

# Mountains, Mobilities and Movement

Christos Kakalis • Emily Goetsch  
Editors

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*To Leslie and Elisabeth*

# Foreword

I once heard a talk by one of the world's greatest mountaineers, a man who had been among the first to conquer some of the highest and most challenging peaks on earth. He described his breath-taking exploits in the language of exploration and discovery. And then he exclaimed, in an unmistakable tone of regret, 'there are no explorers any more, only cavers!' Now that every mountain peak had been conquered, short of starting afresh on another planet, the only future for exploration—he thought—lay underground, a sort of upside-down mountaineering that would carry the torch of humanity to ever greater depths rather than to the most ascendant heights. For me, the great man's remark set so many discordant bells ringing that I paid scant attention to the rest of the talk. While the audience listened spellbound to his stories, illustrated by slides which predominantly featured panoramic shots of formidable landforms or close-ups of men in gear and goggles, my mind was hooked on the mountaineer's regret. Why should he think the era of exploration to be over? What leads us to believe that a mountain climbed once has been climbed for ever? What does this say about our understandings of perception, imagination and memory? Indeed this one remark seemed to harbour within it a whole agenda for thinking about what mountains really are, why they fascinate or repel, how they play on our conceptions of humanity and what it means to be alive, how we experience earth, sky and the ground between them, and how we measure up—in distance

and altitude—the space of human habitation. These are the themes of the volume now in your hands. Before you embark on it, I would like to enter with a few reflections of my own.

We all come into the world as infants, so let us start from there. For every infant, the world that gradually opens up to their perception is a source of continual astonishment. The allure of everything and everyone around them motivates them to get moving, by whatever means are available, in order to discover more. Infants and small children are compulsive explorers, and are making discoveries all the time. Nor do they have to venture far from home to do so. Indeed they are more likely to discover things close to home, where familiarity affords the freedom to wander about in relative safety, unshackled by straps, harnesses and other protective gear. As grown-ups, however, we are convinced that everything within the circle of the familiar is already known, and that to explore we must go further, expand our horizons and gear ourselves up—mentally as well as physically—for the challenge. The adult's sense of exploration, it seems, is the precise opposite of the child's. One, the child's, is centripetal; the other, the adult's, is centrifugal. For young children, perception and imagination are one, not because their world is one of fantasy rather than fact, but because they are themselves immersed in the process of things becoming what they are. Everything and everyone has—or rather *is*—their own story, their own way of becoming, and the child-explorer, going on her way, joins her story with theirs in a correspondence that can continue for as long as life goes on. The familiar world, for the child, is an inexhaustible source of revelation. Adults, by contrast, understand their world to be complete and fully formed. To convert imagination into reality, or fantasy into fact, they therefore have to go beyond the limits of the already known. This is what drives the would-be adult explorer ever further afield.

Is there some point, then, in the life-cycle of a human being, when childlike exploration ends and adult exploration begins? Or is it rather that as we get older, a certain discourse—shot through with idioms of territoriality, conquest and the human domination of nature—exerts an increasing grip on the mind? In this discourse there are two sorts of exploration, and two sorts of discovery. The first establishes a curriculum, in the form of a condensed recapitulation of past human achievements, that

every child is expected to follow in the course of their education. In this adultocentric conception of learning, children are merely playing catch-up on their predecessors, discovering for themselves what earlier generations already knew, climbing mountains they had climbed. The second is the sort of exploration and discovery of which we pretend that never in all of human history has it been done or made before. Here the explorer-discoverer—commonly assumed to be male—takes the first step, pulling the rest of humanity in his wake. From these small steps, we say, is the history of humankind made. This imagination of history, I believe, lay behind the exclamation of the regretful mountaineer. If making history means setting foot where no man has been before, then how can human history continue if there are no more summits on which to stand for the first time? The great man seemed almost to be offering an apology for the fact that he had bagged so many mountains for himself, leaving none for future generations. Are we now condemned to the endless recapitulation of a once glorious past? Is the inverse mountaineering of the caver the only remaining option, or would we do better to direct our ambition to other planets? Might there be mountains to be climbed on Mars?

In the narrative of territorial conquest, peaks imagined are progressively converted into peaks remembered; the eye-witness account paints the mountain as a *true story*, a thing of fact rather than fiction. But to paint it thus is also to deny the mountain any story of its own. To say that once climbed, every subsequent climb is a repeat performance is to assume that the mountain itself remains exactly as it was—that while history moves on, the mountain is on the side of an ever-constant nature. But nature is not constant. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once observed, there is no holding nature still and looking at it. Mountains have their stories just as we do. A peak that had never seen a human before our mountaineer arrived has, since then, seen many more humans. They have built steps in its gullies, hammered spikes into its rock faces, left their litter all over the place. But for a mountain that has been shaped over aeons of time by earthquakes and eruptions, by immense forces of descending ice and water and by extremes of weather, the human imprint must seem of little consequence. For the great slumbering giant, the conquering hero is no more than a minor irritant, like a fly on the tip of its nose. The mountain does not feel conquered or domesticated, con-

tacted by civilisation or incorporated into the human fold. It promptly forgets—if it ever noticed—that someone was up there, waving his arms ecstatically on the summit. It just goes on being there, doing its thing. Indigenous people, for whom mountains are a familiar, everyday presence, know to treat them with respect. Often they have ascended their mountains many times, long before explorers arrived to climb them ‘for the first time’, not in order to claim them for themselves, but to petition for their protection and prosperity, for clement weather and good crops.

In the sixth century BCE, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus is alleged to have declared that you cannot step twice into the same waters of a flowing river. Is it not the same with the mountain? Is not every ascent the first? This depends, of course, on how you define the mountain. Perhaps you will identify it as the landform seen from afar, with its characteristic profile. ‘Here is a picture of Everest’, you say; ‘Everest is a mountain’. It looks like a mountain because you are far away from it. Any profile, of course, will be one of many, often markedly different, viewed from different vantage points. But they all add up to a monumental presence which gives every sign of permanence. Having once been climbed for the first time, then every subsequent climb of the same mountain is a repeat performance. The only way to introduce variation is by changing the route, tackling this face rather than that. But for the climber on the slopes or at the summit, the mountain is not a profile, or even a route. Indeed it does not really look like a mountain at all. It rather feels like one. And that feeling is one of immersion in a whole that comprises the rock and earth beneath one’s feet, the sky above and between them the carpet of vegetation, the waters of bubbling brooks and stagnant bog, birds and beasts, rain and snow, clouds and swirling mists. Here you are climbing, to be sure, but you are not climbing the mountain. Rather, you are climbing *in* the mountain. What is more, you can never climb twice in the same mountain. For if the mountain is all flow, then—just as Heraclitus observed for the river—the idea that a mountain ascended once is ascended for ever is simply absurd.

So when the regretful mountaineer told us that all peaks have been climbed, and that none remain to conquer, it can only be because he understood the mountain from the perspective of one who is not *in* it. He does not inhabit the mountain but goes at it as a soldier might embark on

a campaign, fitting himself up against a perceived adversary and hoping to prevail by force of arms. And then he leaves, having reached the summit and secured his place in history. This explains why his pictures are either distant shots with no people in them, or close-ups with people armed to the teeth and laden with equipment. For inhabitants, mountains are part of a familiar but ever-evolving world, where nothing is the same from one moment to the next. Inhabitants get to know this world by making paths through it. Life is measured out in steps and traced along the ground. The mountaineer, however, is not an inhabitant but an occupant. His lines are not traced in walking but are first projected, as a solution to the puzzle of how to get from base to summit by a connected sequence of points, and then enacted on site by means of ropes and spikes. Paradoxically, this places the most distant peaks closer to metropolitan centres from which every expedition typically starts, than to the inhabited rural areas in the foothills. The mountaineer's telescopic vision vaults the hills to reach the summits, the angles of which are framed in the distant view. The lands in between are merely to be passed through; their inhabitants maybe pressed into service as porters for the expedition's baggage. Even today, mountaineers tell of their exploits as if the odd sighting of a local person going about their business, perhaps herding animals or cutting hay on steep inclines, were an irrelevance.

People, in the practice of their livelihood, go along. But the mountaineer has only one aim, to go up. His ambition is framed by verticality. For him it is the summit that counts, not the great, having mass of rock of which the summit just happens to be the highpoint. If you are farmer or herdsman, or even a traveller, and if you are more interested in making your way through a landscape than in rising to the top, then do not call it a mountain. Call it a hill! Where mountains are for climbing, hills are for walking. Though climbers tend to speak of hills rather disdainfully, as landforms of insufficient stature to qualify as proper mountains, the real difference comes down to the question of how the relation between land and form, or ground and feature, is understood. The walker, whether going uphill, downhill or on the level, remains in continual contact with the ground by way of the feet. Thus the ground itself appears corrugated, and the hills and valleys are its folds. These corrugations are felt in the muscles, whether straining with or against the force of gravity. Not so for

the mountaineer, however. From his telescopic perspective the ground figures as an isotropic plane, open to the horizon and level with the sea, upon which forms and features are placed as if on a base. The earth itself appears furnished, and among its furniture, mountains are by far the biggest and most impressive features. In this perception the mountain is not ground but a structure that rises from it, with base, sides and top. As the climber scales the mountainsides, so he pulls himself ever further up. Whereas hillwalking is a way of inhabiting the world, or a practice of immanence, what the mountain offers the occupant climber is transcendence. And for that, he is prepared to risk life and limb.

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Tim Ingold

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