

The Conquest of Mountains: A Contradiction?

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Arne Naess

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The urge to climb has many sources, and no two climbers ever have the same motivation. Success as a climber, however, is measured in a fairly specific fashion, reflecting perhaps some of the most objectionable traits of contemporary society.

There is stress on competition. Achievement is measured by means of such superficialities as the number and difficulty of a climber's ascents, or the number, difficulty, and height of the summits he has reached. The superficiality stems from the conventional approach to the assessment of "difficulty." Every well-integrated individual has his or her own way of "measuring" achievement and success, namely in relation not only to personal goals but also to his or her state of training and so on: factors which naturally have to be ignored in the world of competitive sport.

Furthermore, detailed route descriptions and publicity are stressed in order to facilitate stupid comparisons. In consequence, how and where to climb on a mountain are determined more by one's reaction to reports and superficial ratings than by desires arising spontaneously *during* the climb. Generally, the most beautiful or otherwise remarkable places on a mountain are to be found along the edges of phenomenal precipices, not at the (geographical) summit which is often a dull place. Nevertheless, climbers often walk or scramble to the summit in fog, merely to complete the climb, as if the latter, as an experience or achievement, could be defined by a machine without reference to qualities specific to human beings.

In the *Himalayas*, the inhuman aspect of climbing is more pronounced than it is elsewhere. When chauvinist impulses dominated the picture after the Second World War, expeditions degenerated into sieges of a

quasi-military sort. The mountains were “conquered,” a fatal expression, and “success” was often insured by sending great numbers of climbers who made a series of “assaults.”

A salutary reaction has set in against the desecration of mountains by garbage (pitons, equipment, etc.), but there is still little protest against this worthless form of “summitry.” Such a negative attitude towards the dominant trend may seem fanatical, and I think only a minority of climbers will experience mountains as I do, but there are more of us than is generally assumed. Our numbers are magnified by the pressure towards conformity, and the need for young climbers to secure reputations, in order to be voted onto expeditions by their fiercely competitive and status-seeking elders.

“The mountain was considered impossible to climb . . .” This is one of the venerable stereotypes in climbing literature. It may be a mistake to translate it literally. The lure of the mountains is largely symbolic; in the mythology and poetry of various cultures, mountains *are* in an important sense “unclimbable.” They symbolize elevation, perfection, and grandeur *to be striven for*. The general public’s awe of mountains as “challenges” is no doubt associated with this symbolism. Thus, identification of success in climbing the holy mountains of the Himalayas with “conquest” of their summits can be seen as nothing but infantile profanation; in this way, modern man convinces himself that he can *do the impossible*. But he forgets both his dependence upon administration and machinery, and also his debt to the old symbols. If his “modern way of life” becomes universal, mountains will one day be regarded as heaps of mineral, and to climb them pointless.

This is not written with the intention of activating climbers who basically share my attitudes, but are too shy or modest to try to change things. Let diversity of motive and method flourish by all means. But let us also agree that no single concept of climbing should so dominate as to spoil the pleasure or experience of others, of this generation or of those to come. To ensure this may, perhaps, entail a broad shift of attitude in our direction, as the “achievement attitude” is massively destructive in nature, and seriously threatens all other positions. Such a shift might today be possible, in the new atmosphere of ecological awareness brought about by technology’s overstepping of vital limits.