

Preface

This volume features several of the contributions presented in the stimulating seminar series *Cultures of Mountain Peoples in Comparative Perspective* that took place in 2021, promoted in part by the Malinowski Forum for Ethnography and Anthropology (MFEA) based at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. Founded in 2016, the Malinowski Forum was inspired by the history of famed anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski and his family in South Tyrol, where they lived for over a decade between the 1920s and 1930s in Oberbozen-Soprabolzano and Bozen-Bolzano. Because one of the Malinowski Forum's missions is that of supporting new scholarship of the Alpine region, it welcomed Tobias Boos and Daniela Salvucci's initiative to host a number of scholars of different generations and backgrounds, creating comparative dialogues within the series' overarching topic of mountain cultures. It is our pleasure to note that with this book, but also with two forthcoming MFEA volumes on Alpine Anthropology, the press is filling a long-standing need for new publications dealing with the humanistic study of the Alps.

If sociocultural anthropology has generally been considered the discipline par excellence for examining culture, when it comes to mountain areas in particular, it has long been recognized that an engagement with other sciences, be they natural or social, is especially necessary. The intimate knowledge of places and contexts fostered through long-term ethnographic engagement leads to great expertise that does not always focus explicitly on comparison. But cross-cultural comparison on the basis of anthropological thinking makes it possible to examine the historical, cultural and political interpretation of ecological conditions in their diversity, as Cole and Wolf showed in *The Hidden Frontier* (1974). Comparison, indeed, has a long and complex history in anthropology, starting from the earliest reflections on what is universal and what is particular in human social existence. As such, comparison sharpens the ethnographic, historical, and geographical gaze

for precisely the similarities and differences of human processes of meaning-making, also in mountain regions.

This volume gives a fresh impetus to older discussions and perspectives by benefitting from newer paradigms in the interdisciplinary field of mountain studies (or *montology*) and usefully exploring contemporary trends in mountain settings (e.g. new rurality). Montanology as a frame for comparison is not like classic anthropological categories such as social organizing, kinship or religion, nor does it refer to a single geographical area or region. And yet, like such categories, we must bear in mind that the very act of *seeing* and defining mountains is itself already inscribed in a Eurocentric perspective. Placing mountains at the center of the knowledge-seeking endeavor immediately implies putting human beings in relation to an orographic context. Mountain areas, or verticality, becomes a frame for comparison on different scales, in different locales, prompting various questions: what hypotheses might we make regarding the features and developments characterizing mountain cultures? These are some of the issues that earlier scholars pursued, emerging anew here.

On the other hand, the contributions to this volume also embody critical and engaged perspectives attuned to politics that have emerged in mountain studies in recent decades, in connection with wider developments in each of the various disciplines represented. If many mountain scholars up to the late twentieth century addressed their questions with a faith in science bordering on ingenuousness – leading to a subsequent distancing from approaches considered too deterministic –, today their research is instead informed by traditions of critique and reflexivity about academic work that emerged following the interpretative, postmodern and postcolonial turns, even as a new empiricism asserts itself. This volume makes a contribution to an interdisciplinary discussion, which is conducted here primarily by social and human scientists, but could also be expanded in the future to include the natural sciences. The aim is to understand mountains as a complex condition alongside other physical conditions in which humans, animals and plants live - such as deserts and savannahs, arctic or coastal areas - in their totality of human (and non-human) practice, imagination and analysis.

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