety. Seven or eight thousand journalists covered the event, more according to some sources. In fact, no one knows exactly how many people were in Rio for the summit. It could have been 30,000 or more.<sup>12</sup>

The bewildering event should not obscure the fact that many participants in this crowded conference were engaged in strenuous diplomatic negotiations. The cold war had officially ended with the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, but the atmosphere was tense: The wealthy nations of the North demanded "protection of the environment" from the less developed South, whereas the South called for a "technology transfer" and financial compensation from the North. To make matters worse, the United States was very selective in its support for environmental protections, yet at the same time it claimed for itself more of a global leadership role than ever before.

A central document, which was deliberated at Rio in the various committees and eventually adopted, was *Agenda 21*, a sort of world programme for environmental and developmental politics in the twenty-first century. The thirteenth of the Agenda's forty chapters was devoted to the mountains, and bore the title 'Managing fragile ecosystems: Sustainable mountain development'.<sup>13</sup> It began by establishing that mountainous regions not only were important sources of water, energy, and biological diversity, but had other key resources to offer as well, such as minerals, forest and agricultural products, and recreational opportunities: "As a major ecosystem representing the complex and interrelated ecology of our

planet, mountain regions contribute vitally to the survival of our global ecosystem." Yet these regions were seen to be undergoing rapid change, accompanied by accelerated ground erosion, landslides, and massive losses to habitat and genetic diversity. On the human side, the chapter identified widespread poverty among mountain people and the loss of indigenous knowledge. "As a result, most global mountain areas are experiencing environmental degradation. Hence, the proper management of mountain resources and socio-economic development of the people deserves immediate action." Following this introductory paragraph, the chapter went on to list a comprehensive catalogue of problems and political directives.

According to the document, approximately ten percent of the world population lived at higher elevations and in steep mountain areas, while another forty percent inhabited the adjacent watershed areas below. Roughly half the world's people were therefore affected by these issues. At the same time mountain regions were described as being highly vulnerable and sensitive to human and ecological imbalances as well as climate change. In programme area A, the Mountain Chapter deemed it necessary to expand the knowledge of mountains on a global scale through surveys, databases, and information systems. In area B, it urged governments to promote these regions with comprehensive programmes in various sectors. The Agenda recommended more than three dozen fields of action for political measures. Mentioned by name were a few globally active research institutes and scientific disciplines such as meteorology, hydrology, forestry and soil sciences, and botany. The total estimated cost necessary to implement these measures was thirteen billion U.S. dollars per year.

The comprehensive content and the dramatic tone of the Mountain Chapter might appear to be peculiar, yet it did not differ in this sense from the rest of Agenda 21. The Agenda stood as an official document, built upon chapters adopted one by one, but for the individual governments it held no legal obligation. Commentators pointed out that with its many general statements and wish lists, it exuded "a different flavour" than the usual international agreements.<sup>14</sup> This was due in part to the broad participatory process of its preparation. For the first time, non-governmental organisations and wider circles were deliberately included in the negotiations. The scope of the preparatory documentation drawn up for the conference was finally estimated at 24 million pages, and even the final synthesis adopted in Rio came to more than 500 pages.

The Mountain Chapter was drafted by Jayanta Bandyopadhyay, an Indian engineer and environmentalist. He held a PhD from the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur and had been a fellow at the Massachusetts

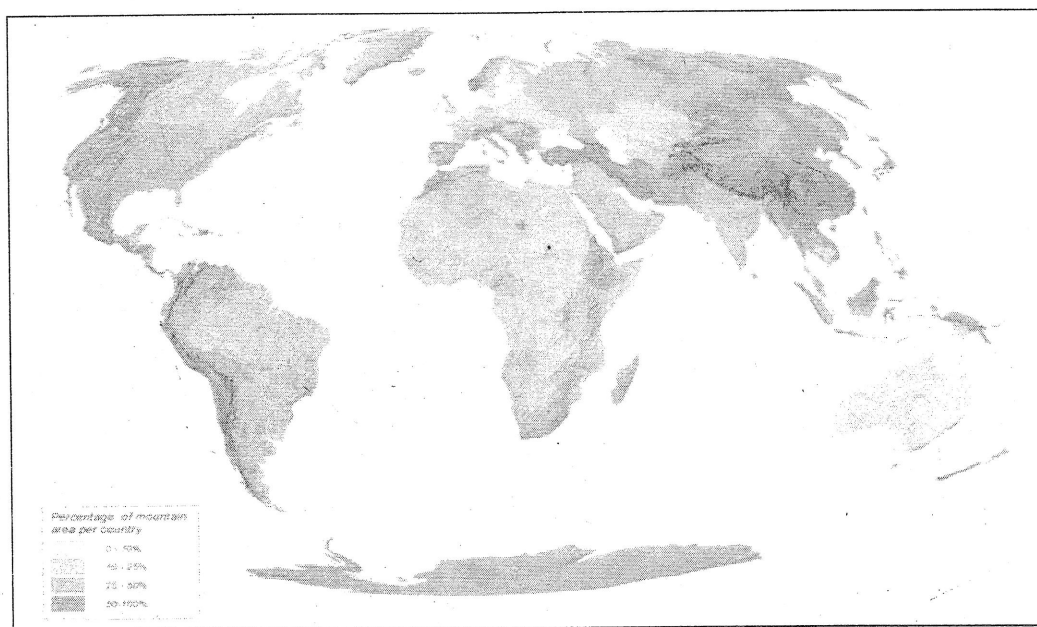
Institute of Technology in the United States. In the early 1990s, when he was commissioned to draft the chapter, he belonged to the Senior Staff of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development in Nepal and was sent to Geneva for a working visit. There he operated as a kind of secretary to the so called *Mountain Agenda*, a loosely organized group of concerned scientists with geographers and environmentalists from Switzerland, the United States and other countries. The group formed in 1990 and met several times in the Bernese Oberland (near to the place where Rebmann had found his 'Mountain Kings' four centuries earlier). The aim of the group was to include the mountains in the Agenda 21 as a 'major ecosystem' like the oceans, the deserts and the rain forests that had entered the UN programmes already in the 1970s.

On the political side, the Mountain Agenda was supported by the Swiss diplomatic corps. The Swiss liked the idea to use mountains, one of their national symbols, in the global arena and were happy that the topic transcended the tough North-South-conflict prevailing at the conference.<sup>15</sup> But how can you convince two hundred countries that the mountains are a global problem? That difficult task was assigned to the young diplomatic assistant Olivier Chave. When I interviewed him some years back about this assignment, he stated that he felt as if he were a parachute commando dropped behind enemy lines.<sup>16</sup> He had only a little time left and began by seeking advice from knowledgeable UN insiders, most prominently from an elderly Indian diplomat and mountain lover residing in Geneva. He gave the advice to recruit helpers from a core group and then, step by step, forge alliances. The core group of states persuaded by Chave was composed of relatively small and poor mountainous countries, many of whom received developmental aid from the Swiss, such as Nepal, Bhutan, Bolivia, and Peru. Some of the larger countries, however, reacted with initial scepticism. India and China seem to have feared that it would divert attention from the central disparity between North and South; and with their military experience in the Himalayas they had rather different priorities. The United States did not view

mountain regions as a problem, certainly not a global one. Its resistance, however, was merely passive.

Support for the project came from the secretary general of the Rio Summit, who was an old friend of the mountains, and—on a deeper level—from the fact that the category of major ecosystems already belonged to the fundamental ideas of the conference. When defined ecologically, the mountains could join in as just one more constituent. In any case, things moved quickly. Bandyopadhyay's draft was adapted here and there, but it passed one obstacle after the other in the pre-conference process. And in Rio, it was accepted so easily that the public barely took notice. Ironically, not even the Swiss press really drew attention to the issue.

But for the persons involved—the emerging global mountain scene—it was a huge success. The Agenda 21 soon became such an oft-cited source and obtained retrospectively a sort of constitutional character. Indeed, it can be considered the first world constitution for nature. The fact that the Mountain Chapter seemingly appeared on the global floor out of nowhere may have allowed it to develop a heightened level of influence over a period of time. Over the course of the 1990s, in any case, it caught on with countless groups who used it to elevate their positions and legitimate their activities. A high point in this colourful movement came in the year 2002, which



the United Nations designated as the *International Year of the Mountains*.

For that occasion the Mountain Agenda published a brochure with a political world map of upland territories. All countries were coloured according to



the mountainous percentage of their territory. The red coloured countries had mountain shares of 50 to 100 percent, the orange countries shares of 25 to 50 percent, and so on. The quantifications were based on a computer-based mountain model from 2000.<sup>17</sup> When compared to imbalanced mountain description of 1606 and to the fanciful world mountain of the 1829, the map stands out as a global political programme, much more on the ground and linked to social organisation of nationhood and universal criteria.

### Mountain Globalisation: How much of a Western Imposition?

This paper set out with the observation that mountains are scattered on all continents, and that it takes some imagination to bring them together and to see them as one distinct region on a global scale. How can we describe and explain that historical construction? Of course, one could consider a great amount of very different evidence for that question. I have proceeded very selectively by picking three examples: an unknown Swiss pastor of the early modern period, a famous German naturalist at the onset of modernity, and the surprising Rio *Earth Summit* of the late 20th century. The three examples were all linked in some ways over time, and they were all affected by the historical contexts of the respective periods. It was not possible, in this place, to show these links and contexts in any further detail.

Usually, globalisation is driven by asymmetric power relations. Identifying impositions from one side or the other is a crucial point in any global history and should be dealt with in a differentiated manner. The problem has been extensively and hotly debated by the humanities and social sciences in recent years. The French political scientist and historian Roman Bertrand, for instance, speaks of a *histoire à parts égales* (history in equal parts) for his account of multifaceted 'global' encounters in South-east Asia around 1600. Thereby, he echoes several attempts at proposing a "history on equal terms" in current scholarship. In June 1596, the ships of the Dutch merchant Cornelis de Houtman arrived on the north coast of Java where he hoped to enter into the spice trade. Soon after, his arrival was already turned into a major achievement of far-reaching consequences by Dutch chroniclers. In the Malay and Javanese texts of the same period, however, it was not even mentioned. So the arrival of the Dutch was—in Bertrand's words—"an event that didn't take place". He relocates it in the colourful, multicultural space of the Javanese coast with a great many actors and connections to other Asian places. In his "polycentric" account he sheds light on the specific situations and traditions of

different groups, and thus dissolves the simple west-east narrative. Moreover, Bertrand shows that the economic interactions were by no means purely "material". Faith and moral aspects formed an integral part of everyday life. The last point is particularly important for Dipesh Chakrabarty. In his well-known postcolonial text, *Provincializing Europe*, he declines to separate the secular from the sacred, and integrates the gods and spirits cherished by Asian populations in the political domain.<sup>18</sup>

For our question of asymmetries in the emergence of global mountain perception it seems more interesting to reflect upon the early modern period than on the recent one. The *Earth Summit* of 1992 was clearly driven by western goals. The promotion of the mountains as a major ecosystem was one of the numerous side stories of the conference. The Swiss diplomacy had strongly supported the case, because it suited to the mountain image and to the professed neutrality of the country. But for all its particularities, Switzerland cannot claim to stand outside the western context. Much more thrilling is a reflection upon the role that we can ascribe to the global imagination around 1600. To what degree, and for which reasons, should Rebmann's conversation between two Mountain Kings be considered a western imposition? And were there other actors in the field, with different intentions, exerting a historical impact in the short or long run? Indeed, would it be possible to (re)construct a non-western genealogy of the global mountain complex?

In contrast to Bertrand's Javanese case, our story does not involve direct encounters. We have to bring together largely disconnected events and developments. Let us take the Tibetan highlands, where the (second) Buddhisation led to the founding of countless cloisters, to the establishment of a basic monastic structure, and from the 17th century onwards, to the formation of an important centre in Lhasa. Just as important for the perception of mountains is the transmission of the sacral geography from exclusive, esoteric traditions from India. With techniques of meditation and with the help of the Mandala-diagram, tantric hermits and ascetics in Tibet would create complex forms of a visionary religious landscape. These visionary landscapes could be fixed to the outward landscape at many points, primarily involving mountains, at which famous spiritual pioneers, using these means, brought important 'treasures' to light. The popularisation and establishment of pilgrimages then changed the character of the heroic meditation-mountains and increasingly also brought governmental-political interests into play. It has been pointed out that Tibet's most important sacred mountain districts—Kailash, Lapchi, and Tsari—are in the South on the border with the states and tribes of the Indian/Nepalese region.<sup>19</sup>



Of special significance during the early modern period was the 'Pure Crystal Mountain' in Tsari, which the Tibetologist Toni Huber researched in an impressive historical-anthropological study. He summed up the varied process of sacralisation as follows: Notwithstanding the possible preceding local cults, it was meditating tantric pilgrims who were there at the beginning and established the religious power of the mountains during an expansion phase of Buddhist sects at the end of the 12th century. The popular lay pilgrimage began only later, and their circumambulation circuits were first established in the 16th century. The most important pilgrimage ritual of the crystal mountain, known as the 'great ravine circuit of Tsari', developed in the 18th century, parallel to the consolidation of the theocratic state in central Tibet. The earlier traditions of meditation had by then largely disappeared, they were only revitalized later. Huber's reconstruction is supported by detailed historical sources. Particularly important in this case is a text which was written in the years after 1570 as a mythological-topographical guide for pilgrims by a well-known aristocratic monk and intellectual. Such guides made it possible to learn to see the mountain world in its entire Buddhist complexity.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, in the same period when the Swiss pastor glared at his two Mountain Kings and imagined a gigantic upland world, the Tibetan Buddhists would fix their mountains and discover a visionary religious landscape. Both of them put down their knowledge in written documents so that we have the opportunity to follow them word by word. Rebmann collected sources from the European tradition and from the accounts of the early colonisation (a case of western imposition). The Buddhist perception was more introverted, but it could include a kind of universality or globality in a spiritual sense. So a certain expansionist movement might not have been absent. Around 1600 Rebmann's text was rather unique in Europe. I am unable to judge the number of Buddhist mountain-related texts in Tibet, but I guess that they could have outstripped the European counterpart by far.

So much for the 16th and 17th centuries. Later on, a division emerged between the secular and the religious domains. The globalisation of mountain perception in the west proceeded along predominantly secular lines. We have seen the case of Humboldt (around 1800) and of the Earth Summit (in 1992). The east, on the other hand, extended its religious reputation. In the course of the 20th century, Mount Kailash developed into a national symbol of Tibet and a global symbol of the sacredness of mountains. The western appropriation and the worldwide canonisation must have happened in the period between the 1930s and the 1980s. In general comments about sacred mountains by western geographers around

1935, Mount Kailash remained unmentioned. In 1990 it appeared in various works, independent of each other, as the undisputed primus and as the spiritual antithesis of Mount Everest, which despite its prestige had a materialistic aura because of high-level mountaineering. In the beginning, popular works of adventure literature were important for Mount Kailash's career. Later, the spread of Buddhism in the West, the political Tibet movement, and other factors contributed to its gain in reputation.<sup>21</sup> In short, if there is a globally recognized mountain religion today, it is Tibetan Buddhism. Mount Kailash, and increasingly other sacred mountains of the region, attract tourists and pilgrims from all continents. The typical prayer flags enjoy worldwide popularity, as well. The spiritual pioneers of the early modern period might have appeared completely otherworldly—yet they did not lack historical agency.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

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2. Lenoir, Tim (1997). *Instituting Science: The Cultural Production of Scientific Disciplines*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 18.
3. The question was raised in a discussion by Dr Deepa Kansra. She had the kindness to comment on a first version of this paper.
4. An extended text on Rebmann and his work will be published in German: Mathieu, Jon. 'Der Berg als König: Raumwissen und Anthropomorphismus in der Naturwahrnehmung um 1600', in *Berner Zeitschrift für Geschichte* (forthcoming 2017); Hans Rudolph Rebmann, *Einn Neuw/ Lustig/ Ernsthafft/ Poetisch Gastmal/ und Gesprächzweyer Bergen*, Bern 1606, available on <http://dx.doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-24281>; the second edition was published in 1620 and is available on <http://dx.doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-7710>.
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7. Mathieu, Jon (2011). *The Third Dimension. A Comparative History of Mountain in the Modern Era*. Cambridge: The White Horse Press, pp. 23-32; an extended version in Mathieu, Jon (2010). 'Von den Alpen zu den Anden: Alexander von Humboldt und die Gebirgsforschung', in Leoni, Simona Boscani (ed.), *Wissenschaft – Berge – Ideologien. Johann Jakob Scheuchzer (1672-1733) und die frühneuzeitliche Naturforschung*. Basel: Schwabe, pp. 293-308.
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12. I follow closely Mathieu 2011 (as note 7), pp. 5–10.
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14. Grubb, Michael et al (1993). *The Earth Summit Agreements: A Guide and Assessment*. London: Earthscan Publications, p. 97.
15. Interview with Jean-François Giovannini, head of the Swiss delegation in Rio, on 9 May 2006.
16. Interview with Oliver Chave on 26 April 2006.
17. Mountain Agenda ed. (2002). *Mountains of the World: Sustainable Development in Mountain Areas: The Need for Adequate Policies and Instruments*. Berne: Institute of Geography.
18. Bertrand, Romain (2011). *L'Histoire à parts égales. Récits d'une rencontre Orient-Occident, XVIe-XVIIe siècle*. Paris: Le Seuil; Chakrabarty, Dipesh (2000). *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; see also Dietze, Carola (2008). 'Toward a history on equal terms: a discussion of Provincializing Europe', in *History and Theory* 47, pp. 69–84.
19. Huber, Toni (1999). *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 24 and chapters 3 and 4.
20. Huber (as note 19), pp. 28–29, 60–72, 85; the multiform genre of "narrative maps" for religious travels was, and still is, widespread in Tibet, see also Buffetrille, Katia (2000). *Pèlerins, lamas et visionnaires. Sources orales et écrites sur les pèlerinages tibétains*. Vienna: Universität Wien.
21. A famous early travel account was Herbert Tichy, *Zum heiligsten Berg der Welt. Auf Landstrassen und Pilgerfahrten in Afghanistan, Indien und Tibet*. Geleitwort von Sven Hedin (Vienna: Seidel 1937); more bibliographical indications in Mathieu 2011 (as note 7), p. 136.
22. It would be interesting to compare the impact of the 'secular' and the 'religious' mountain perceptions; one simple case in point could be the 'global' participation at the International Year of the Mountain 2002 and the 'global' participation in pilgrimages around Mount Kailash at the same period; for a true assessment of this complex question we should, of course, integrate numerous other aspects.

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