

Zeitschrift:	Histoire des Alpes = Storia delle Alpi = Geschichte der Alpen
Herausgeber:	Association Internationale pour l'Histoire des Alpes
Band:	8 (2003)
Artikel:	Urban Phenomena and the comparability of mountain regions : Andes, Alps/Pyrenees and the Himalaya
Autor:	Singh, Chetan
DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-9231

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 29.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

URBAN PHENOMENA AND THE COMPARABILITY OF MOUNTAIN REGIONS: ANDES, ALPS/PYRENEES AND THE HIMALAYA

Chetan Singh

Résumé

Le phénomène urbain et la comparabilité des régions de montagne: Andes, Alpes, Pyrénées et Himalaya

L'urbanisation est un phénomène que l'on rencontre dans de nombreuses sociétés à travers le monde. Pour cette raison, elle se prête tout particulièrement à des études embrassant différentes cultures. Une approche comparative du développement urbain dans des chaînes de montagne situées sur trois continents – à savoir les Andes, les Alpes, les Pyrénées et l'Himalaya – est très prometteuse, pour autant qu'elle ne succombe pas à la tentation d'exagérer les convergences et de simplifier les divergences. Le présent article soulève un certain nombre de questions devant permettre d'élaborer une trame comparative. Il traite d'aspects écologiques, de l'interaction commerciale entre zones de montagne et de plaine, et du colonialisme. Le colonialisme fut le facteur isolé qui a le plus contribué à lier des économies éloignées à un système commercial et productif centré sur l'Europe. Une approche mettant en exergue son rôle dans l'histoire des centres urbains des régions de montagne pourrait constituer le fondement d'une future recherche, bien qu'elle passe sous silence des régions et des développements significatifs. Le concept de «polarisation spatiale» revêt en l'occurrence une importance cruciale dans le contexte de la modernisation

This essay was supposed to be a response to some of the issues and problematic questions that arose in the context of papers presented by scholars from three continents in the session on “The Mountains in Urban Development” in Buenos Aires. The original intention therefore, was to confine it to a discussion of the problems and processes of urbanization in the Andes, the Alps/Pyrenees and the Himalaya. However, the naivety of this intention became slowly evident, and the enormity of the task gradually assumed forbidding proportions. To begin with, the endeavour rested on two assumptions. The first was implicit in the inception of the session: the assumption that mountains areas and societies are comparable *because* they share a similar geographical/topographical environment. The second was that, despite (or because of) the obvious and vast differences that existed between the areas studied, it was possible/desirable to successfully restrict oneself to the relatively limited subject of urbanization. But are these assumptions justified?

Regarding the comparability of mountain regions, it is apparent that a similar logic is extendable to deserts, riverain belts or coastal areas. The arguments of ecological fragility, resource constraints, natural risks etc., could apply equally, and as effectively, to many of them. Nor does the similarity of geographical conditions mean that the societies they support are naturally comparable. We do therefore need to concede that mountains are not the only geographical phenomena possibly amenable to comparison and that even mountains can be the scenes of very diverse human experiences. For some time now, however, the apparent inaccessibility of mountains, and the low level of human activity, have made mountains an attractive subject for social scientists attempting to explore the impact of the natural environment on society. One can justifiably argue that, just as in the case of other natural regions, a comparison of three major mountain regions of the world – despite all its problems – might enable us to appreciate more fully the intricate and uneasy relationship that has always existed between ecological factors and human volition. Comparison, moreover, is not necessarily a search for similarities. It is also an attempt to indicate and explain differences. With regard to the second assumption, it can be no one's case that specific socio-economic processes, such as urbanization, be extracted from their long-term geo-historical context. This context permeates (even constitutes and creates) processes of human development in diverse ways. For most of history,

the social experience of human societies has usually been a regional/local one. This invariably makes the task of extended comparisons in time and space extremely complex. Yet urbanization is a phenomenon encountered in societies across the globe. Perhaps, for that reason itself, it should be suitable for cross-cultural comparison, despite the obvious underlying differences. A comparative approach to the study of urban developments in three distant mountain ranges holds immense promise provided it does not succumb to the temptation of exaggerating convergences and simplifying the divergence.

The papers presented at the session were independent regional/local studies that did not by themselves attempt to make comparisons. A comparative agenda, in its proper sense, could emerge only after the different presentations created the basis for it. Jon Mathieu has already made a critical and thematic evaluation of individual contributions in this volume. It may be more fruitful in this essay to mention only a few questions around which it may be possible to construct a comparative framework. These are more in the nature of broad problematics rather than points directed towards addressing specific issues highlighted by authors in this volume.

Even at the cost of projecting a rudimentary, ecological explanation, it may still be relevant to recall that the part of the Andes that appears crucial for our present purpose is the Altiplano and its adjoining slopes. While the considerable elevation certainly made for difficult climatic conditions, its tropical latitudes somewhat tempered the harshness. Its stretches of flat land, combined with rich mineral resources to give to it immense economic advantage. Agriculture and pastoralism are believed to have been a more viable option here than in the wet, thickly-forested – and perhaps disease-ridden – plains. Whatever the reasons for this preference of the aboriginal inhabitants for the mountains, the Andean Altiplano (unlike most mountain ranges) emerged as a civilizational core. To this mountainous core, the lowlands were socially peripheral, maybe even irrelevant.

The Alps and the Himalaya, on the other hand, lie beyond the warming influence of the Tropics – the former more so than the latter. Even at relatively lower altitudes the growing period available for crops was not as long as in the adjoining plains where intensive cropping was possible. Moreover, the socio-economic “mainstream”, so to speak, apparently existed in the richly cultivated and well-populated lowlands. In comparison to this lowland “main-

stream”, Alpine and Himalayan societies may have been viewed as variations – even deviations. More typically than the Andes, it was the Alps and the Himalaya that represented the marginality that mountains and mountain people acquired in popular imagination during the course of history.

It might be useful here to refer to the interesting scheme of “trade interaction” presented by Jon Mathieu in his introduction to this volume. On this basis he categorizes the three mountain ranges. The Andes are defined as being “insular” for a period of time, the Alps as following a “continental” pattern and the Himalaya a “peninsular” one. This is an economic argument in which trade relations of the mountains with neighbouring regions form the primary criterion of comparability, and on the basis of which differences are represented. From this viewpoint, therefore, the Andes were devoid of “urban trade potential in the surroundings”; the Alps had “urbanized lowlands at both sides”; and towns of the Indo-Gangetic plain to their south bordered the Himalaya.

While the emphasis is ostensibly on interaction of mountain regions with areas of “urban potential”, it does seem to primarily imply lowlands. Why else would the vast and well populated Andean range with an extensive civilization be categorized as “insular”? We do also know that, after Inca expansion, a fair amount of trade was carried out within the Andes. Does it mean that intra-mountain economic exchange cannot by itself break down “insularity”? A simple answer to this question is unlikely. It does then seem that for the large majority of mountain societies – including the Alps and Himalaya – the highland-lowland exchange was an integral part of their survival strategy. A corresponding possibility that emerges from this is that the Alps and the Himalaya, were only *incidental*, not *essential*, to the trajectory of socio-economic change in the urbanized and well-populated lowlands adjoining them.

In this context, therefore, the distinctions made on the basis of trade interaction might carry an additional underlying argument – one that assumes mountain societies to be economically (and socio-politically) peripheral. For the Alps and the Himalaya this is probably true. The “peninsular” Himalaya were peripheral to, and partially dependent upon, a socio-economic order that stretched across the vast, cultivated plains of north India. It is likely that the Alps were similarly marginal to economic systems and social orders that were dominant to their two sides. Just as the Himalaya and their people

came to be described in terms of a dominant “peninsular” perception, Alpine society too might, in more ways than one, be the product of a primarily “continental” definition. Larger European trends in education, and institution building too, may have contributed to the changes that Alpine towns underwent. Both the Alps and the Himalaya appear, more clearly than the Andes, seen as casual extensions of worlds that were continually being constituted elsewhere.

The Andes tell a different tale. Certainly they were “insular” from a post-Columbian European perspective and economy that successfully came to describe and dominate the globe. But the pre-Hispanic Andes were definitely not peripheral until they were subjected to European colonialism. It was, in fact, this mountainous domain of indigenous civilization and empires that determined an original and independent world-view. The Andean people practically came to define the whole of South America.

It lies in the logic of things then, that of all the mountain regions, the Andes should – in pre-colonial times – have the largest number of big cities. The comparative situation between the three mountain ranges did not change significantly even after the establishment of Spanish rule. Unlike the urban centres of the Himalaya, and perhaps of the Alps, the cities of the Andes produced wealth on a far larger scale than neighbouring lowland areas. Even when new cities emerged on the South American coastline and lowland, the ratio of Andean towns to the total number of South American towns was very much higher than that of Himalayan towns to those of the Indian subcontinent and the Alpine towns to the total number of European cities. In fact, the prosperity of many lowland and coastal towns of South America that appeared during the early years of colonialism depended upon the continuing productive activity of Andean cities.

In the Alps and the Himalaya, on the other hand, there were few big cities. From the papers included in this volume it is evident that administrative and political factors played a major role in the growth of towns in the Alps and the Himalaya. But the process of urbanization (in the small form that it existed) also had inextricable economic links with the plains. Many towns of the two mountain ranges owed their existence to their role in extended trade connections that usually originated or/and terminated in lowland cities. There were few Himalayan towns that did not lie on a trade route. This does not necessarily mean that they owed their existence to trading activity. They

were all important political centres having access to the resources of an extensive agro-pastoral territory. Most towns, nevertheless, remained small in comparison with those in the plains – and more relevantly, in comparison with Andean cities. The actual transportation of merchandise in the Himalaya was carried out through several stages. This usually meant the involvement of several communities of traders who specialized in carrying the goods through different terrain. While halting-places along the trade routes did not grow into centres of any significance, the points at which the different trading communities transacted business were usually large towns. The largest of such Himalayan intermediary trading centres was the fascinating urban conglomeration of three capital towns in the Kathmandu valley.

The economic centrality of the Andes and the marginality of the Alps and Himalaya may have found political expression. Over the centuries, large mountain based states periodically rose and fragmented in the Andes. These preceded the establishment and expansion of the Inca Empire in the 15th century. It has been suggested that, unlike earlier Andean states, the Inca Empire did not rest upon the founding of large cities. Be that as it may, it is worth recalling that the centralized authority of even this tragically short-lived empire emanated from, and was symbolized by, the impressive mountain city of Cuzco. During all this time the political entities in the Alps and the Himalaya, though not always inconsiderable, were much smaller and never serious contenders in any struggle for empire in their respective regions. The Himalayan region, in particular, was fragmented into tiny principalities or chiefdoms that were incorporated into somewhat larger units only for short periods of time. It was not until after 1768/69 that an extensive Himalayan state was created in the form of the kingdom of Nepal.

Several contributions in this volume refer to the role of politico-administrative authority in the emergence of towns. It is also true, however, that an extensive state need not necessarily translate into a large number of urban centres. Conversely, a large city could be the centre of a very small state. Much would depend upon the means by which the state and the prosperous classes obtained their wealth, and the system of appropriation and distribution prevalent. Variables such as the emergence of new professions and the evolution and implementation of legal codes, too, would have influenced the process of urbanization. A comparative approach needs to explore and inter-connect these issues across the mountain ranges in greater detail.

However, the greatest force to confront non-European countries in modern times was colonialism. It was also the single most influential factor that bound disparate and distant economies to a Europe-centred system of trade, production and markets. One need hardly emphasize that the impact on the New World of its “discovery” by Europe was of a completely different order than the relationship it established with Asia. Like other historical developments, colonialism not only underwent a transformation with the passage of time, it also manifested itself in different parts of the world in diverse ways. This impact of the expansion of Europe was felt first, and more drastically, in the Andes from the first half of the 16th century onwards. The Spanish conquest of Inca centres in the mountains struck at the very heart of Andean society. Not only the material basis, but also the world-view of an entire civilization, was destroyed.

As a result of colonization, the Andes – that were essentially the socio-economic kernel of South America – became a ruthlessly exploited periphery in an intercontinental economic system. The chain of events that followed after the discovery of silver near Potosí is too well known to be repeated here. Potosí was certainly the largest and most impressive of the Andean mining towns that grew rapidly during the colonial period. Like all of them, however, it reflected and reinforced the marginalization of the Andes not simply to the coastal towns of South America, but ultimately to the metropolitan power in Europe. The shift in urbanization towards the lowlands and the coast thereafter was the result of this marginalization.

It was almost 300 years later than the Andes, that the Himalaya were brought into the exploitative relationship engendered by a colonial dispensation. Even then there was the substantial part of the Nepal Himalaya that was never incorporated into the British Empire. It is common knowledge that developments in the Himalaya were considerably different from the Andes. To begin with, the establishment of British colonialism in India was a long-drawn, gradual process. Moreover, the Himalaya were never central to South Asian society and economy as the Andes were to South America. Consequently, the impact of colonial exploitation in India was moderated by the intervening and fertile plains that were, in fact, the primary interest of British administrators. Timber was the greatest exploitable natural resource of the mountains. Unlike the silver mines of the Andes, timber extraction did not lead to any form of urbanization in the hills. It resulted only in the

emergence of small timber marts at points where the Himalayan rivers broke from the hills onto the plains. On the other hand, the administrative and military towns that actually came up in the mountains under British rule required the investment of substantial economic resources obtained from the plains. This perhaps also explains why no new “mountain” cities – as different from foothill towns – seem to have emerged during this period in the Nepal Himalaya that lay beyond actual British political control.

The absolute peripheralization and exploitation of the Andes appears, at least outwardly, to be in contrast with the considerable expenditure incurred in the creation of new cities for Europeans in the Himalaya. But appearances can be deceptive. Even the Himalaya were subjected to an unprecedented timber extraction under British rule. Rather than being a privileging of the Himalaya, the establishment of the hill stations – as an escape from the thickly populated Indian heartland – was actually an acknowledgement of the pre-existing and continued marginality of the mountains. The economic benefit of these new towns to the surrounding countryside was limited, and the markets they created were only seasonal in nature. What hill stations, perhaps, had in common with Andean cities, now was an increased and compulsory demand for labour that they exerted on the mountain peasantry.

But the differences between the two situations are too stark to be glossed over. These had as much to do with ecology as with the convergence of different trajectories of civilizational histories at specific points of time. Yet colonialism was, in many ways, the first global system and the similarity of the responses that it engendered in colonized regions across the globe has been the subject of discussion for some time. A scheme emphasizing the role of colonialism in the history of urban centres in mountain areas can probably form the basis of future research. It would, however, leave out some significant regions and developments. Here the point of “spatial polarization” in the context of modernization made by Jon Mathieu is of crucial importance. Apart from enabling us to study areas that were not subject to colonialism, this approach also allows us to accommodate the contested question of the “modernizing” impact of colonialism and subsequent post-colonial developments outside Europe.

Research agendas are influenced not only by the individual inclination of scholars, but more so by the historical experiences of the societies to which they belong. This is, perhaps, reflected also in the contributions to this volume.

The articles on South America implicitly recognize the pre-modern political and productive centrality of the Andes. They examine the nature of the trade and exchange that Andean cities sustained – not simply mediated – for a long time. The fundamental changes initiated in the settlement of urban centres as a result of colonial and post-colonial developments are major factors considered by the authors.

In some of the contributions on the Himalaya, on the other hand, the peripheral position of the mountains to the rest of South Asia runs as an underlying theme. This does not deny that the Himalaya occupied an important position in Hindu symbolism, and remained connected – though loosely – with the long-term historical processes of the lowlands of north India. A limited trade with towns in the plains also existed. But the relentless logic of colonialism not only impacted most severely on Himalayan economy; it emerges from the articles in this volume that colonial rule was also the most significant factor influencing urbanization in the Himalaya.

The highland-lowland relationship seems to be the major focus of the articles on the Alps and the Pyrenees. Two aspects stand out in this relationship. First was the intermediary position of Alpine towns in a trade-chain that primarily (not entirely) began and ended in the lowlands. The second was the close association and identification of some lowland – sub-mountain – cities with the mountains. Socio-economic trends in the neighbouring plains had an important bearing on the pattern of urbanization in these mountains. This, it appears, is the premise that informs the perspective of scholars working on the Alps/Pyrenees.

Despite their undeniable richness and pretensions to authenticity, the historical experiences of a particular society cannot always lead to broad and acceptable generalizations. In the absence of a comparative overview, the reiteration of the inherited historical wisdom of a society by way of explanation might prove to be only another manifestation of the simplistic and restrictive “common sense” view of history. The Buenos Aires session on “Mountains in Urban Development” facilitated the interaction of some very compelling counter-perspectives from three continents. These would not be easy to harmonise, and it may not be advisable to do that either. On the contrary, it might be more advantageous to use these ostensibly conflicting positions as cross-cultural vantage points to re-examine old arguments. By turning around the reservations of sceptics, we can even venture to suggest

that a comparative study of the Andes, Alps/Pyrenees and the Himalaya is possible and desirable precisely because the three regions appear to be so different.