

The Emerging Mountain Imaginary of the Galician Highlands: A New National Landscape in an Era of Globalization?

Mountains have been the object of an intense elaboration of national imaginaries. There is a widespread perception of Galicia as a rural and coastal country based on agricultural and seaside landscapes, with mountains being largely ignored. However, a production of local narratives around the Trevinca Massif has recently taken place, which has become quite widespread, with an emerging mountain landscape imaginary of its own around the notion of the Galician Highlands. This paper discusses these developments in the context of both the changing imaginaries of mountains in western cultures and the different Galician landscape imaginaries. The research was carried out by means of semi-structured interviewing, which led towards obtaining three narratives elaborated from semiotic clustering. These results allow us to infer that global forces, in particular tourism and promotion, have been essential for explaining the emergence and spread of the Galician Highlands as a socio-spatial imaginary. Another conclusion is the relevance of the disputed conception of “natural borders” coinciding with mountains in the case-study area.

Keywords: Galician Highlands, globalization, mountain, nationalism, socio-spatial imaginary

Introduction

Certain mountains hold a deep national meaning for the respective countries they are located in (Nogué and Vicente 2004; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Bernbaum and Price 2013; Della Dora 2016; Herb 2018). A case in point is Japan, quintessentially linked with Mount Fuji, customarily shown with sea waves, cherry trees and traditional architecture, but nowadays these icons have been replaced by other representations, such as manga and even the shinkansen. In the current era of globalization, these imaginaries are quite commonly projected abroad, attaining world-wide significance. Debarbieux

(2004) proposed a framework regarding spatial imaginaries attached to mountains in western countries¹ that was broadened, gaining a planet-wide dimension, by Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010). In this model, the national imaginary of mountains is commonly expected. However, other imaginaries are also identified, including global environmentalism and internationalism, which have gained momentum throughout the twentieth century. By examining a case-study where the mountain imaginary is contemporarily emerging, we can find out if the national aspect remains significant or assert that, currently, the social construction of mountains bears witness to other dimensions.

The country in focus is Galicia (Figure 1), whose national character is based on its own language, culture and sense of belonging, causing a strong identity. Galicia is constitutionally considered a nationality, euphemism for nation, which has experienced devolution within Spain since the late 1970s. As outlined below, mountain landscapes in Galicia have been largely ignored and the national landscape imaginaries have been constructed with other geographical bases in mind. However, throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a new landscape discourse has emerged in the Trevinca Massif (the highest peak of the nation being Trevinca, 2127 m a.s.l.). Obviously, these mountains, the highest ones in Galicia, have always been there, but they have only attained significance in the socio-spatial discourses about Galicia since the 2000s, approximately. In this process of emergent mountain imaginary, the development and extension of the category of the “Galician Highlands” (*Terras Altas de Galicia* in Galician) has certainly been a milestone. The studied region was indeed the “objective” Galician highlands

— with a significant land area of over 1,800 m a.s.l. — but no one had used this concept before.

[Figure 1 here]

Accordingly, the recent local narratives about mountains, developed in the Trevinca Massif, are analyzed to discern whether these respond to the construction of a national landscape and/or whether they are linked with global processes. Debarbieux's (2019) conceptualization of social imaginaries of space is the overall foundation for such an attempt; moreover, and more precisely, the specific theorizations on mountains constituting a socially framed spatial category (e.g. Debarbieux 2004; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Della Dora 2016) and on landscapes becoming a national discourse (e.g. Nogué and Vicente 2014; Herb 2018) will be here addressed. More significantly, this research does not focus on these mountains per se, but on the emergent imaginaries associated with them.

The paper begins by building a theoretical framework through an overview of the changing imaginaries of mountains in western cultures and by revising the construction of national landscape imaginaries in Galicia, followed by the presentation of the case-study area. The next section outlines how the empirical analysis has been carried out. The paper then goes on to analyze the spatial narratives obtained from qualitative interviewing through analytical coding. A discussion is provided in order to contrast these results in light of the overall evolution of western mountain imaginaries and taking into account the different Galician national landscape imaginaries.

The Evolving Western Imaginaries of Mountains

Mountains are widely understood as physical elements that are identifiable in the landscape. However, this discernment is not standardized, as the perception of what a mountain is differs among communities. Some imperceptible hills can be regarded as relevant mountains nearby, while orographic massifs, defined as mountainous by physical geographers and geologists, might not be conceived as such by the people living within or nearby — for a wider discussion in this respect, see Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010) and Della Dora (2016). Indeed, classical geographers such as Roderick Peattie stated, in the 1930s, that mountains can only be defined by making use of “the imagination of the people who live within their shadow” (Byers, Price and Price 2013, 2).

Hence, in regards to mountains, the focus here is on the “various conceptions [that] have flourished one after the other, each one being a combination of patterns of perception, visions of the world, projects of knowledge and action” (Debarbieux 2004, 404). These successive imaginaries find their correlate in different social, political, historical and cultural contexts. They cannot all be read as mutually exclusive, but interwoven, overlapping and in dialogue with each other, in a process that is not always linear.

The “Invention of the Mountain”: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism — and Nationalisms

The critical change in the western perception of mountains took place in the eighteenth century, particularly in the Alps, moving from being perceived as a diabolic image based on Christian conceptions — see Joutard (1986), Cronon (1995) and Della Dora (2016) —, to an idyllic and, as such, a more

sympathetic vision. This process has been coined by Martínez de Pisón and Álvaro (2002, 43) and Sacareau (2003, 3) as “the invention of the mountain” — an expression that was already used by Joutard (1986) when specifically referring to “the invention of Mont Blanc”. This shift can be explained by the Enlightenment; science was considered central to human existence and, by so doing, there was a need to properly conceptualize, objectivize and define reality. In this sense, western academics were keen to know the specific location of the mountains and fully study their features, in an attempt to map the world through systematic explorations.

In parallel to the rational interest in the mountains, a significant emotional and sensitive reconfiguration also took place. This is made evident by, for instance, the increasing number of books published in the eighteenth century devoted to mountains: they were described as magnificent places and as the quintessence of natural beauty. A literary milestone is *La Nouvelle Héloïse* by Rousseau (1761), in which the Alps were the “natural sanctuary” of Europe (Martínez de Pisón and Álvaro 2002, 39) under a “moral and aesthetic” categorization (Debarbieux 2004, 400). This book was the origin of the taste for mountains in Europe (Bernbaum and Price 2013).

Saussure’s ascent of Mont Blanc in 1787, preceded one year earlier by Balmat and Paccard, is pivotal for mountaineering, not only in the Alps but also in the world; motivated by science and adventure, Saussure’s feat gave rise to mountaineering (Joutard 1986; Martínez de Pisón and Álvaro 2002). Thanks to this Alpine seminal moment, the Alps have become the “model” and “prototype” for mountains in the world (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010, 40—42). Alpinism has a very intense history led by Alpine Clubs in many

countries, whose members have climbed the outstanding mountains of the world throughout the twentieth century (Martínez de Pisón and Álvaro 2002).

Romanticism contributed with new meanings for mountains in western cultures (Short 1991), causing a multiplication of artistic representations of mountains, namely the Alps, including different types of texts (guidebooks, novels, poetry, etc.), music, paintings, lithography printings, the first photographs and even souvenirs (for instance, porcelain dishes). This imagery became extremely popular and available to a wider public in the nineteenth century (Martínez de Pisón and Álvaro 2002; Nogué and Vicente 2004; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Della Dora 2016).

Nogué and Vicente (2004) analyze how certain mountainous landscapes have become symbols of nationalisms, including not only well established nation-states (e.g. the role attributed to the Alps in Switzerland) but also new independent countries (e.g. Mount Kosciuszko and, in general, the Australian Alps for Australia) and stateless nations (e.g. the Pyrenees for Catalonia). Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010) include the particular perception of mountain people within the national narratives in this wave of nationalisms. These are always politically-driven discourses, attached either to negative (savage, violent, belligerent...) or positive (tough, courageous, loyal...) values. According to Herb (2018), nationalism endows these landscapes and the people inhabiting them with such connotations because they are conceived as the origin of the nation; this attribution also entails a connection between the allegedly unspoiled nature with the unspoiled national soul.

Mountains were attributed an important role as “natural borders” under the western nationalist conception of mountains in the nineteenth century

(Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Fall 2010). The origin of this notion can be traced back to Cardinal Richelieu's attempt to fix the French borders coinciding with the Pyrenees and the Alps in the seventeenth century (Sahlins 1990).

Natural and Environmental Views on the Mountains

Liberal nation-states have developed nature protection policies in mountain areas since the nineteenth century (Price and Kohler 2013). The designations of Yellowstone and Yosemite as Parks in the second half of that century are widely seen as milestones of this policy. However, other achievements can be noted; this is the case of forestry policies, such as compulsory afforestation affecting significant parts of mountain areas in the Alps (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Cunha and Price 2013). Be that as it may, these designations evidence that these policies were not really based on environmental motives — as could be contemporarily misunderstood — but largely responded to nationalist and pro-tourism intentions, through a particular construction of the notion of wilderness in the US (Short 1991; Cronon 1995; Depraz 2008; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Woods 2011; Debarbieux 2019).

In any case, National Parks as planning devices were rapidly applied to several mountains across the globe; indeed, other designations soon emerged in the early twentieth century (natural monuments, forest reserves, etc.), leading to a correlation of mountains and protection (Price and Kohler 2013; Arpin and Cosson 2015). Environmentalism has increasingly shaped mountains, especially since the early 1970s, when the UN organized the first major conference on international environmental issues in Stockholm in 1972. This conference marked a turning point in the development of environmental

policies. In short, mountains are often conceived as “emblematic landscapes [extracted] from artificialisation and modernization” (Debarbieux 2004, 402).

Modernist Imaginaries: Resources and Development

Throughout the twentieth century, mountains have also been seen as areas enduring specific problems, such as depopulation and economic decline, increasingly earmarked for explicit policies delivered by the respective nation-states. The modernist paradigm initially arrived through dams built for obtaining hydroelectricity and selective manufacturing development (dependent on the availability of natural resources), commonly attached to infrastructures of access (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Price and Kohler 2013). Tourism was already present in mountains from the nineteenth century, but its systematic use for the purposes of economic growth took place throughout the twentieth century. Nowadays, tourism in mountain areas ranges from Alpinist hikers who value solitude to mass tourism and amenity migrants (Nepal and Chipeniuk 2005; Price and Kohler 2013). In many countries, specific aids for mountain farming have also been set up in order to sustain declining farms in the second half of the twentieth century (Majoral 1997; Pujadas and Font 1998; Debarbieux 2004; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010).

Since the 1960s, regional and/or local policies, agencies and initiatives for mountain regions have multiplied and, contrary to previous sectoral approaches, these spatial devices envisage integral mountain development (Majoral 1997; Pujadas and Font 1998; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Price and Kohler 2013). In this sense, many mountains have been the object of an accelerated commodification through trademarks and labels promoting their development since the late twentieth century (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010). In

the case of the European Communities (now the EU), devices such as protected food designations and local action groups under the LEADER initiative,² launched in the early 1990s, have repeatedly made use of mountain narratives to sustain their identity, basically in economic terms, with inconclusive results (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; McMorran et al. 2015).

The “Internationalization of Mountains”

Over the past few decades, mountains have increasingly been conceived as meaningful at a planet level, rather than at a country level. In this regard, several global initiatives have been significant since the 1970s, such as the Man and the Biosphere Program under the auspices of UNESCO, leading, in turn, to the celebration of the International Year of Mountains in 2002 (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Price and Kohler 2013). Since the early 2000s, civil society initiatives have envisaged avoiding formal politics, such as the World Mountain Forum at the global level or, at the regional level, the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative, founded in 1997 (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Chester 2015).

A specific instance is the EU. In the context of the EU integration (including cross-border initiatives), different forms of regional institutionalization of international mountains have taken place (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Balsiger and Nahrath 2015; Debarbieux, Price and Balsiger 2015). The Alpine Region, the Pyrenees and the Carpathian Range, to name a few, have been the object of intense construction of trans-national mountain devices.

Galician National Landscape Imaginaries

According to Beramendi (2007), Galician nationalism dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, initially by asserting the ethnical identity of Galicia — namely by means of a re-birth of the poetry and prose written in Galician, almost absent in formal literature since the Middle Ages — and the need to politically re-frame the Spanish State in order to establish a new political status for Galicia. In the early twentieth century, the national character of Galicia becomes overtly acknowledged and the ideological quest for the political institutionalization of Galicia gains momentum, including autonomist, federal, self-determination and secessionist claims.

Landscape imaginaries have been present since the early variations of Galician nationalism. López Silvestre (2004, 492) remarks on the relevance of the first time the word ‘landscape’ is written in Galician: it is in the prologue of *Cantares gallegos* (‘Galician songs’) by Rosalía de Castro (1863), which is widely seen as a seminal book of contemporary Galicia. Hence, ‘landscape’ acts as a cultural and social — progressively, also political — discourse for rooting the Galician identity and sustaining the (national) self-esteem and self-identification of the Galician people. This is done by considering the Galician landscape as being similar to prestigious landscapes, such as the Swiss ones — Galicia becomes, quite often, the ‘Spanish Switzerland’ — and contrasting it with the (alleged) core Spanish landscape represented by Castile. Rosalía de Castro gave birth to a Galician landscape understood as green, beautiful, rural, agricultural, maternal, gentle and full of farmers, broadly recognized in these terms by Galician society in the following decades (López Sández, 2008; Murado, 2008).

Miguélez-Carballeira (2014) argues that this canonical imaginary has been manipulated for decades because the perception of the landscape as feminine has gradually been linked with the notions of docility, submissiveness and passivity. This move entails obvious political correlates which are used, for instance, by Spanish institutions to tamper Rosalía de Castro's original voice into a more manageable vision of what Galicia is meant to be. In any case, the Galician landscape ideal is deeply rooted in Rosalía de Castro's construction, privileging this self-representation of Galicia as a fertile garden.

Mato (1998), López Sánchez (2008) and Murado (2008) show that other Galician writers and historians had already contended with this dominant Galician landscape since the mid-nineteenth century. This opposed landscape narrative is characterized by counter-motives, such as masculinity and wilderness; instead of farmers, it is inhabited by epic warriors and mythical heroes; rather than cows and corn (two archetypical elements of the Galician landscape derived from de Castro's works), the landscape is full of wild flora and fauna. Importantly, this narrative favors the coastal landscapes of Galicia with cliffs and creates a link with other Celtic and Atlantic European nations. This is a landscape narrative that has had a limited effect compared to the first, and main, one; nevertheless, it is relevant in order to grasp Galician nationalist landscaping.

Since at least the 1930s, Galicia has begun to be customized from the Spanish national perspective, especially for tourism marketing purposes. This image focuses on the south-western Galician coastal area, with beaches located on the shore of wide *rías* (inlets), accessible and ready to be visited by

tourists, quite often depicted in sunny summers. This is an exogenous landscape vision that is opposed by Galician nationalist cultural elites (Paül, 2019). However, it has been highly influential and widely adopted in Galicia as a sort of self-representation, converging and merging with the first landscape narrative. Interestingly, such a vision has had a direct effect on the protected natural areas policy, with the first designations in the 1930s affecting coastal areas and a persisting trend to designate coastal lands as protected (including the only National Park designated in Galicia: Atlantic Islands of Galicia). Additionally, the Spanish tourism marketing — as well as the one developed in Galicia since devolution in the 1980s — has repeatedly promoted Galician coastlands as a destination, in contrast to inland areas that were not marketed until the 1990s, by means of the increasing attention paid to rural tourism and the Way of Saint James (Santos and Trillo, 2017).

Revealingly, the mountains located in inland Galicia have been largely blotted out from this genealogy of landscape imaginaries. Surprisingly, neither the Galician nor the Spanish nationalist vision has generated a mountainous landscape imaginary in Galicia, an awkward absence in itself given the relevance of mountain landscapes in western nations, as suggested above. However, this is not to say that there is no mention of mountains (for instance, in the artistic domain, mainly in literature), but they are particular and unstructured. A case in point is the almost lack of mountaineering in Galicia — in contrast with Spain as a whole, particularly in Madrid; and with Catalonia and the Basque Country, the other two main stateless nations within contemporary Spain, with a long history of very active mountaineering clubs (Martínez de Pisón and Álvaro 2002) —, although there are some humble

exceptions that will be partially considered in the next section. To sum up, the mountainous landscape is expected in western nations but Galicia has not followed this pattern until quite recently. This paper will consider when and how this emergence has taken place.

The Trevinca Massif

A vast region of more than 850 km² extends around the Trevinca peak without any settlements. The hamlet nearest to the peak, Ponte, is 8 km away as the crow flies, but this is an exception given that most of the hamlets are located more than 15 km from the peak, generating an empty region from a demographical perspective. This is due to the climate, which is extremely cold in winter and the region is covered by snow for several months (Figure 2). Inhabitants have only settled at lower altitudes. The highest hamlet in Galicia is Cepedelo (1340 m a.s.l.), more than 20 km from the Trevinca summit; above this altitude, permanent population has been historically unmanageable. The area is extremely sloping, making mobility difficult: the 8 km from Ponte to the peak have an elevational gradient of more than 1000 m.

[Figure 2 here]

The municipalities³ in this massif have been depopulated over the last century: demographics peaked in the 1930 Census, with 30,558 inhabitants, and nowadays the population living therein is 7,721 (2019) (Figure 3). Overall, there has been a 75% drop in 89 years. The most dramatic decrease has been experienced in the municipality of A Veiga, given that the population registered in 2019 was only 11% of the figure in 1930; indeed, there are currently 889 inhabitants distributed among 29 different hamlets, some of

them with only five or seven inhabitants (Figure 3).

[Figure 3 here]

From a landscape history perspective, these lands have been devoted to seasonal pastures at least since the Middle Ages, as on many other mountains (Cunha and Price 2013). During summer, thousands of cows and sheep grazed the mountains, enduring the consequences associated with wolves and other feral animals (Figure 4). During the snowy season, the livestock were sheltered in the hamlets or, by means of transhumance routes, transported hundreds of kilometers away. These activities required burning to keep the landscape clear of trees. These practices disappeared throughout the second half of the twentieth century and currently only some sporadic groups of cows are recorded as grazing in summer (Figure 4). However, even now all the land above 1400 m is deforested. In fact, one of the main ranges is named Serra Calva — “Swidden Range”, proof of this historical practice (Figures 4 and 5).

[Figure 4 here]

In terms of physical geography, the massif is centered on the Trevinca peak. From this nucleus, several ranges extend towards disperse cardinal points (Figure 5). During the recent ice age, there was an icefield located in this nucleus from which different glaciers spilled down into valleys, looking like tongues. The erosion caused by these valley glaciers created glacial lakes, including the biggest one on the Iberian Peninsula, Sanabria Lake, which is moraine-dammed.

[Figure 5 here]

The fact that these are the highest lands in Galicia was unclear for centuries.

Trevinca is first quoted in a document by the German geologist Schulz (1835, 7), who declared that “I have not figured out the heights of the different ranges [...] but in general I can say that the ranges in Galicia do not attain an extraordinary elevation [...]. Only Ancares and Trevinca [...] retain some snow until mid-summer” (our translation). Significantly, Schulz was dubious about the highest lands in Galicia (Ancares does not reach 2000 m in height). Another foreigner, also working in mining, was the first to measure the height of Trevinca in the early 1900s: the Belgian engineer Edgar d’Hoore, who managed the rich wolfram mines of the region. He is the first recorded mountaineer in the area and was known by Gonzalo Gurriarán, the founder of the first hiking club in Galicia in 1944 (Gurriarán 2005).

The context in which mountaineering was born in Galicia in general, and in the Trevinca Massif in particular, is ambiguous. The activities began in the 1940s, the first decade of the Franco dictatorship, which repressed Galician culture, language and identity. Although Gurriarán tried to involve the Galician elites, the hiking club was a modest one. There were continuous plans to open a ski resort, which never materialized (Paül et al. 2019). Some buildings in Fonte da Cova are the result of this pursuit (Figure 6). Additionally, the few Galician cultural activists who were active during Franco’s dictatorship were not keen on mountaineering, as the geographer Otero Pedrayo evidences: a well-known Galician nationalist, he was repeatedly invited to the mountains by Gurriarán in the 1940s-50s but he never went there, possibly because he did not feel that they matched his landscape imaginary, much dependent on de Castro’s canon (Paül 2019), as previously explained.

[Figure 6 here]

However, and despite the harsh context of Franco's dictatorship, in 1953 Gurriarán led a group to protest against the project to build an artificial dam on the Sanabria Lake moraine that would have destroyed the glacier-born landscape (Gurriarán 2005). Fortunately, the dam was never built and this was the beginning of a process to designate it a protected area. Eventually, the "Sanabria Lake and surroundings" area was designated a Natural Park in 1978 by the Spanish Government, covering part of the municipality of Galende (further extended to a wider area in 1990 and again in 2017; Figure 5).

Although the small group of mountaineers' perception of landscape understood Sanabria Lake to be the terminal moraine of the ancient glacier originated in the Trevinca peak — thus part of the Trevinca Massif — in the 1950s, the designated Park has been centered on the lake itself since the 1970s. In the late 1970s, after Franco's death, autonomous regions were created in Spain. Designating and managing protected areas became a power of these devolved regions. Thus, the Natural Park was transferred to the Castile and Leon Autonomous Region, the Trevinca massif being split between Galician territory (western half) and Leon territory (eastern half) (Figure 5). While in Galicia these mountains have not attracted attention, in the Natural Park counterpart, tourism development has escalated. The Galician side was unprotected until the EU impelled local authorities to designate areas as part of the Natura 2000 network.⁴ Under this initiative, the Galician Government designated a Site of Community Importance (SCI) named Trevinca, which was converted into a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in 2014 (Figure 5), with substantially weaker protection than a Natural Park.

Methodological Considerations

Following the conceptualization carried out above, “mountain as a category is not a ready-made resource, it has to be constructed” (Arpin and Cosson 2015, 63) as “a social [...] category” (Debarbieux 2004, 404). Rather than looking into this construction by examining materials such as texts or maps (e.g. Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Della Dora 2016), our approach favors interviewing. This is because Ruiz Olabuénaga (1999) understands that social constructivism has to be studied by means of this research technique.

Interviewees were selected due to having participated in “attribut[ing]” new “meanings” (Valentine 2005, 111) to the area. Additionally, in these interviews it was essential to comprehend “the processes which operate in particular social contexts” (Valentine 2005, 111) in order to gain a social dimension beyond mere personal considerations. The reader must account for the fact that one of the authors of the paper has been mountaineering in the region, as well as being a member of a local hikers’ club, for more than two decades, and the involvement of them both in developing the contents of a Visitors’ Centre for the region inaugurated in 2017, as reflecting a bias. On the other hand, this situation has facilitated easy access to several interviewees. Additionally, snowballing has been practiced to recruit other informants (Valentine 2005). It is essential to point out that interviewing does not seek representativeness (Ruiz Olabuénaga 1999; Valentine 2005).

36 in-person interviews were conducted from February to April 2017; 29 of them are considered meaningful for this paper. Their profiles are challenging as most have various roles; they can be clustered as follows: seven activists (mountaineers, environmentalists, etc.); seven entrepreneurs (mostly

in tourism, but not exclusively); six local politicians (five mayors and one deputy mayor); four civil servants working in local governments and five nature managers (managing the Natural Park or the SAC). We tried to include stakeholders from the nine municipalities of the area (Figure 5), 16 in Galicia and 13 in Castile and Leon. In eight cases they do not live therein but nearby or they have political/administrative roles with a direct impact on the area. In order to guarantee anonymity, real names have been omitted and substituted by invented names, occasionally changing the genders. Most of these interviews have already been interpreted, in a paper solely focused on tourism, by Paül et al. (2019).

A semi-structured interviewing schedule was created following Ruiz Olabuénaga's (1999), Kitchin and Tate's (2000) and Valentine's (2005) conventions. The words "mountain(s)" and "Trevinca" were deliberately avoided to encourage participants to freely refer to these concepts (Cameron 2016). Through 25-30 questions phrased as "Tell me about", four themes were embraced:

- perceptions of the region;
- identification of people, institutions, organizations, etc. working in the region, to detect actors and networks;
- assessment of the role played by the public sector, particularly related to policies impacting and promoting the region; and
- presence of an administrative limit between Galicia and Castile and Leon, trying to clarify to what extent there might be a divergence between both sides of the border.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour and, with permission, were recorded and transcribed. This material has been analyzed by means of open coding, both emic and etic (Crang 2005; Cope 2016). These codes are the basis for the results section of this paper, which are structured into three narratives obtained from semiotic clustering, carried out according to Crang (2005). The quotes are our translation.

Results

The narratives are an interpretation of a consistent set of analytical codes regarding the Trevinca massif. Interviewees are not grouped by narratives because one interviewee may refer to codes attributed to different narratives. From a spatial perspective, we have inferred that each narrative has taken shape on particular hiking trails, embracing specific spatial ways of conceiving, planning and managing them (Figure 7).

[Figure 7 here]

Wilderness Highlands to Be Mountaineered and Deserving Integral Protection

The first narrative is based on the understanding of these mountains as areas of wilderness, with limited human intervention:

“It is an isolated area, without roads, [...] and, above all, undoubtedly for me, still pristine. [...] I walk every day [...] and for me it is like seeing a garden” [Elvia].

“I would define the area as the last natural paradise [...]. Because there are some areas that are practically inaccessible, that still hold the essence of the mountain nature” [Xoel].

These mountains are also seen as the perfect setting for achieving solitude and personal introspection:

“The highlands, mountainous, are spectacular. They amaze me. [...] The other day I was in [an upper valley], I stopped walking... and I couldn't hear anything at all: simply the sound of nature [...]. A place to get lost... or to find yourself” [André].

“I often hike in the mountains. [...] It is relaxing, it helps me. [...] It is a therapy that I recommend” [Iago].

Accordingly, the pivotal way to delve into the region is walking. In this sense, trails are relevant to access what is considered the soul of the region: the Trevinca peak. A revealing initiative, signposted in the early 2000s but not officially approved as a GR,⁵ was the Trevinca Massif trail (Figure 7), a 135 km walk inspired by the well-known *Tour du Mont Blanc randonnée*:

“Knowing the idea of the Mont Blanc Massif, [...] it could [...] interrelate all the places in the region [...] always in the lowlands [of the massif] [...]. This trail, afterwards, should have a kind of access to the highest parts, to the summits. [...] 3-4 small huts were planned, open, for hikers [...]. [In some parts] the trail allows the view of Trevinca on the horizon, fantastic, [...] you see Trevinca covered in snow” [Filipe].

Trevinca as a peak and the mountainous nature of the region are seen as central both to regional identity and at an international level (Figure 8):

“Trevinca is the highest summit in Galicia, [...] a distinguishing mark for the region” [Brandán]; “[Trevinca] is the meeting point. It is like the symbol that has all the meaning there inside for us” [Tomé]. In this respect, the notion of “Galician Highlands” as a brand was conceived in this instance, a label that was subsequently appropriated by a particular local government, as will be explained later.

[Figure 8 here]

The extension of these highlands knows no borders. The massif is seen as a whole: “I don’t believe in borders. I don’t believe that beyond Trevinca [...] something different begins [...]. There is continuity between both sides [...] [T]he region [...] is the same” [Tomé].

Hence, a Natural Park for the whole region is upheld. Taking into account that there is no cross-border cooperation in place and that the Galician side has not been designated, it seems essential that the massif as a whole attains common protection: “I would like this to be designated an inter-regional Natural Park. [...] We have a mountain that is shared, forests that are shared, rivers, valleys, lakes... it is the same!” [Catuxa].

Trevinca Mountains as a Tourism Resource Appropriated by A Veiga’s Local Government

It is highly revealing that some interviewees, when mentioning “Trevinca”, do not refer to the mountain(s), but to the unbuilt ski resort mentioned earlier.

“Trevinca was the most important project [discussed in the early 2000s] [...], but in the end, nothing came of it. They wanted to build a ski resort or something like that” [Roi].

“Then we had a project for Trevinca, but there was nowhere to accommodate visitors, and with this story about Trevinca [...] [it was possible] to develop tourism” [Olalla].

This is evidence of a vision conceiving the massif as a potential tourism attraction ready to be intensively developed. Improving accessibility is a milestone of this narrative:

“The ski resort was a blow to the whole area. [...] It was just an initial rallying point, and from there... [...] I think the only potential for this area is to first have good road infrastructure [...]. And attract tourists” [Sabela].

We identify two spatial scales attached to this conception. The first is older, from the early 2000s, and consisted of a LEADER project managed by several local governments belonging to both autonomous regions (Figure 9). Fundamentally devoted to tourism, the project initially focused on the ski resort; when this did not happen, it diversified amongst several tourism accommodation investments: “With that project we decided to develop hotels and rural tourism businesses to attract more tourists” [Olalla].

[Figure 9 here]

Given that this LEADER device was led by A Veiga’s Local Government, this municipality has gained momentum, increasingly attaching its toponym to Trevinca. Although the massif is shared between different municipalities, A Veiga is making more profit from Trevinca, understood as a resource, with the declared object of converting it into an economic product. A Veiga’s Local Government used “Galician Highlands”, an expression originally from mountaineering (see above), to promote the municipality in the 2000s and, throughout the 2010s, it has consistently marketed the area. A case in point is the achievement of the “Starlight Destination” label⁶ for the municipality of A Veiga with the name “Trevinca-A Veiga” (Figure 10). This designation has attracted widespread attention:

“The only one [local government] who made it [in the tourism industry, within the region at large] is A Veiga with its Starlight certification. [...] I think it [the Starlight campaign] will be very beneficial; it will make

the area known, whether directly or indirectly it is going to help the area [...]. It's a form of advertising" [Brais].

[Figure 10 here]

In 2016, A Veiga's Local Government funded three GRs. They reach the summit of Trevinca from different hamlets of the municipality, and are the first signs that have been blazed in the highest part of the mountains (Figure 7). Beyond tourism, these developments in A Veiga embrace other sectors by means of converting Trevinca into a trademark:

"The marketing and promotion of an area encompasses everything. Today a liter of honey is worth more [because it is labeled 'Trevinca'] [...]. Once we have created the Trevinca brand, all tourism, livestock, honey... products with this trademark will increase in value" [Hadrián].

These advances, led by A Veiga's Local Government, are discursively placed under the sustainability approach; however, some interviewees point out that they are incompatible with increasing levels of nature protection: "[The designation of the Natural Park] might be led by [A Veiga's] Local Government, but they are not willing to face hunters" [Xil].

The Sanabria Lake Natural Park as a Tourism Destination, with Trevinca as a Distant Peak Constituting the Border with Galicia

This narrative refers to the same landscape, but from the other side, instead of from a Galician perspective. The massif is seen as a remote and inaccessible area:

"Getting there is very difficult. [...] Trevinca is the distant aim for many people [...]. It is the highest peak, the place which is furthest away. It

requires an effort. It is an emblematic place for a lot of people, as it is challenging, and not a lot of people go there” [Martíño].

These mountains are perceived as tough, as an endeavor because of the hard environmental conditions:

“[To get to Trevinca] is the longest trail in terms of time that we have here [...], eight to ten hours. [...] You must be very careful” [Xonxa].
 “A footbridge has fallen in the mountains [...] and in the mountains this [the infrastructure] is constantly damaged” [Millao].

This perspective of mountains being far away is derived from an understanding of the Sanabria Lake as the center of the region. From a tourism perspective, the lake might be connected with the mountains in the future:

“We should encourage visitors to leave the lake and go to other places. [...] [The mountains] have a large capacity to receive visitors” [Martíño].

“The Government of Castile and Leon is discussing installing a cable car [connecting the lake level, 1050 m, with the top of a neighboring hill, 1600 m] [...]. This would give the area a boost, it would become an important attraction, revitalizing the hamlets” [Nuno].

The notion that these mountains are foreseen as part of an expanded tourism destination is consistent with the general agreement that the lake itself has been over-touristified, experiencing what is labeled as “mass tourism” [Filipe]: “There are more and more bars, hostels, hotels... and everything is competition. There are activities that there didn’t use to be [...]. It’s too much” [Xonxa].

The Park has marked a GR structuring the protected area without connections with the environs (Figures 7 and 11). Accordingly, the Park does not interact with Galicia: “Relations [with Galicia] are... scant. [...] We

should have more cooperation [...] as it is the same area, it is exactly the same” [Martíño]. Trevinca becomes, then, a dividing, and even invisible, mountain: “[Trevinca] is the peak that divides us” [Paulo]; “There are people living here [...] who have never been to [...] Trevinca nor do they even know that it exists” [Tomé].

[Figure 11 here]

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper analyzes the discursive emergence of the Galician Highlands as a spatial imaginary, trying to expound whether this leads towards a new Galician national landscape of its own and/or whether this responds to global forces. Three narratives have been found from interviewing, contributing unequally to this construction, as will be further argued. Each one of them seems consistent with either one or several of the western imaginaries regarding mountains, as outlined by Debarbieux (2004) and Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010), amongst others.

Firstly, the narrative understanding the massif as a place of wilderness to be protected because of its outstanding natural and spiritual values is in accordance with the enlightened and romantic imaginaries of the mountains — i.e. the era of the western “invention of the mountain” (Joutard 1986; Short 1991; Martínez de Pisón and Álvaro 2002; Sacareau 2003; Debarbieux 2004; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010). The association with mountaineering is highly relevant, not only in sportive terms — e.g. hiking — but, more transcendently, in the sense of establishing emotional connections (Martínez de Pisón and Álvaro 2002; Nogué and Vicente 2004; Bernbaum and Price

2013). There is also a link with the wilderness vision (Short 1991; Cronon 1995; Depraz 2008; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Woods 2011; Debarbieux 2019). A further connection relates to the global mountain imaginary (Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Price and Kohler 2013), as evidenced in Figure 8.

This first narrative might have connections with nationalist arguments in accordance with theorizations by authors such as Nogué and Vicente (2004), Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010), Herb (2018) and Paül (2019). However, we only find a feeble vindication in this regard from the mountaineering precedents of the 1940s-50s, developed in tough political circumstances that complicated the creation and dissemination of cultural products (Figure 12), as found in other cases analyzed by Martínez de Pisón and Álvaro (2002), Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010) and Della Dora (2016). Moreover, nowadays, there is only a very moderate use of Galician national symbols — such as the flag — in current mountaineering activities. A possible underlying factor is that, contrary to other countries (Nogué and Vicente 2004; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Herb, 2018), Galicia lacks its own landscape tradition linked to mountains from a national perspective, as explained in a specific contextual section of this paper devoted to the Galician national landscape imaginaries.

[Figure 12 here]

The “Galician Highlands” notion was conceived in this first instance. Interestingly, this notion was named to resonate with Galician identity concerns — in an attempt to enable the massif to be assumed at the national level. Ironically, the notion can only be understood within some immanent

global connections, as the acknowledged inspiration is the Scottish region toponym, confirming that the Scottish Highlands landscape construction has had a powerful capacity to frame a spiritual notion of distinctiveness at a world scale (Perkins 2006; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010). In any case, the spread of this spatial category has been developed in the context of the second narrative, thus becoming a social imaginary, as the first narrative has had a humble capacity to influence wider imaginaries.

Secondly, the narrative conceiving the Trevinca Massif as a potential resource appropriated by political entities, especially for tourism purposes, matches the modernist imaginary of mountains as policy-making regions for developing economic activities (Majoral 1997; Pujadas and Font 1998; Debarbieux 2004; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010). In this context, the Trevinca 2000-2006 LEADER device can be read as an institutionalization of mountain regions, described by Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010) and McMorran et al. (2015). However, in the 2010s, this massif-scale LEADER device vanished and the narrative has since been monopolized by A Veiga's Local Government, which has equalized the municipality with the massif as a whole.

Although we have found attempts to mobilize the primary sector based on the mountain notion, tourism is central to this second narrative. Beyond Paül et al.'s (2019) examination of the emergence of Trevinca-A Veiga as a tourism destination, this research bears witness to the ability of tourism to determine a spatial imaginary, commodifying a rural landscape (Tonts and Greive 2002; Perkins 2006; Woods 2011). By means of marketing, labeling development and meetings of popular influencers on social networks, A Veiga's Local Government has been able to position Trevinca and the Galician

Highlands at a Galicia-wide level and even to promote the mountains as a landmark for Galicia abroad (Figure 13). Additionally, with the Starlight brand, global marketing has been reinforced and now the area is proudly part of a worldwide network of certified regions without light pollution.⁷ This is a worthy addition to the literature on mountain tourism (e.g. Nepal and Chipeniuk 2005; Price and Kohler 2013); hence, tourism should not only be understood as an economic activity in the mountains, but also as a relevant procedure to create and impel their spatial imaginaries, implying a global dimension.

[Figure 13 here]

Thirdly, the Sanabria Lake-centered narrative responds to the inception of protection devices in mountain areas (Depraz 2008; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Price and Kohler 2013; Arpin and Cosson 2015). This confirms the capacity of protected areas, especially National and Natural Parks, to create discourses that can become spatial imaginaries. The development of this narrative clearly places tourism in its core but spatially over-focusing on the lake, with limited capacity to incorporate the massif. Although we acknowledge a will to access Trevinca and the highest areas, the narrative itself favors a vision of the mountains as remote, difficult and so forth.

There is an inherent tension between the first narrative and the third one, as the former demands more protection by only allowing harmless forms of hiking, while the latter envisages infrastructure and investments linked to increasing levels of tourism. This confirms the widespread contest between tourism and protection, resulting in multiple solutions (Nepal and Chipeniuk 2005; Depraz 2008; Price and Kohler 2013; Arpin and Cosson 2015).

This third narrative can also be interpreted under the lens of the interaction between borders and mountains. Indeed, this narrative does not participate in the social imaginary of the Galician Highlands, as it is detached from Galicia. In other words, although the Galician nationalist construction is feeble, as explained above, it has ultimately contributed to the spatial divorce dividing the massif into two parts: the western part has become, in a sense, a “nationalized landscape” and the eastern part is basically a Natural Park. Past case studies report the disputed notion of “natural borders” coinciding with mountains (Sahlins 1990; Debarbieux and Rudaz 2010; Fall 2010), but this research makes it evident that this is an immanent, ongoing debate. In fact, the contrast between [Paulo] saying Trevinca divides, while [Tomé] believing it unites is highly revealing.

The separation between the emergent imaginary of the Galician Highlands within Galicia, on the one hand, and the Sanabria Lake Natural Park, on the other, bears witness to the lack of cooperation between neighboring devolved autonomous governments within Spain, as already described by Romero (2009; 2012). In fact, the first narrative analyzed here suggests the idea of global protection for the massif as a whole. Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010), Balsiger and Nahrath (2015), Chester (2015) and Debarbieux, Price and Balsiger (2015) have reported cases where mountains have been the instance for cooperation. Why this is possible between neighboring countries but not in our case-study area, where the border corresponds to an internal limit between two devolved territorial entities within Spain, remains an open question.

The overall interpretation of the obtained narratives does not dispute the model of western succession of mountain imaginaries by Debarbieux (2004) and Debarbieux and Rudaz (2010). However, we stress that this background literature does not take into consideration the narratives obtained from interviewing, reducing the ability to capture nuances and contradictions on the ground, as expected by Ruiz Olabuénaga (1999) and Valentine (2005). In fact, the dominant literature on mountain imaginaries seems largely based on elitist cultural products. However, “to prevent the social imaginary from being a kind of floating abstraction with a vague status, it has to be attached to concrete practices, including those of individual imagination” (Debarbieux 2019, 4). We therefore conclude that in order to grasp social imaginaries regarding the mountains and their national and/or global adscriptions, it is essential to start from the views of individuals. Importantly, we also infer that imaginations can have a material consequence, as expressed in Figure 7, where every hiking trail is the shape of a particular narrative.

This paper has shown that the emergence of the Galician Highlands as a new socio-spatial imaginary about Galicia responds to two interrelated processes. On the one hand, the overall preference for coastal and farming landscapes in Galicia is being nuanced with the appearance of the mountainous landscape that we have analyzed here. Hence, the Galician national landscape imaginaries are experiencing a reconfiguration in relation to the inherited visions discussed above. On the other hand, the rise of the Galician Highlands construct has been impelled by global forces, namely tourism and branding for promotion purposes. In this regard, the ultimate construction of a new national landscape for Galicia based on mountains,

although using some national attributes (e.g. the name of Galicia itself), seems more related to the need of positioning Galicia internationally, embracing an inherent global dimension. In the end, it can be asserted that Galicia has been incorporated into the club of many western countries with a mountain imaginary. Thus, the recent materialization of a deliberate artistic project on Galician mountains, led by photographer Fernández Pérez de Lis (2017), evidences that the mountains — with Trevinca at the forefront — have definitively become a Galician spatial imaginary.

Notes

1. Following Debarbieux (2004), the attention here concentrates on western countries, although the West is a very problematic concept (Lewis and Wigen 1997).
2. Under LEADER, specific rural regions are selected to encourage development projects and actions based on local strategies.
3. Except in the case of Porto, the other municipalities have more than one hamlet in their local government area. In order to refer to the area as a whole, we favor the municipal scale (with nine municipalities shown in Figures 3 and 5).
4. An EU network of protected areas. Despite the alleged consistency across the EU, protection is a national (in Spain, regional) responsibility. See https://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/index_en.htm
5. GR is the acronym for *Grande Randonnée* in French, a European-wide system of official long-distance footpaths blazed with characteristic marks

consisting of white and red stripes.

6. It is awarded by the Starlight Foundation (Institute of Astrophysics of the Canary Islands).

7. <https://www.fundacionstarlight.org/en/section/list-of-starlight-tourist-destinations/293.html>

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