

**Andrew Denning**

## **Alpenraum or Alptraum? A Cultural and Environmental History of Skiing in the Alps, 1890-1970**

This project aims to investigate the ways individuals and groups discovered, experienced, and altered the physical environment of the Alps through leisure activity, namely skiing. In so doing, I will show that the human-environment relationship is reciprocal and, thus, that the environment had a profound effect both on leisure practices and on the cultural meanings associated with those practices. Further, I contend that the usual geographic definition of the Alps must be expanded to encompass the Alps as a coherent and diverse cultural field that transcends national borders.

The ski is one of humanity's oldest transportation technologies, dating from 2500 B.C.E. For most of its history, the ski was used primarily for utilitarian activities like hunting, logging, and basic transport in mountainous and sub-arctic zones. It has only relatively recently been repurposed as a medium of leisure. Leisure skiing swept across Europe in the late nineteenth century from the Pyrenees in the west to the Carpathians in the east as the people of Europe followed the lead of pioneering Norwegians. This development was made possible by socio-economic and cultural changes generally grouped under the heading of "modernization processes" (i.e., industrialization, urbanization, and the growth of mass culture).

The growth of leisure skiing was especially pronounced in the Alps, where the climate and geography are conducive to all styles of skiing: downhill, cross-country, touring, and ski jumping. Further, the location of the Alps at the heart of Europe made skiing easily accessible to residents of many of Europe's largest urban areas. By World War I, the Alps had emerged as Europe's "winter playground" and ski tourism was largely responsible for the resuscitation of many mountain communities that had been in economic and demographic decline. In the interwar period, skiing continued to grow in popularity and tourist infrastructure (e.g., transportation networks, hotels, and skiing areas) expanded widely throughout the Alps. After World War II, skiing shifted from a regime of leisure tourism to become an element of the tourist industry, defined by corporate control and strong coordination between private interests and local, regional, and national governments.

My project aims to examine the development of skiing in the Alps along the trajectory described above: from decentralized leisure activity in the late nineteenth century to a highly orchestrated multi-billion dollar industry in the postwar era. I will use this narrative of socio-economic and institutional changes as a framework to analyze the cultural meanings associated with skiing. I argue that the Alps themselves were the most influential factor in both the economic/institutional development of skiing and in the production of cultural meanings associated with it. In order to understand skiing culture and the perceptions of the Alps in this time period, a comparative, transnational approach is essential. The fragmented political geography and the political decentralization of the Alps resulted in a panoply of meanings associated with skiing as both a leisure activity and a sport that spanned multiple geographical tiers: the local (e.g., Chamonix), the national region (e.g., Bavaria), the nation-state (e.g., Switzerland), the transnational region (e.g., the Eastern Alps), and, finally, the Alps as a whole. The Alps are a transnational landform and skiing was often understood in cosmopolitan terms, but individuals and groups also appropriated both

skiing and the Alpine landscape to assert difference along the geographical tiers described above. Thus, the meanings associated with skiing were always refracted by the perception of the Alpine landscape in its numerous temporal and geographical variations.

I am using a wide array of primary sources to examine the relationship between culture and landscape in Alpine skiing. These include, first, published monographs, such as instruction manuals, travel guides, and histories of skiing; second, published serial sources, such as newspaper coverage of skiing and Alpine communities and the monthly skiing and alpinist journals produced by national, regional, and local clubs; and finally, unpublished archival sources kept by ski and alpine clubs and by relevant local and regional governments.