

# Using Autobiographies for a Sociology of Mountaineering

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*Since the beginning of mountaineering, mountaineers have produced a vast literary canon. Amongst these texts, autobiographies hold a special place: although they are much more common in mountaineering than perhaps in any other sport, they appeared much later than the first mountaineering accounts of ascents and expeditions, which have been available at least since the 1840s. This article addresses two questions. First, why have mountaineers written so many autobiographies, but only since the 1920s? And second, is this material relevant if we want to carry out a valid sociological analysis of mountaineering, and more particularly of excellence in mountaineering? The article shows that autobiographies present relevant, even ideal material for a sociological study of excellence in mountaineering. Indeed, they are characterized by a discourse of excellence produced by an elite (both sporting and, to a certain extent, social elite), a discourse that can tell us a lot about the so-called spirit of mountaineering.*

Keywords: sociology of literature / literature and alpinism / mountaineering literature / autobiography / excellence / elitism

## Introduction

Since its earliest stages, mountaineering as a practice has captured the imagination and generated stories. It has been surrounded by a dense literary output following its inception and gradual institutionalization in the United Kingdom in the 1850s and in France in the 1870s—the two countries on which my research for this article was conducted. At first, this production focused on other aspects than the sport of mountaineering itself, such as scientific reports and poetic writings. It then increasingly came to deal with the activity itself through accounts of ascents and expeditions (see Perret). The first autobiographies, centered on the climber's career and his or her most important ascents, were published by the British in the 1920s. Since then, autobiographies have been continuously published: I have counted over 70 such texts

for the period 1920–2015 in France and Great Britain. This is a high number when compared to the number of autobiographies published in other sports, by any count (see Buisine; Perret; Artiaga; Moraldo, “Analyser”).

Why is this so? And, as social scientists, how can we use this singular material? These are the two questions I will try to address in this article. The first question immediately situates mountaineering as a singular practice in relation to other sports. The second is a more methodological reflection which leads us to a questioning of the validity of this atypical material, a material which at least French sociologists have tended to frown upon.

My work on the sociological use of autobiographies has roots in my doctoral research project, which has resulted in a dissertation (see Moraldo, *Sommets*) and more recently a book (see Moraldo, *L'esprit*). In this research, I have focused on excellence in mountaineering—that is, the elite among the mountaineers—since its inception in mid-nineteenth century in Britain. I have examined the ways in which a so-called spirit of mountaineering—a body of ethical rules and an *esprit de corps*—was invented, and remained over time, despite all the changes that have affected mountaineering, including democratization, feminization, and professionalization. My research shows that this spirit of mountaineering still governs the ways in which mountaineering is practiced nowadays in the United Kingdom and France. I have analyzed 72 autobiographies of British and French mountaineers published between 1920 and 2014, that is to say, all the autobiographies of great French and British mountaineers published before 2015. As a complement to this autobiographical material, I have also used as sources sociological interviews, ascent accounts, articles from mountaineering magazines, and obituaries.

## **Autobiographies as a Portal to Discourses of Excellence**

Among the narratives produced by mountaineers, autobiographies and climbing accounts are two particularly common types of self-discourse. Autobiographies in particular prove to present interesting material for studying excellence in mountaineering.

In high-profile sports such as football, autobiographies sometimes represent a means of accessing a population of inaccessible people (see Juskowiak and Nuytens). Similarly, but for different reasons, it was a question of inaccessibility that led me to the use of autobiographies in

the first place: given the object of my research, namely the (self-)discourses of mountaineers, many of which had long since passed away, and the long historical time-frame I was interested in (150 years), autobiographies at first seemed to be a practical means of accessing much of the information which would have been otherwise unavailable. However, this primary, essentially practical reason was quickly relegated to the background. Indeed, autobiographical material has proved to have an unsuspected richness for studying excellence in mountaineering, particularly from a longitudinal perspective. Thus, from belonging to default material autobiographies quickly became a central and indispensable tool in my work. This idea requires further clarification.

### **A Literary Production Reserved for an Elite**

Autobiographies are a form of literary production reserved for a certain mountaineering elite: very few minor mountaineers (if we can call them that) publish autobiographies for a wide audience, and the few who have done so have been excluded from my corpus. There are several reasons for this.

First, this type of publication is often justified and legitimized by the achievement of extraordinary feats: one does not write a mountaineering autobiography without having unpublished episodes to tell. This does not mean, as I will show later, that this criterion is sufficient. Specific social conditions are also necessary to engage in autobiographical writing.

Second, mountaineering is a specific activity in that it requires the prowess of its practitioners to be narrated in order to receive validation within their peer group, and for the feats to thus be recognized into existence. Indeed, since its beginnings, mountaineering has been made visible through narrative. In a way, a new ascent only exists insofar as it is told afterwards, with sufficiently clear and numerous details to support the claim. For those who wish to have their exploits recognized and validated by their peers, the absence of judges or spectators means that they have to relate, in one way or another, the climbs they have made. Hence the strong propensity of elite mountaineers to publish.

Finally, the way in which mountaineering is practiced lends itself well to written narration. As an activity close to exploration, and unlike standardized sports, mountaineering allows for relatively varied narratives: the places where the action takes place are always different, capture the imagination, and usually require detailed description; the out-

come is often uncertain; the risks are high; etc. Moreover, unlike more institutionalized sports, where all the work and actors who contributed to the making of the heroes are visible, the mountaineer can give the impression of having become who he is, and of having accomplished remarkable feats, alone. Autobiography is a form that corresponds particularly well to this representation of the individual, and which in turn helps to validate it.

That being said, if one must be a member of the mountaineering elite to publish an autobiography, it is less clear that the authors of autobiographies are representative, in social and gender terms, of the mountaineering elite as a group. This question is fundamental: indeed, it is one of the conditions for approaching autobiographies as valid empirical material for studying excellence in mountaineering. To address this concern, I have sought, throughout my research, to identify according to objective criteria, decade by decade, who the most important mountaineers of each period were (e.g., those who achieved the greatest ascents, or the greatest number of ascents), thus reconstructing an elite of mountaineers since the 1850s. Using this method, the elite comprises 364 mountaineers. What I found is that when the social properties of this (reconstitution of the) elite are compared with those of all the authors of autobiographies, the two are extremely, and surprisingly, similar. I say surprisingly because my population of autobiographers was not constituted with a view to being representative. This allowed me to consider, with all due caution, that what was found in the autobiographies was representative, in a way, of the discourse and views of the great mountaineers in general (as a group), and reflected their conceptions of excellence and, more generally, what I have called the spirit of mountaineering.

### **“Mountaineering” Autobiographies—Not Autobiographies “of Mountaineers”**

Another reason why autobiographies quickly became a central and indispensable source material in my research is because they are above all texts about “mountaineering”: they are life stories centered on mountaineering and in which the other social roles and statuses of their authors are obscured. The writers tend to present themselves as “mountaineers” above all, giving the impression of a life exclusively devoted to mountaineering. This reduction of the author of an autobiography to one aspect alone, this coherence, which has been strongly criticized in

sociology (see Bourdieu 69–72), is not, however, detrimental to a sociological analysis of mountaineering excellence. On the contrary, the very fact that elite mountaineers produce this type of discourse reveals something about their relationship with an activity that is primary in their eyes. Moreover, these discourses indicate a lot about excellence in mountaineering, since they are texts in which their authors develop both their trajectories—within the mountaineering elite—and their conceptions—that is, their definition of excellence in mountaineering. The research for my book (see Moraldo, *L'esprit*) was thus shielded from the dangers of the so-called biographical illusion—the disparity between an individual's outward discourse and his or her (often unthematized) social reality—because the forms of official discourse carried on by a social elite about itself were precisely what I sought to access.

Although this presents relevant material for studying excellence, it is not the only type of source used in my research: accounts of ascents, biographies, obituaries, articles from Alpine journals from the 1850s onwards, but also interviews (15 in total) conducted with living mountaineers, were analyzed.

## **Objectivizing Autobiography**

Prior to analyzing their content, autobiographies written by mountaineers ought to be rigorously objectified: reinscribing this material in the historical and social frameworks that make it possible and give it meaning is necessary in order to understand what it can—and does—tell us. But this sociological work of objectification is not a mere preliminary to the so-called real stage of analysis: it already tells us a lot about excellence in mountaineering and its spirit.

### **The Historical Conditions for the Emergence of Mountaineering Autobiographies**

First and foremost, it is necessary to put the mountaineering autobiography back into its historical context by asking how this type of self-discourse could appear among mountaineers in the first place.

The autobiographical genre, whose founding text is arguably Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, developed progressively during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, before taking off at the end of the eighteenth century (see Grève). In the nineteenth century, the genre spread

throughout Europe. In France and the United Kingdom, a number of writers and essayists wrote their autobiographies. These make up the majority of the texts listed by Philippe Lejeune in his “repertoire” of autobiographies (Lejeune 11). Autobiography was thus already a well-established genre in the nineteenth century, when mountaineering was at its early beginnings.

However, the first autobiographies of mountaineers appear much later. While the first compilations of mountaineering stories by Alpine Club members were published in the 1840s,<sup>1</sup> the first mountaineering autobiography, *Mountain Memories* by Martin Conway (1856–1937), appeared in 1920 and was followed in the same decade by no less than five other similar texts: *The Making of a Mountaineer* by George I. Finch (1888–1970) in 1924, *The Mountains of Youth* by Arnold Lunn (1888–1974) in 1925, *On High Hills* by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (1876–1958) in 1927, and *Day In, Day Out* by Elizabeth Aubrey-Le Blond (1861–1934) in 1928. In France, the situation is different. The first mountaineering autobiography was *Vocation alpine (Alpine Calling)* by Armand Charlet (1900–1975), published in 1949. It was not until 1961 that *Les conquérants de l'inutile (Conquistadors of the Useless)* by Lionel Terray (1921–1965) was published. Pierre Puiseux (1855–1928) and Micheline Morin (1900–1972) had certainly published mountain memories, the former in 1928 with *Où le père a passé (Where Father Went)*, and the latter in 1936 with *Encordée (On the Rope)*, but both were compilations of accounts of climbs rather than autobiographies. We are therefore faced with what appears to be a British specificity: the early appearance of autobiographies. Two questions can be asked at this point: the question of the gap between France and the United Kingdom in terms of published autobiographies, and the question of the late appearance among mountaineers of a literary genre that was already established elsewhere.

The differences in autobiographical production in the two countries ought to be considered in relation to the different roles mountaineering had played within the two national sports spheres before the interwar period, and can be read in the light of the respective dominant definitions of the activity in the two countries. My research was able to show that the appearance of these mountaineering autobiographies (that is, autobiographies centered on mountaineering) was conditioned

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<sup>1</sup> These include James Forbes' *Travel through the Alps of Savoy* (1843) and the *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers* volumes published by the Alpine Club from 1859 onwards, before the bestselling mountaineering stories such as Leslie Stephen's *The Playground of Europe* (1871) and Edward Whymper's *Scrambles amongst the Alps* (1871) were published.

by the possibility of gaining social standing from mountaineering and, more simply, by the fact that it became possible to declare oneself to be a mountaineer as a principal undertaking rather than as a secondary activity. In other words, writing autobiographies became possible when mountaineering as an activity became respectable enough to be more than a mere leisure activity or hobby. In France, until the 1920s, mountaineering remained a “cultivated excursionism,” a “cultivated practice not unlike the activity of learned societies,” a practice focused on the scientific or contemplative dimensions of mountaineering rather than its conquering and sporting dimension (Hoibian 56). In this context, it was rare to see people devote more time to mountaineering than one would to a leisure activity, and the profit to be made from mountaineering exploits (which were quite rare among the French) were small. In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, mountaineering was institutionalized earlier, from the 1850s onward, and the so-called golden age of British mountaineering (1856–1865) was characterized by the emergence of a sporty and conquering mountaineering against a backdrop of British imperialism. This culminated in the Everest expeditions of the 1920s (see Ellis). Two of the early authors of autobiographies, Martin Conway and George Finch, published their books after their respective Himalayan expeditions (Conway went to the Karakoram as early as 1890, and Finch took part in the Everest expedition in 1922). Such a definition of mountaineering creates a space for the autobiographical production, limited, granted, to the best mountaineers, those who have joined the ranks of national heroes together with the great British explorers of the period. This is one reason why autobiographies focused on mountaineering appeared in the United Kingdom from the 1920s onwards. Another possible reason could be that, before the 1920s, it was still not acceptable in the United Kingdom to give too much importance to an activity that was not one’s profession, let alone to write memoirs centered on this activity. As mountaineers were professionals (businessmen, teachers, lawyers, diplomats), it would have been undignified, especially in the Victorian era, to present oneself first and foremost as a mountaineer.<sup>2</sup> Leslie Stephen (1832–1904), a major mountaineer of the golden age and author of the bestselling book *The Playground of Europe* (1871), thus published several articles, but these,

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<sup>2</sup> Even though accounts of climbs were published, their titles emphasized the fact that mountaineering remained a secondary activity, reserved for free time: *The Playground of Europe* (Stephen), *Scrambles amongst the Alps* (Whymper), *Wandering amongst the High Alps* (Wills), *Norway, the Northern Playground* (Slingsby), *Summer Months among the Alps* (Hinchliff), *Hours of Exercises in the Alps* (Tyndall), etc.

although his mountaineering activity can sometimes be mentioned in them, are mainly devoted to his professional and intellectual career. Similarly, in *Penultima*, the memoir published by Alfred Hopkinson (1851–1939) in 1920, mountaineering takes a minor place when compared to his professional career as a professor of law and headmaster of Owens College.

The rise of mountaineering autobiographies in the United Kingdom in the 1920s can thus be explained by a combination of several factors: a favorable ideological and political context, including the unique access to Everest, the imperialist aim of the first expeditions to the Himalaya, encouraged by institutions such as the Royal Geographical Society (see Ellis), and the revaluation of the figure of the explorer; the presence of institutions both old (the Alpine Club, the Royal Geographical Society) and new (the Everest Committee); and the action of the media in disseminating the exploits of mountaineers and creating a readership. Mountaineering had thus become so popular that it was possible for mountaineers, at last, to publish their life stories without tarnishing their image.

Later, for the generation of mountaineers born in the 1920s in particular, it was France that dominated autobiographical production. This reversal corresponds historically to a renewal of the dominant definitions of mountaineering in both countries, marked in particular by the great post-war era of French Himalayanism, following the ascent of Annapurna in 1950, which consecrated the mountaineers as national heroes. An important element must be added, though, namely the growing media coverage of mountaineering which opened up a kind of market of testimonies that was seized upon by mainstream publishing houses. This phenomenon is particularly visible in France, where mountaineering autobiography took off as the result of the media coverage of Himalayan expeditions. Additionally, editorial constraints and the organization of the publishing field are elements that influence autobiographical production as well.

Finally, mountaineering narratives emerged when it became legitimate to present oneself as a mountaineer first and foremost, which did not happen until the 1920s in the United Kingdom and the 1960s in France. Subsequently, the publication of an autobiography became commonplace among the best mountaineers. As a result, in some cases, autobiography came to resemble what it is in other sports: a medium for self-promotion and a way to profit from a career. The age of mountaineers when they published their autobiography is an indicator of these new functions of autobiography and, in short, of the profession-



alization of mountaineering. The earlier the climber publishes his or her autobiography, the more likely it is that the aim is to gain notoriety, especially for the latest generation of professional climbers who have to manage their media image. While the average age at which an autobiography is published in any period is around 50 years (47.3 years in the United Kingdom and 50.1 years in France), this average age decreases over time (see Figure 1). This decrease has another indirect consequence: the increase in the number of autobiographies published in recent decades. Indeed, to publish at a young age is to avoid the risk of dying in the mountains before having had the chance to write the autobiography. The generalization of Himalayanism has contributed to the increase in this risk, just as it encourages a truly vocational investment in mountaineering among the latest generations.

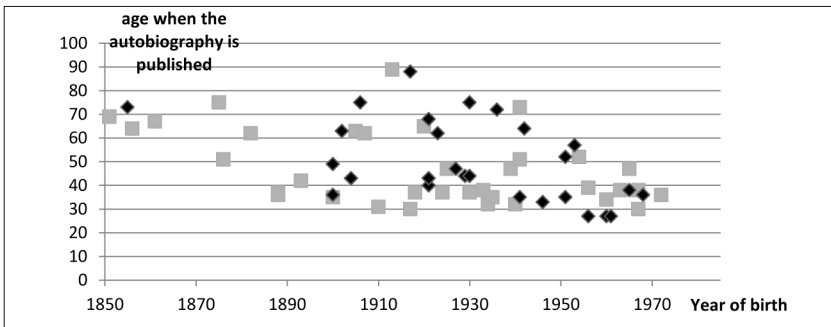


Figure 1. The age at which climbers publish their autobiographies. Autobiography base (N=62). In grey the British, in black the French.

We can thus see that both the ways in which autobiographies appear and the different functions that they can take on (from a strategy of achieving notoriety to a disinterested discourse) should be put in relation to their historical and social conditions of enunciation. In this sense, it is important to bear in mind that a mountaineer's autobiography obtains a different meaning and different stakes depending on whether it is written in the 1920s or in the 1980s, by a middle-class amateur or by a professional mountaineer, in old age or at an early age. It is therefore essential to restore, as far as possible, its exact frameworks of enunciation in order to better understand its function and to apprehend it for what it is.

## The Social Conditions of Possibility of the Autobiography

Among these frames of enunciation, the author's background and gender should also be taken into account. Among the authors of autobiographies, there is an over-representation of men (89% of authors from both countries) and of mountaineers from privileged backgrounds compared to their share in the general population (around 70% of British authors and almost 50% of French authors).

This over-representation leads us to question of the properties that might give the mountaineer a sense of entitlement that leads to writing and publishing about himself. Does this sense of legitimacy come from the social, sporting, or literary sphere? At the end of what type of life trajectory does it appear?

Regarding the trajectory, writing is legitimized by an exceptional, exemplary, sporting career that is deemed worthy of interest; in a word, an excellent career. The justification of the autobiographical enterprise in terms of the transformation or conversion of the self in the course of one's life (see Poliak 9) is implicitly present in the texts, as they tell the story of this transformation. The exemplary dimension inherent in the autobiographical project explains, once again, the rarity of accounts by ordinary mountaineers and the proximity of the social and gender composition of the population of autobiographical authors to that of great mountaineers.

When it comes to the social properties and skills that preside over the autobiographical enterprise, one condition appears to be necessary: one has to possess the literary skills and social dispositions that allow one to feel authorized to write and publish a life story (see Lahire). Because of phenomena of self-selection of a social or gendered nature (see Poliak 11; Bertaux 215; Peneff 56), mountaineering legitimacy alone is not enough. Being a man (rather than a woman) or a bourgeois (rather than a member of the working class), however great a mountaineer one may be, are two factors that make writing and publishing more likely.

Finally, being a great mountaineer who has written an autobiography requires two conditions to be fulfilled: to have accomplished feats that make one part of the mountaineering elite, and to have the literary skills and social dispositions to feel entitled to write and publish a life story. The combination of these two effects can be seen in the case of female climbers. Their under-representation in the autobiographical corpus reflects their dominated position in mountaineering: to be implicitly accepted as part of the elite, they must demonstrate an excep-

tional sporting level, that is, they must not only be better than other women but also equal to the best men (see Moraldo, “Women”). This may explain why there are no women from working-class backgrounds among the authors of autobiographies, as they have a double deficit of legitimacy, one based in gender and the other one in class. Among men from working-class backgrounds who belong to the mountaineering elite, it is above all a deficit of literary legitimacy that may hinder a possible autobiographical project. From this point of view, if authors from working-class backgrounds are not under-represented compared to their proportion in the mountaineering elite, it is also because their upwardly mobile sporting trajectory is often coupled with a literary acculturation, often caused or triggered by the reading of mountaineering stories, which can act as an entry point to reading in general and then to writing. The acculturation of working-class climbers can also take place through contact with other climbers and, for guides, with their clients from privileged backgrounds (see Moraldo, *Sommets*). Another reason stems from the construction of the autobiographical corpus: to get more data, I have chosen to include the four autobiographies written with the help of a co-author: it happened that they are all autobiographies of mountaineers from working-class backgrounds who did not undertake secondary education, namely Don Whillans (1933–1985), Robert Flematti (1942–), Pierre Leroux (1921–2005), and Benoit Chamoux (1961–1995).

The social properties of the authors also depend on their generation, and must be seen in the light of what has been said above about the historical objectification of autobiographies. For example, while almost all writers born before 1914 belong to the social and intellectual elite (90%), post-war climbers are more often from the working class, in relation to the changes in the meaning of mountaineering autobiographies: it is increasingly sanctioned solely by sporting success. Women, on the other hand, are still in the minority among the authors of autobiographies: gender remains the last bastion. There is much to be said about the evolution of literary style, the episodes chosen, and the length of the texts, all of which testify to a decline in literary skills over time.

### **Bad Material or Bad Uses?**

If autobiography could appear to be an ideal material for capturing what I have called the spirit of mountaineering, that is, the rules and representations which govern a so-called excellent practice and which

are shared by all elite mountaineers, this material is viewed with suspicion by sociologists, as they prefer sociological interviews.

The first reason is that autobiographies do not belong to material generated by the sociologist: indeed, he or she does not control their production. The second reason, linked to the first, is that autobiographies hold the reputation to be more biased than other materials. The usual criticisms of the autobiographical process thus concern its propensity to generate illusions that make it unsuitable for sociological use: a “referential illusion” concerning the veracity of the text; a “biographical illusion” (Bourdieu; Bertaux 213), denouncing an *ex post* reconstruction of the author’s trajectory, seen solely from the point of arrival.

### **False Criticisms of Autobiography**

In my view, these are false objections: reality is always considered in retrospect, through the prism of a discourse, regardless of the way in which the information is collected. Such a reconstruction is inevitable. It is even indispensable to the narrative endeavor itself. Gérard Mauger points out that it would be just as illusory to think that a lived life could be exempt from narration, and reminds us that the so-called self is already a biographical institution (Mauger 35).

On the other hand, to address the specific objection of referential illusion, there is, in a practice such as mountaineering, a cross-checking by peers that lessens the possibility of lying, as it were. The publicity of the autobiography thus brings into play, as in the case of the sociologists studied by Jean-Philippe Bouilloud, the “recognition” of the author “by those he recognizes” (Bouilloud 60), and must propose a public version of the facts considered to be accurate.

The question is not so much whether the material is in itself or naturally good material—it is not about modelling on autobiographies the procedures and expectations in terms of sociological knowledge that are those of tried and tested sociological methods and techniques (the interview in particular)—as it is to ask how it is questioned and what we can hope to find in it.

Mauger refers to autobiographies “from below”, written by workers who have experienced an upward social trajectory, as “undertakings of self-aggrandizement,” justified by the exemplary nature of a journey, by the knowledge acquired, and by the self-transformation brought about during this journey (Mauger 39). The same can be said of autobiographies of mountaineers: they are exemplary narratives and under-

takings of the so-called growth or heroization of the self. As a result, they are almost ideal for studying excellence: its values, its ideologies, its practices.

But even if the mountaineer were to lie (in terms of the referential illusion) or give a distorted vision of his or her existence because it is reconstructed according to the point of arrival (in terms of the biographical illusion), autobiographies would still provide useful material. I believe that we should avoid these false questions and analyze the autobiography as both a factual discourse (not devoid of historical veracity) and a discourse of excellence and vocation, that is, a presentation of oneself as an elite mountaineer. Rather than sticking to a factual perspective aimed at comparing narrative and reality, the interest of the autobiography lies in the attempt at reconstruction it carries out, and in what this particular formatting reveals. In this respect, Nathalie Heinich's argument seems relevant when she writes that "from a comprehensive perspective [...], [the] narrative is part of the very matter of investigation: not only what makes it possible to understand, but also what must be understood" (Heinich 425)—provided, of course, that the discourse is articulated with the author's social properties. In the study of mountaineering excellence, more than knowing which discourses are supposed to be true, it is the image that the individual gives of himself and the way in which he reinterprets his trajectory, always put in relation to his social affiliations, and what this discourse tells us about the relationship (passionate, vocational, etc.) to the activity, that matters. As Mauger writes, in the autobiography, "the definition, necessarily relative, of the 'essential' and the 'accessory' is determined by the interests and problems of the author" (Mauger 43). It is precisely these interests and this problematic that I am interested in. In contrast to a critical sociology interested in revealing the truth hidden behind indigenous beliefs, and following Jacques Defrance's suggestion that we "take seriously the discourses of disinterestedness and apoliticism of the agents of the sports field [...] and adopt the anthropologist's point of view as we study the beliefs or worldviews of a social group," I want to consider the reconstruction carried out in the autobiography as a sociological object that tells us something about the ethos, beliefs, and representations of the mountaineers, but also about the factual course of their trajectories. This has been done, but without a consideration of these objects "as primary truths" or renouncing "any critical analysis of the role of the dominant" (Defrance 23).

## **The Three Functions of Autobiographies for a Sociological Analysis of Excellence**

Hence, by considering autobiography as an exemplary narrative produced by an equally exemplary individual, one can consider autobiography to fulfil the following functions, which are also conditions of its production.

The first function is to bear witness to the reality of mountaineering at a particular time. The mountaineer has the legitimacy to do this as an insider and privileged witness. This is why, at a first level of analysis, we can say that the autobiography constitutes a source of factual information on the world of mountaineering. By cross-checking it with other sources (climbing stories, alpine journal articles, biographies), I have been able to draw up an accurate portrait of the ways in which mountaineering was practiced and considered over time.

The second function is to tell the story of an extraordinary life journey. As accounts of transformation and calling, autobiographies of mountaineers narrate trajectories, but in ways that must be objectified. By comparing these texts, I was able to reveal the main stages of a mountaineer's career and its evolution over time. This, in turn, allowed me to show how mountaineering had gradually evolved from a so-called leisure activity to a truly vocational practice, requiring an always greater investment (in time, money, but also physical and mental fitness).

The third function is to justify a place among peers, alongside the other elite mountaineers. By publishing an autobiography, the author asserts his or her status as an exemplary mountaineer. These texts thus partake in a discourse of distinction and entitlement, allowing one to justify one's place in a group (the elite of mountaineering). By analyzing the discourse, it is possible to bring out the representations, principles, and rules, in particular the ethical rules, which govern the spirit of mountaineering.

## **Conclusion**

This article set out to answer two questions: Why are mountaineers so keen on autobiographies? How can a sociologist legitimately use this atypical material? The answers to these questions relate to the question of excellence and, ultimately, to what constitutes the spirit of mountaineering. Autobiography is a discourse of excellence, produced by an

elite (both sporting and, to a certain extent, social elite), from the moment it became legitimate to exist as a mountaineer first and foremost. For those who want to analyze excellence, it is close to the ideal material, provided that it is analyzed for what it is, and with the awareness that it does not say what it cannot say.

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## Avtobiografije kot vir v sociologiji alpinizma

Ključne besede: sociologija literature / literatura in alpinizem / alpinistična literatura / avtobiografija / odličnost / elitizem

Vse od vznika alpinizma alpinisti in alpinistke s svojimi spisi vzpostavljajo obsežen literarni kanon. Med temi teksti imajo posebno mesto avtobiografije. Te so za alpinizem veliko značilnejše kakor nemara za kateri koli drug šport, a so se pojavile bistveno pozneje kakor prva alpinistična poročila o vzponih in odpravah, ki jih zasledimo že okrog leta 1840. Članek odgovarja na dve vprašanji. Prvič, zakaj alpinisti in alpinistke pišejo toliko avtobiografij, a šele od dvajsetih let 20. stoletja naprej? In drugič, je to gradivo lahko relevantno za sociološko analizo alpinizma in zlasti odličnosti v alpinizmu? Članek pokaže, da so avtobiografije relevantno in celo idealno gradivo za sociološko proučevanje odličnosti v alpinizmu. Gre namreč za diskurz odličnosti, ki ga proizvaja elita (in sicer športna in v določeni meri tudi družbena elita) in ki nam lahko veliko pove o tako imenovanem duhu alpinizma.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article

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