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Book Review

Globalization and Mountain Communities: A Critical Review of Mari Oiry Varacca's *Montagnards dans la mondialisation*

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ABSTRACT

The book explores how mountain communities, often marginalized, actively respond to the challenges of globalization. Drawing on fieldwork in regions such as the Atlas Mountains, the French Alps, and the Scottish Highlands, Oiry Varacca examines the interactions between tourism, postcolonial collective memory, and diasporic networks. The work offers an original perspective on local resistance, challenging the idea that mountain regions are peripheral.

1. Introduction

Mari Oiry Varacca, a geography expert, explores how tourism, often pushed to the sidelines, and community efforts intersect/interact in various parts of the world. Her research is built on extensive time spent in places like the Atlas Mountains in Morocco, the Scottish Highlands, the French Alps, and even cities like Paris. She often explores how communities actively push back against negative labels, deal with shared memories after colonial times, and manage the tricky connections between global networks (like diasporas) and local changes. Thanks to her solid research

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background, including a PhD in geography, she truly understands issues around what makes places undesirable, how public spaces are used, and discrimination.

In this review, I argue that Oiry Varacca's 2019 book, *Montagnards dans la mondialisation*, is a hugely important and original work. Published as part of the *Montagne et innovation* collection, it does much more than just look at the challenges faced by mountain regions. Instead, it offers a fresh way to understand how local communities resist in our globalized world. She achieves this by really digging into original materials like old documents, local reports, and direct stories from her fieldwork. This gives us an incredibly deep look at how diaspora networks and community movements work, especially in mountain areas that are often overlooked.

By refusing to see mountain regions as simply “out of the way” places, Oiry Varacca gives us a powerful, on-the-ground view of globalization's complexities. Her work effectively redefines how we think about space in a global context and challenges the traditional centers of academic power (Oiry Varacca, 2019). This idea isn't new; it connects with other major works that have similarly questioned our assumptions about supposedly “marginal” global areas. For example, authors like Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, in her book *Friction* (2005), and James Scott, in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), have also shown how places we might consider “marginal” are actually lively hubs of complex interactions and resistance. These places actively shape global processes, rather than just reacting to them. As Bernard Debarbieux points out in his introduction to Oiry Varacca's book (2019), it skillfully avoids common mistakes in studies of mountain regions, like oversimplifying social issues or only focusing on their marginalization. Instead, it prioritizes the real-life experiences and political aspects of collective identities, showing how these communities actively navigate and influence global events.

2. Reviews of the Book

Montagnards dans la mondialisation has received considerable scholarly attention, leading to several academic reviews since its publication. Among these, the analyses by Fourny (2021) and Rudaz (2020) offer insightful examinations of the book's central arguments. Both reviewers consistently highlight Oiry Varacca's core focus on how diasporic networks and social mobilizations contribute to the development of their regions of origin, particularly in mountain areas often facing marginalization within contemporary globalization. They both commend the book's nuanced perspective, which portrays these communities not as passive victims, but as active agents capable of leveraging global connections to foster local development and adaptation. The concept of “territory” as a dynamic and significant space, deeply

shaped by migrants' attachments and symbolic investments, emerges as a key shared point of emphasis across both reviews.

2.1. Individual reviews

Marie Christine Fourny's review (Fourny, 2021) specifically commends the book's empirical depth and its original approach to the interplay between transnational processes and local territorialization. Fourny notes how integration into diasporic networks provides political, cognitive, and symbolic resources, potentially leading to “trajectories of reversibility” that could offer alternatives to marginalization. She consistently praises the detailed case studies from the Moroccan Atlas, Scottish Highlands, and French Alps, highlighting the rigorous empirical investigation and the fresh perspective on the dynamic relationship between global processes and local development.

Gilles Rudaz's assessment (Rudaz, 2020) similarly underscores the book's originality in moving beyond simply depicting mountain societies as victims of globalization. Instead, Rudaz emphasizes Oiry Varacca's focus on their “experimentations” in adapting to and even leveraging globalization through the mobilization of diasporic and international networks. His review highlights the book's adoption of a “subaltern studies” approach, which critically examines power relations and identity formation, including specific attention to Amazigh identity and women's networks. While acknowledging the comprehensive focus on the Moroccan Atlas due to the author's expertise, Rudaz concludes that the book offers a fresh perspective on social mobilization in mountains, demonstrating the resilience, adaptability, and innovative capacity of these communities in redefining their identities and resources in the face of global trends.

2.2. Synthesis of reviews

In summary, both Marie Christine Fourny and Gilles Rudaz provide positive evaluations of Mari Oiry Varacca's work. They consistently commend its innovative perspective on how marginalized mountain communities actively engage with globalization, showcasing their resilience and ability to utilize diasporic connections for their development. The book is presented as a valuable contribution to understanding the complex dynamics between global processes and local agency, particularly in rethinking territoriality and identity in mountain regions.

3. Summary of the Book

In *Montagnards dans la mondialisation*, Mari Oiry Varacca offers a critical examination of how mountain communities navigate contemporary globalization. Departing from conventional wisdom that often casts these areas as merely marginalized or archaic, the book demonstrates how individuals and collectives leverage transnational networks and social mobilizations to resist, adapt to, and reshape globalizing forces. Through comparative case studies in Morocco, Scotland, and France, the author explores how processes like patrimonialization, while seemingly valorizing local specificities, often integrate these communities into dominant capitalist models without fundamentally altering power dynamics or exacerbating inequalities. Ultimately, the work highlights discreet, networked resistances that, despite their localized nature, represent crucial experimentations against marginality-producing systems.

4. Critical Analysis and Evaluation

Mari Oiry Varacca's *Montagnards dans la mondialisation* offers a deeply insightful and nuanced understanding of mountain regions as they navigate the complexities of globalization. This work makes a significant contribution across several fields, including geography, anthropology, and development studies.

4.1. Strengths of the book and its position within academic discourse

This book stands out by immediately addressing a major misconception: that mountain regions are inherently isolated or underdeveloped. Instead, Oiry Varacca brilliantly demonstrates that any vulnerability these areas face is not a natural given, but rather the direct result of specific historical and political decisions. This fresh perspective challenges the deterministic notion that geography alone dictates a region's fate. It portrays mountain communities not as passive victims of global forces, but as active players shaping their own destinies. In this way, Oiry Varacca's work directly complements and challenges dominant narratives of rural marginalization that often frame mountain regions as static or inherently disadvantaged. By refusing to treat mountain regions as mere peripheries, Oiry Varacca contributes to the spatial reconceptualization of globalization and offers a valuable challenge to centers of epistemic power (Oiry Varacca, 2019).

A major strength of Oiry Varacca's approach is her comparative method, examining the Atlas, Scottish Highlands, and French Alps. By highlighting both common mechanisms of marginalization and their unique manifestations across diverse locations, she provides a robust framework. This approach helps to avoid

sweeping generalizations and deepens the understanding of complex social, economic, and political situations. The arguments presented in the book are consistently strong and empirically well-supported. Oiry Varacca meticulously traces geo-historical processes (Chapter 1), illustrating how the formation of nation-states and the rise of capitalism deliberately relegated these areas to peripheral status. This is substantiated by historical accounts of out-migration and resource exploitation.

Her assertion that international migrations (Chapter 2) constitute a vital resource for those remaining in mountain areas is particularly compelling. She provides vivid examples of diaspora associations funding development projects and explores the political significance of “travels of memory” (Chapter 5). The analysis of social mobilizations and counter-narratives (Chapter 3) offers concrete illustrations, particularly from the Moroccan Atlas, demonstrating how activist groups utilize global ideas to challenge state and economic dominance. The discussion on how tourism can be re-appropriated from a tool of control into a form of resistance (Chapter 4) further exemplifies the book's insightful depth and Oiry Varacca's skill in identifying instances of agency in unexpected contexts. Oiry Varacca's writing style is academic yet accessible, explaining complex theoretical arguments with clarity and precision. The inclusion of specific examples, such as the differential impacts of saffron labeling in Taliouine versus Tazenakht (Chapter 6 and Conclusion), effectively bridges theoretical discussions with real-world applications. The research is clearly thorough and robust, drawing on a rich blend of geo-historical analysis, socio-economic examination, and detailed case studies across three distinct, yet comparable, mountain ranges.

Oiry Varacca's insights resonate with, and at times diverge from, other key scholarly contributions on mountain societies and globalization, further solidifying her book's distinct place in the academic landscape. While Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010), in *Les faiseurs de montagne*, examine the historical construction of mountains and montagnards, Oiry Varacca complements this by showing how contemporary mountain dwellers actively reshape these imaginaries through their projects (Oiry Varacca, 2019). Similarly, Fourny (2018), through *Montagnes en mouvements*, positions mountains as sites of social innovation, a view supported by Oiry Varacca's documentation of inventive community solutions (Oiry Varacca, 2019). Oiry Varacca's study also implicitly challenges deterministic environmental views prevalent in earlier works like Viazzo's (1989) *Upland Communities*, by demonstrating the agency of mountain inhabitants in mobilizing global resources (Oiry Varacca, 2019). Furthermore, her detailed examination of diasporic networks and their role in economic and identity projects directly enriches the multidisciplinary understanding

of mountain mobilities found in Cretton and Boscoboinik's (2025) *Mountainscapes* (Oiry Varacca, 2019). Finally, Oiry Varacca builds upon Lacroix's (2005) foundational work on Moroccan transnational networks in *Les réseaux marocains du développement*, specifically applying it to how these connections address marginalization within mountain contexts (Oiry Varacca, 2019). Her emphasis on agency and subtle resistance also brings to mind the work of James Scott (e.g., *Weapons of the Weak*, 1985), which explores how marginalized groups employ everyday forms of resistance to navigate power structures. While Oiry Varacca does not directly cite Scott, her focus on “rhizomatic” resistances and counter-narratives aligns with the spirit of uncovering agency in seemingly powerless contexts, providing a contemporary lens on these enduring themes within mountain studies. The book's dedication to understanding bottom-up processes also resonates with critical development studies, notably challenging top-down perspectives (cf. Escobar's *Encountering Development*, 1995).

What truly distinguishes this book is its unique combination of rigorous empirical comparison, a nuanced theoretical framework that reframes marginality, and a compelling focus on the active agency of mountain communities through their global connections, thereby moving beyond typical narratives of isolation or dependency.

4.2. Weaknesses

While the book's focus on subtle, localized forms of resistance is a major strength, some readers might inquire about the broader impact and long-term viability of these initiatives. The text touches on how processes such as official labeling have limitations in fundamentally challenging dominant systems. However, a more explicit discussion on whether these “rhizomatic” resistances can genuinely coalesce to create broader, systemic change could be beneficial. Additionally, while the comparative approach is excellent, deeper qualitative insights into the lived experiences of a wider range of individuals—beyond primarily “militant groups” and “elites”—could further enrich the human dimension of the analysis. These identified limitations should not be interpreted as shortcomings, but rather as fruitful avenues for future research to further explore the dynamics of local resistance and its potential for systemic transformation.

4.3. Target audience and relevance

This book is highly relevant for scholars and students in geography, sociology, anthropology, development studies, and political science, particularly those

interested in globalization, rural studies, and postcolonial perspectives. Its rigorous comparative analysis and innovative re-evaluation of marginalization make it a valuable resource for anyone seeking a nuanced understanding of how local communities actively engage with global processes. It effectively challenges conventional wisdom and emphasizes the agency of mountain populations, presenting a compelling alternative to deterministic interpretations of marginality.

5. Synthesis and Broader Implications

Montagnards dans la mondialisation compellingly argues that individuals and collectives within mountain regions, including migrants, their descendants, and newly adopted inhabitants, are active agents in a dynamic process of reinvention. They strategically transform the circulation of people, goods, capital, and ideas across borders into resources for their own development strategies. By foregrounding these “experimentations”, Oiry Varacca pushes the reader to consider whether these actions represent mere “pis-aller” (stopgaps) for marginalized regions or genuine inventions of alternatives to the models that produce marginality. The book also implicitly raises the critical question of whether models originating in the Global North are simply imposed on the Global South, or if true cross-pollination and fertile invention can occur in both directions.

Oiry Varacca's work is a vital contribution to geographical, sociological, and anthropological studies, offering a rich tapestry of localized agency within a globally interconnected world. It challenges us to look beyond the simplistic dualities of center-periphery and global-local, proposing instead a vision of mountains as vibrant laboratories where new forms of social organization and spatial dynamics are constantly being forged. What new research directions could be inspired by this focus on the interconnectedness and dynamic reinvention of mountain communities?

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