High Altitude Climbing: A Small Window on the Processes and Consequences of Globalization

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Abstract

From an historical set of cases of climbing the highest peaks in the world, we describe how as economic capital was increasingly used, it shaped the relations among the actors in ways that led them to fail to recognize the consequences that arose as it was substituted for more localized forms of capital. We argue that this is not a simple story of domination or a lapse in “rationality,” but an outcome generated by the relations of power between actors and the forms of capital that they possess. This research raises the issue of the practical and political challenges of representing the value of more localized forms of capital in exchanges that are becoming increasingly “globalized.”

(Key Words: Globalization, Unintended Consequences, Disasters, Forms of Capital, Misrecognition, High Altitude Climbing).
1.0 Introduction

The primary goal of this paper is to provide a small window on some of the processes and consequences that lie within the larger phenomena of globalization. What is clear is that our world is becoming more interdependent and tightly linked across locales, countries and cultures. Producers and consumers are now more easily connected and the apparent “efficiency” has meant a movement away from localized or institutional relations toward more market-based or commodified relations. This has grown significantly over the last few decades in the industrialized world—but now is beginning to take place on a more global scale. Clearly these changes generate consequences, some of them not positive. Further, to learn more about why certain disasters or “unintended consequences” occur, it is necessary to understand the structural and historical forces that underlie them. In this paper we take a more structural approach so as to not force the complete burden of explaining disasters on more psychological explanations (i.e., “a collapse of sensemaking;” Weick, 1993). Like some research in organization studies, notably Perrow (1984), Shrivastava (1987), Gephart (1993), we pay particular attention to the structural antecedents of disasters.

To address these issues we describe a specific social practice in which exchanges have become more “commodified” and the groups involved have found it difficult to recognize their role in the negative consequences that exist. We use a set of historical cases from the field of high altitude climbing (peaks over 8000 meters or 26,240 feet) to provide a small window to view some of the processes and consequences of globalization. Conceptually we draw upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1980; Bourdieu 1994) using his concepts of “field,” “capital” and “social trajectory” to offer an explanation of the forces at play in the changing social arena.
of high altitude climbing. In particular we examine how as new and valued forms of capital move into a social “field,” it becomes a source of power that alters the relations among actors in the social arena and can generate negative consequences, many of them unintended. The critical question that we seek to explain is why the negative consequences that are generated are often so hard to recognize by the actors involved.

To address this question, we identify a major change that occurred in the field of high altitude climbing starting in the 1980’s. Before the 1980’s, climbers and Sherpa porters were the key actors on high altitude climbs. As a collective group they possessed similar types and amounts of physical ability and skills in using equipment and experience climbing in teams at high altitudes. Beginning in the 1980’s a new actor—the paying client—assumed an important role that dramatically altered the approach to how high altitude mountains were climbed. These clients exchanged economic capital for the climbing abilities that only experienced climbers and Sherpas could provide. The presence of this new actor caused a shift from more localized relations between Western climbers and Sherpas who shared similar practices and experiences, to more commodified exchanges between paying clients and climbers/guides and Sherpas. This change required guides and Sherpas to assume new roles and to work together in new ways (i.e., tightly coupled systems with a sharp division of labor) to improve their capability to deliver the “highest peaks on the planet” (Krakauer 1997) to these paying clients. Today the ease of exchanging economic capital for more localized forms of capital and the mutual dependency present has made it hard for the actors involved to recognize the negative consequences that have continued to occur on high altitude peaks, even after significant disasters on Everest and other high altitude peaks in 1996 and 1997. The critical issue to understand is not that negative consequences arise, but to provide a sociological explanation about how and why when relations
between groups become commodified it often blinds the actors to their role in generating these consequences.

In what follows we first provide an introduction to the conceptual framework that will be used in our analysis. Second, we present the historical cases in two phases—the pre-client phase (before the 1980’s) and the client phase. Third, we compare the pre-client and client phase, using our conceptual framework to explain how actors, their respective forms of capital and their relations, generate many of the consequences observed in the field of high altitude climbing.

2.0 Theoretical and Conceptual Framing

To understand the changes that have occurred in high altitude climbing, it is important to explain the relations between the actors and how and why those relations changed over time. We use Bourdieu’s generative structural sociology (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 11) to describe these relations in terms of the historical “positions and re-positioning” of the actors involved in the field high altitude climbing. To describe this historical process of change we refer to three key concepts: field, capital and trajectory.

Field (Bourdieu 1980; 1990) is a concept used to describe a spatial-temporal arena where actors occupy different positions relative to each other based on the abilities and resources they possess. For a field to exist, actors must recognize that there is something of value to be claimed through participating in the field. In high altitude climbing, the summit is most valued by the actors involved. Less visible, but still associated with the summit are being able to do something that one loves (i.e., climbing), for Sherpas earning extra money to send your son to a local school, and acquiring the status given to one who has attained the summit. What actors’ value is “at stake” because there are risks associated in claiming it—otherwise it would not be of great
value. Actors then must possess some power or capital by which they can lay claim to what is of value to them.

**Capital** (Bourdieu 1977; 1980; 1990) refers to the skills, abilities and resources that allow an individual or group to wield influence and power over what is at stake in a given field. Bourdieu distinguishes between different forms of capital to acknowledge the different sources that individuals use to influence and claim what is of value to them. In the case of high altitude climbing we distinguish between three forms of capital—technical, social, and economic. Technical capital is defined by the specific skills that a person has developed in using modern climbing equipment, knowing the right climbing procedures and techniques under a variety of condition, and having sufficient physical strength and endurance to endure challenging physical conditions. This form of capital accrues as a function of climbing at high altitudes, oxygen deprivation, and extreme weather, which demands significant physical endurance. By social capital we refer to the experience and abilities in working with other climbers in a coordinated fashion, often in teams. Given the risks of climbing in a team at high altitude, the hallmarks of team skills include flexibility and responsiveness among members under difficult circumstances that are often unforeseen. Economic capital is the financial resources that an actor has accumulated or has access to that can be applied to the field. By comparison, technical and social capital are highly localized because they can only be accumulated through the practice of climbing high altitude peaks, usually within teams of highly skilled “communities-of-practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991), whereas economic capital can be accumulated through many different locales outside of high altitude climbing and exchanged for the other two.

To connect the “positions” and “re-positioning” of actors to the concepts of field and capital, Bourdieu invokes the image of a social **trajectory** (Bourdieu 1983). The position of each
actor along their trajectory is the current outcome generated through their use of the various forms of capital that they possess to claim what is of value for them. The position of each actor occupies in the field, their trajectory, is also generated by their relations to other actors in the field. For simplicity sake, we can think of two actors. The position of each actor at any given point in time is a combination of accumulations of various forms of capital that they possess in relation to each other as they claim what is of value to them in the field. To think about the repositioning of actors, we need to identify how the relative positions of the actors influence each other and cause changes in the field over time. Each trajectory and the relative positions that they collectively generate are not impartial because individuals are inclined to follow what their accumulated skills and abilities (capital) affords them to claim. This connection between capital and trajectory helps us see why the skills and abilities that people acquire are “at stake” and that individuals who possess them are inclined to move along a trajectory where those abilities can improve their position over time. However, these trajectories are not rigid, but can be altered as actors interact as they try to claim what is of value to them. This position and repositioning of an actor defines their trajectory overtime.

In our analysis of the field of high altitude climbing, the positions of these trajectories across actors are important, as are how these trajectories change and alter the nature of the field itself. We are interested in understanding how, as new actors bring in a new forms of capital and their associated abilities (how they claim value) and inclinations (what they value), the relations among the actors changes the field.

3.0 The Data: Historical Cases on the Field of High Altitude Climbing

Climbing at altitude is generally defined as climbing at heights above 6,000 meters or 19,680 feet. At such heights the human body begins to deteriorate because of a lack of sufficient
oxygen. Climbing at heights above 7,500M/24,600FT or the “death zone” can only be done safely for a few days because the human body begins to slowly die of oxygen deprivation. It was not until the early 1900’s when “Western” climbers began to gain access to the Himalayan peaks in Tibet, Nepal, China, India (and Pakistan), that humans began to consistently climb at high altitudes. This Himalayan region possesses all of the highest peaks in the world, over 450 higher than 7,000M/22,960FT. Those that have drawn the most attention of mountaineers, are an elite set of fourteen peaks all over 8,000 meters, ranging from 8,013M/26,289FT to 8,850M/29,035FT. Before access to the Himalayas, mountain climbing expeditions had been limited to the European Alps and peaks in North and South America. In those areas most peaks are only 4,200M/14,000FT to 5,000M/15,000FT with a few above 6,000 meters such as Mount McKinley (6,194M/20,320FT) in Alaska and Aconcagua (6,962M/22,841FT) in Argentina.

The high altitude pre-client era started in 1902 with the first “organized” attempt of an 8,000 meter peak (K2). Efforts to climb 8,000 meter peaks in the pre-client era can be separated in two distinct phase—attempts between 1902 and 1940 and attempts after 1949. The years between 1940 and 1949 almost all high altitude climbing was suspended because of the events of WWII. Before 1940, all fourteen 8,000 meter peaks had been attempted but none successfully climbed. From 1949 to 1960 all 14 of these elite peaks had been successfully climbed. This difference in success was due not only to the accumulated experience associated with climbing under such extreme conditions, but also to World War II that brought significant technological improvements in terms of light-weight gear and more dependable oxygen equipment. In the early 1980’s we begin to see the birth of the client-based system which became full fledged in the 1990’s.
To outline the historical changes in the field of high altitude climbing we have selected five major case studies. The first three occurred during the pre-client era and the last two during the client based era. From the pre-client era, the first two cases were attempts on K2, the second highest peak in the world (8,611M/28,250FT), in 1938 and 1939. They offer an interesting comparison since the first was considered one of the greatest successes of team climbing at the time and the later one of the worst climbing disasters before WWII. The 1939 expedition of K2 is particularly interesting because it is one of the few examples in the pre-client era where wealthy (i.e., economic capital), but inexperience climbers participated in a climb to fund the expedition. The third case in the pre-client era that we use is the first successful climb of Mt. Everest (8,850M/29,035FT) in 1953. To begin the client era we discuss the emergence of the client-based system beginning with Dick Bass’s four year effort to summit the highest peaks on 7 different continents which successfully ended in 1985. We then discuss the May 1996 Everest disaster as an example of the structural failure that arises when economic capital is easily and systematically exchanged for more local forms of skill and competence.

3.1 The Pre-Client Era

K2 Expedition (1938)

In 1938, an American climber, Charles Houston, led a K2 expedition that was organized by the American Alpine Club. Although second to Everest in height, from a technical climbing perspective K2 has always been considered by some to be the ultimate high altitude mountaineering challenge. Houston’s primary mission was to reconnoiter the mountain and establish a route that either his team or the next year’s team could use to reach the top. He was a 25-year-old medical student who had climbed in the Alps and Alaska and who had achieved the first ascent of Nanda Devi in 1936 (7816M/25,645FT), which until 1950 was the highest peak
ever climbed. Curran (1995, pp. 74) notes that Houston was an excellent climbing leader and that his previous expeditions, including the one to Nanda Devi, had been a model of democratic decision-making and cohesive teamwork.

On this expedition, Houston assembled an excellent team of experienced climbers. By July 1, he and the team had reached Camp 1. By July 18, he and another American climber, Paul Petzholdt, reached the shoulder of the mountain at 7,740M after having established a camp at 7,530M. On July 21, just above Camp VII at 7,925M with a clear sky and warm sunshine, they were in an excellent position to make a try for the summit. After climbing for several hours through waist-deep powder and carrying heavy oxygen equipment, they reached a height of 8,210M and then decided to retreat “safely and methodically” (Curran 1995, pp. 79) down to Camp V. This was a decision that Houston and his team did not regret, according to Curran (1995) in part because they were not in it “for fame or glory” (Curran 1995, pp. 78). Since they had been successful at reconnoitering what many still consider to be the most challenging of all high altitude peaks, they decided as a team to summit only if conditions were perfect. Today, even though they did not successfully summit K2, their climb is still recognized as a remarkable achievement, in part because they collaborated well as a team, accomplished and stayed within the goals of their mission, and did not suffer any casualties.

K2 Expedition (1939)

Events on K2 unfolded very differently in 1939. Fritz Wiessner, an American of German decent and the president of the American Alpine Club, was the expeditionary leader. He was extremely competent as a climber and authoritarian in leadership style. Unlike Houston’s team in 1938, Wiessner’s team consisted of many individuals who lacked climbing experience and skill; many of the more experienced climbers withdrew “for compelling excuses but underneath there was a
feeling that Wiessner’s personality was a common problem” (Curran 1995: 82). Many were in their early 20’s and students at Dartmouth College. Money to fund the expedition also became a critical issue and many of the climbers who participated were chosen more on the basis of their ability to fund the expedition than on their climbing expertise. For example, Jack Durrance, was a pre-medical student from Dartmouth College. He was supported by a grant from the American Alpine Club, and had some technical climbing experience in the Teton Mountains in the United States. Another climber on the team, Dudley Wolfe, was a wealthy socialite “seriously rich, described by his nephew as ‘being like something out of Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby’. He had all the playboy toys, had taken to skiing, then mountaineering at which we was enthusiastic but almost totally without ability. It frequently took two guides to haul his ungainly bulk up easy climbs” (Curran 1985, pp. 82-83).

Their progress to K2 and preparation for the final assault had been slowed by a series of miscommunications and delays. Because of this Wiesser pushed the team very hard, often leading the team from the front as opposed to the rear as was customary at the time. Throughout the climb, Dudley Wolfe labored hard to keep up with Wiessner and, by the time he reached Camp VI, had signs of frostbite on his feet—a sign which should have “spelt out the need for an immediate retreat” (Curran 1995, pp. 86). But Wolfe, not recognizing how serious this was, did not call attention to his injury until they had reached Camp VIII. Having established Camps I through VII at the same places as the 1938 expedition, the team established Camp VIII at 7,710M. Wolfe remained at Camp VIII while Wiessner and his highly regarded Sherpa climbing Sirdar (head Sherpa), Pasang Kikuli, established Camp IX and on the next day pushed for the summit.
After an arduous all day climb, they reached 8,380M by 6pm. Wiessner argued for continuing to the top and, given the highly favorable weather conditions, descending by moonlight. Pasang refused to go any further, however, saying it was too late in the day. Wiessner finally gave in and together they returned to Camp IX at 2:30 am, completely exhausted. The next morning they went down to Camp VIII and met with Wolfe, who told them he had not been resupplied from Camp VII. At that point, all three of them decided to descend to Camp VII, which was supposed to be well equipped with supplies. Upon arriving, however, they found that it had been abandoned and lacked supplies.

Still anxious to try for the summit, on the July 22nd Wiessner decided to leave Wolfe at Camp VII so that he and Pasang could more rapidly move down the mountain to get badly needed supplies. To their complete surprise, however, they discovered that all the other camps down to Camp II had likewise been abandoned. On July 24, Wiessner and Pasang finally reached Base Camp where they discovered that the entire organization had fallen apart. From a combination of inexperience, miscommunication and altitude sickness, Jack Durrance had misinterpreted a note from the deputy leader of the expedition, to bring down to Base Camp as many tents and sleeping bags as he could in preparation for the arrival of a group of porters. Believing that there were still Sherpas and supplies high up on the mountain above Camp IV, Durrance complied. Unfortunately, however, the Sherpa porters above Camp IV had not kept supplies moving upward and, given a lack of contact from anyone above Camp VII for four days, had come to believe that Wiessner, Pasang, and Wolfe were all dead. Like Durrance below them, in their inexperience, they decided to bring down sleeping bags and supplies “obeying their natural instincts which (were) to go down and go home” (Curran 1995, pp. 92). Wiessner was furious.
On July 29, three Sherpas, including Pasang, set out to rescue Wolfe and found him, “still alive but in a bad way;” he had been at Camp VII for almost seven days since Wiessner had left him. Wolfe was conscious but refused to go down and asked that they return the next day when he would be ready to leave. Resupplying him, the three Sherpas descended to Camp VI where it stormed for the entire next day. After documenting what had happened, finally on July 31, they again set out for Camp VII to rescue Wolfe. For reasons that remain unexplained, however, they were never heard from again. In all, four members of the Wiessner’s expedition party died on K2. For the rest of Wiessner’s life, he was vilified for his role in the death of the four members of his climbing party (Curran 1995).

**Everest Expedition (1953)**

In the 1920’s and 1930’s British mountaineers made several attempts to reach the summit of Everest. When, in 1952, a team of Swiss mountaineers was almost successful in reaching the summit of Everest, it came as a surprise and source of concern to the British. Because of a number of factors—the coming coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, their fear that other countries might summit first, their easy access to Everest by virtue of their colonization of Nepal—the British were very motivated to launch an expedition in 1953. It came as a surprise to many when Colonel John Hunt, a military officer known for his organizational rather than mountaineering skills, was chosen over Eric Shipton, a popular expedition leader, famous for his earlier exploration of the Himalayas.

Like Houston in 1938, Hunt put together a very strong team, regarded by many as the best climbers in all the Commonwealth countries. In a very organized and well-planned fashion, the expedition team made its way to Everest and established a new route through the dangerous Khumbu Icefall and the South Face of Lhotse. Hunt’s plan to reach the summit was as follows:
The summit parties should be two in number. There were good reasons for increasing this to three or even four, but the ever-dominant supply limitations ruled this out. Each summit party must be supported by other climbers below, helping to carry the loads, ready to receive them on return from their climb, capable of going to their help in an emergency. The second assault must follow closely on the first. The size of, and supplies at, the highest camps on the mountain being restricted by the carrying problem, the minimum time interval between the assaults must be twenty-four hours. Thus the second party would in a sense be in support of the first, as well as preparing to carry through to the summit if the first party failed. (Hunt 1954, pp. 137)

On May 26, two climbers, Charles Evans and Tom Bourdillon, made the first summit attempt. By 1 PM they had gone beyond the Swiss high point from the previous year to the South Summit at 8,750 M/28,700 FT. However, their oxygen equipment began to malfunction, and they determined that, with an unknown route to the summit, they would have to return in darkness if they continued on; therefore, they decided not to try for the summit. Since the expeditionary goal was to achieve a successful summit, Hunt’s scheme dictated that the next day a new pair of climbers would try. In this case the pair was Edmund Hillary, a New Zealander, and Tenzing Norgay, from Nepal. After a supply team left Camp VII at 8:45am on May 27, Hillary and Norgay left about 75 minutes later. The supply team dropped supplies at a flat spot at 8,500M/27,900FT and returned to a lower camp while Hillary and Tenzing pitched their tent and set up a high camp in preparation for an early morning try for the summit. At dawn the next day, Hillary and Norgay used their small cooker to melt snow for water and to thaw Hillary’s frozen boots. By 6:30am they had started towards the summit, reaching the South Summit by 9am. After traversing a very difficult ridge, they reached a rocky step, now known as the Hillary Step, and successfully climbed the approximately 40 feet. By 11:30am they had reached the summit.

Similar to Houston’s expedition on K2 in 1938, the Everest expedition was marked flexibility and interdependence. When Evans and Bourdillon were unsuccessful on the
expedition’s first attempted ascent, it was logical that Hillary and Norgay be given the next opportunity to summit. The primary objective of the expedition was to reach the summit. This required a willingness and ability of other climbers to abide by the system, support other team members, and manage any personal jealousy or disappointment. Since the teams on both the Everest and the K2 (1938) expeditions were made up of individuals who have similar skills and abilities, it allowed them to be both flexible and interdependent when conditions became unfavorable. Weissner, by contrast, ended up recruiting many climbers who were ill-prepared for high altitude climbing and drove them on the basis of a personal desire—not expedition objectives—to be the first to summit K2. Weissner’s expedition also shows the disastrous effect when team members lack the necessary skills and experiences at high altitude.

3.2 The Client-Based Era

Dick Bass and the Seven Summits (Early to Mid-1980’s)

In 1981, Dick Bass, the owner of the Snowbird ski resort in Utah, and Frank Wells, the president of Warner Brothers Studio, decided to become partners in climbing each of the seven highest peaks on the seven continents of the world. This included Mt. Everest in Asia, Aconcagua in South America, Mt. McKinley in North America, Kilimanjaro (5,963M/19,563FT) in Africa, Mt. Elbrus (5,663M/18,481FT) in Europe, Puncak Jaya (5,030M/16,502FT) in Australia/Indonesia, and Mt. Vinson (4,897M/16,066FT) in Antarctica (Bass, Wells and Ridgeway 1986). Wells quit his job at Warner Brothers and Bass began to devote an increasing amount of time to preparing for and setting up the adventure. The middle-aged and wealthy men decided to seek out experienced expedition leaders and offer to fund all or a significant part of the expenses in exchange for the opportunity to be guided up these high peaks.
From the beginning, Bass was the stronger climber of the two clients, while Wells struggled, often embarrassingly so. In spite of this they continued on with their adventure, sometimes, especially in the case of Wells, risking their own lives and the lives of the other members of their climbing parties to achieve their objectives (see Bass, Wells and Ridgeway 1986). By 1984, Wells had realized that he would never be able to climb all seven summits and had dropped out to become the new president of Disney. In 1985, after spending hundreds of thousands of dollars in expenses, Bass was finally successful in achieving his goal. Led by well-known photographer and high altitude guide, David Breashears, Bass finally reached the summit of Everest on his third, and what he said would be his last, try.

Bass’ four year achievement and the publicity surrounding it marked the birth of the high altitude client-based system—a system whereby wealthy individuals who were committed to climbing high altitude peaks and in reasonably good condition, could exchange economic capital for the guidance and logistical support of experienced climbers and Sherpa porters. Bass’ success demonstrated to experienced climbers that they could design a system to compensate for the lack of skill and experience of a client base and “make a livelihood doing what they loved to do” (Krakauer 1996).

In the 10 years after Bass’ accomplishment, the most successful company in designing such a system was Rob Hall’s Adventure Consultants. Between 1990 and 1995, his company successfully guided 39 clients, each paying as much as $70,000 US, to the top of Everest. Jon Krakauer noted that Adventure Consultants alone, “was responsible for three more ascents than had been made in the first 20 years after Hillary’s inaugural climb” (Krakauer 1996, pp. 52). In Hall’s system, each individual had a specific role to play. Leaders and guides were required to organize the climb (secure permission, get licensees), acclimate clients, take care of anyone who
got hurt, and plan out the logistics. Sherpas had responsibility for implementing logistical aspects of the climb (setting all the fixed ropes, for example), and carrying all the food and oxygen and setting up shelters at various camps.

Clients were expected to adhere to all the guidelines and rules of the system during acclimation and the climb itself. With an emphasis on safety, during the six weeks of acclimation prior to the ascent, clients had to make three trips above Base Camp as a group, “climbing about 2000 feet higher each time” (Krakauer 1996, pp. 53). The client group was also required to stay together during the ascent and turn around if conditions deteriorated or it was after 2 pm in order to insure sufficient time and light for a safe return to the camp below.

Provided that all parties fulfilled their roles competently and the weather remained in check, the system worked remarkably well.

The Everest Tragedy (May 1996)

Unlike the steady stream of successful ascents in the adventure climbing system from the late 1980’s onward, May 1996 marked the first real disaster in client-based era (See Table 1 for a summary of the main events; see Elmes and Barry (1999) for a more detailed description). On this expedition there were three climbing parties scheduled to climb on May 10, 1996. The first was Rob Hall’s Adventure Consultants made up of three guides, six clients and fifteen Sherpas. The second was Scott Fischer’s Mountain Madness made up of three guides, six clients and thirteen Sherpas. Fisher new guiding on Everest, but was a highly experienced high altitude climber and guide. The third was a Taiwanese team made up of eight climbers. All three groups departed for the summit just before midnight on May 9th. Twenty-four hours later five people would be dead (a total of fifteen people died on Everest that year, the highest ever). Perhaps most surprising, two of the most experienced climbers in the world—Rob Hall and Scott Fischer
died that day—and they contributed to the circumstances that let to their own as well as the other
deaths.

To understand this outcome in the client-based era we will discuss the details of how the
relative positions and the relations between each group—guides, clients, and Sherpas—not only
effected one another, but created the structural relationships wherein this tragedy took place.
Here the presence of substantial economic capital at stake in the field of high altitude
dramatically affected and changed how guides and their companies approached their expeditions.
On Everest during the spring of 1996, there was considerable competition between Rob Hall’s
established adventure climbing business and Scott Fischer’s new enterprise. Fischer was new at
the guiding business and had given some of his clients a discount to establish him in this new
field. Fischer even tried to differentiate his company’s approach by advertising it as a “do your
own thing” approach to climbing. In addition, despite Hall’s company’s tremendous success, his
yield during the previous climbing season had been zero; hence, Fischer was Hall’s first real
competitor on Everest and a threat to his ongoing business interests. In an increasingly
commodified field, both Hall and Fischer felt pressure to get as many clients to the top as
possible in a way that left their clients feeling satisfied.

As the paying and powerful, new actor in the field of high altitude climbing, clients were
allowed to bring creature comforts and exotic foods, given ample logistical support, and catered
to by guides before and during the climb. For example, in order to make the acclimation period
less strenuous and time consuming for clients, Fischer flew many of them to a higher point on
Everest than had been traditionally acceptable. Some climbers have argued that one reason why
Fischer became exhausted and disoriented during the final assault on Everest was from having
continually taken sick and injured clients up and down the mountain (Bourkreev and DeWalt
Likewise, others have suggested that Fischer’s decision to allow his head Sherpa, Lopsang, to short-robe (pull) Sandy Hill Pitman up to the summit reflected the importance placed on meeting client needs. Even Rob Hall’s decision to stay with Hansen, who had failed to summit the year before, contributed to his own death and indirectly to the deaths of three others in his party. All of these reflected the strong dependence that clients and guides had on each other.

Clients were not only the paying customer; they were also the eyes and ears for potential new customers. This was particularly true for journalists, Sandy Hill Pitman (a member of Fischer’s team) and Jon Krakauer (a member of Hall’s team). Pitman was a wealthy New York socialite who, like Dick Bass, was trying to join the “Seven Summits” club. She represented a potential “marketing bonanza” for Fischer’s company, Mountain Madness, when she reached the summit (Krakauer 1996). She was making daily posts to the NBC Interactive Media website and was planning to write an article after the climb in *Vanity Fair*. Jon Krakauer, was a well-known adventure writer and was writing an article for *Outside* magazine on his experiences. Both of these two individuals had considerable influence on how future clients would see each of these companies meeting their climbing needs and aspirations.

Lastly, *Sherpa* behavior also changed in relation to the other actors in the field. According to Ortner (1999), assisting “sahibs” on high altitude climbs was always a way of making a good living and solving the problem of property and inheritance in Sherpa society. Money was also a way that Sherpas could feel distinct and prestigious, more valuable than ordinary porters and at some level, equal to the sahibs in spite of the paternalistic role Western climbers usually took towards them. We wonder if the new the amount of economic capital now at stake in the new system encouraged many Sherpas, especially Sirdars, to concern themselves
more with equity issues (in relation to other porters and even sahib guides), particularly given how inexperienced and often irreverent towards the mountain that adventure climbing clients must have seemed to them (for example, expressing concern that unmarried clients were fornicating with each other on the mountain). While the argument could be made that higher wages for Sherpas was long overdue, the influx of substantial amounts of capital and questions related to equity made the logistical system less reliable and more prone to breakdown in our view. During the May 1996 Everest climb, the two expedition Sirdars, Lopsang (Fischer) and Ang (Hall), never left Camp IV early to set fixed ropes higher up the mountain to support their clients. Lopsang chose not to do so because he was busy short-roping Sandy Pitman up the mountain, and Ang refused to do it alone. The resulting bottlenecks caused several hours of delays that, in retrospect, were one of the primary reasons that many clients failed to reach the summit until much too late in the day.

The relative positions of guides, Sherpas and clients to each other explain why climbing dynamics shifted toward a tightly coupled, production system approach. The substitution of economic capital for the technical and social capital further explains why such a system lacked flexibility and created a problematic situation of mutual dependency. In the pre-client era because the competencies required at high altitude where roughly equal among all parties, each person could rely on the others for support under a variety of circumstances on the mountain. This gave climbing teams greater resiliency in responding to unforeseen events such as unexpected delays, an unanticipated storm, or the rescue of a stranded climber.

These increasingly commodified relations, however, fostered guide over commitment and exhaustion, client dependency, and a general lack of flexibility in the system. Clients were less skilled, less fit, and less experienced than traditional climbers. Anatoli Boukreev (considered to
be the world’s strongest climber at the time and a guide for Fischer) felt that many clients were willing to pay the economic price but not the physical price for preparing for the climb (DeWalt and Boukreev 1997). Beck Weathers, a client in Hall’s group, was a wealthy American physician who trained for the climb at home primarily by using a Stairmaster. He also brought new climbing boots to Everest, something that an experienced climber would never have done.

The dependency of clients on the technical and team skills of the guides and Sherpas reinforces the dependence of the guides and Sherpas on the economic resources of the clients. The fact that some clients were short-roped up the mountain and most failed to follow the “2 pm Rule” are strong examples of this mutual dependency. We also see evidence of this in comings and goings of Fischer on behalf of client that left him so exhausted that he could only lead from the rear, and Hall making an overcommitted rescue of a hapless client that cost Hall his life. One of the outcomes of this is that several clients and guides failed to make it back to their tents at Camp IV by evening, and got caught in a ferocious storm. During this descent in the storm, many of the clients were completely disoriented and some, like the Japanese climber, Namba, who lost her life, became completely immobilized. Unfortunately, guides and expeditions leaders were either too exhausted or over-committed with other clients to offer much assistance. Weathers was left for dead during the storm, eventually wandered back into camp the next morning alive—eventually losing much of his hands, feet and nose to frostbite. Many acknowledge that if it wasn’t for the strength of Anatoli Boukreev, who went back up the mountain to find those who became lost in the storm, five more people would have lost their lives on Everest that night.

In short, we see that in this increasingly commodified field and the production system approach, while often successful, can create delays, over commitment and exhaustion, making it
more likely that negative consequences will arise when weather conditions or other unforeseen circumstances occur.

High Altitude Climbing Today

Given the disasters of 1996, it makes intuitive sense that climbers and climbing organizations within the field would recognize the problems associated with high altitude climbing, particularly on Everest, and start to police themselves. But this has not occurred to any great extent. In a recent article from National Geographic’s Adventure Magazine, climber Andy Politz was quoted to say: “The challenge of Everest today is shucking and jiving around people in trouble so you don’t get sucked into a rescue” (Roberts 2001, pp. 96). According to the article, if not for the heroism of several climbers and “an abundance of good luck”, a similar disaster as May 1996 would have occurred in May 2001. One anonymous veteran of the 1996 expedition was quoted as saying, “It’s the fifth anniversary of the Everest disaster and they haven’t learned a f---ing thing” (Roberts 2001, pp. 96). Below we delve more deeply into the structural sources of these problems in the field of high altitude climbing.

4.0 The “Structural” Source of Negative Consequences

To explain the consequences of the repositioning of actors in the field of high altitude climbing over the last 70 years, we focus on forms of capital and the relative accumulations among the actors in the field. Beyond the particular characteristics of each form of capital, what is of interest is that technical and social capital can only be accumulated through participation in high altitude climbs, whereas significant economic capital can be acquired in practices outside the field of high altitude climbing and easily brought in.

4.1 Analysis of Pre-Client Phase
Prior to the client-based system of mountaineering, the entrance fee to climb above 8,000M was based upon skill, training, and prior experience in climbing in such extreme conditions. There were relatively few individuals who were qualified. Because of this those who went, climbers and Sherpas, had similar types and amounts of these skills and experiences. The 1939 K2 climb was a clear exception of this fact and the results were disastrous.

The left-hand side of Figure 1 represents the forms and levels of accumulation of the technical and social capital held by the key actors involved before the client-based system of climbing arrived. There were no gaps in the forms and amounts capital; they were “matched” across the key actors involved—expedition leaders/climbers and Sherpas. By this, we do not mean there were no differences in terms of status (i.e., rank in the system) or culture (i.e., Western climbers and indigenous porters), but that the key forms of capital that are required to competently climb high altitude peaks were similar.

This matched quality of technical and social capital across leaders/climbers and Sherpas resulted in climbing teams that were flexible because each actor had redundant skills; each individual could be reliably interchanged when challenging conditions arose on the mountain. In the 1953 Everest Climb, the climbing leader had the ability to rotate in another “experienced” set of climbers (Hillary and Norgay) for another try at the summit. This rough match across actors meant that they each possessed the requisite variety of skills to climb and also the experience to understand the risky environment that they were climbing in.

4.2 Analysis of Client Phase

With Dick Bass’s paid adventures to the top of the highest peak on each continent during the early 1980’s, the paid client-based system was born. With this introduction of paying clients, the entrance fee to a high altitude summit became significant amounts of economic capital.
Given the logistics and equipment required for high altitude climbing, economic capital had always been required. Now however, economic capital was being used as the primary entrance fee for the paying client. Even though in the 1939 K2 expedition Dudley Wolfe and Jack Durrance had provided economic capital to enable Weissner’s team to climb the mountain, its effect was isolated to the expedition itself. It did not lead to a transformation of high altitude climbing into a commodified field as inaugurated by Dick Bass in the 1980’s.

We argue that with the addition of paying clients, three critical and related changes in the field of high altitude climbing occurred that created a problematic gap (see right hand side of Figure 1). First, since economic capital was valued and valuable to all actors involved, it could be easily transferred from paying clients to climbing guides and Sherpas. Second, to complete the transaction, economic capital from paying clients was exchanged for the value of the technical and social capital of the guides and Sherpas. Third, the exchange of economic capital from paying clients substituted for the technical and social capital essential for climbing high altitude peaks. This substitution generated a gap in the technical and social capital of clients to be filled by the production-based climbing system established by guides and implemented primarily by Sherpas. The question that will be raised is that now that economic capital is the primary means of defining the relations among actors, does it work to recognize or misrecognize the value or the costs of what is being substituted. Below we discuss each of these three related changes in greater detail.

First, since economic capital is so valuable to those who produce it (i.e., clients), and so highly valued by those who want to consume it (i.e., guides and Sherpas), it is willingly and easily transferred. For guides and Sherpas, economic capital represents a new and valuable form of capital that they can begin to claim because of the technical and social capital that they
possess. For the guides, the flow of economic capital has allowed them to support themselves and their families while they pursue their passion for climbing fulltime. Gone are the days when guides had to hold down several temporary jobs in order to have enough money to support their passion for climbing. However, this flow of economic capital has now become a requirement to keep their new means of economic stability (i.e., their businesses) afloat. For the Sherpas, especially for climbing Sirdars or lead Sherpas, economic capital has provided them with the possibility for high paying and more predictable salaries from increased high altitude tourism than has been historically available. The governments of Nepal, China and India also benefited from the fees paid by this growing, high altitude mountaineering industry.

Second, guides and Sherpas *exchange* their social and technical capital for the economic capital of the client, mutually reinforcing the dependency. The ability to transfer and then exchange economic capital for these highly localized forms of capital (i.e., technical and social) is what established a commodity approach to high altitude climbing. Since a commodity approach started in the late 1980’s, it has successfully maximized the “yield” of successful summits on Everest. For example, from 1953 to 1987 the ratio of climbers who successfully summited, to climbers that died was 217 to 74—for every 100 who summited, 34 died. From 1988 to 1999, the era of the client-based system, that ratio fell to 870 to 76— for every 100 who summited, only 8 died on the mountain. In that last eleven years compared to the previous 34 years, you are almost 4.5 times more likely to summit Everest as opposed to die trying. This increase in the yield was made possible through the implementation of this production system approach put in place by high altitude climbing companies and supported by the economic capital of clients.
Third, the introduction of economic capital as a source of claiming value on behalf of paying clients “effectively” substitutes for technical and social capital required. Clients have purchased (with an entrance fee of sometime $70,000 or more) what they lacked in climbing ability and experience. This substitution generated a gap in the amounts of technical and social capital among the main actors involved on the mountain. This gap is filled by the skills and abilities of the guides and Sherpas and the client-based production climbing system that they put into place. As outlined in the previous section, because of this gap clients were very dependent on the guides and Sherpas to reach the summit (via short roping, rope fixing, acclimatization, and rescue). Dependencies had to be managed by a tightly coupled division of labor, a sequencing of tasks, acclimation procedures, Sherpa-based logistical support and a heavy reliance on supporting technology. Under normal circumstance this system compensated for the clients’ lack of physical conditioning, technical climbing skill, or climbing experience at high altitude—and overall, could do for clients what they could not do for themselves.

In recent history the combination of more traffic on the mountain (a field with an increasing number of high altitude climbing enterprises), less skilled and more self-inflated clients willing to pay higher fees (Elmes & Barry 1999) and the constant possibility of dangerous weather have made the production system approach more susceptible to a major disaster, such as occurred in 1996. As Roberts (2001, pp. 96) notes, “Today, the pressures of sponsorship, the clash of nationalistic agendas, the rivalries among powerful egos, the pipe dreams of unqualified clients, and an epidemic of hypoxic dehumanization have conspired to make Everest a place where one’s fellow climbers can pose risks as grave as those the mountain itself presents.” The negative consequences generated from these commodified relations between the actors are hard
to recognize because the relations among them have increasingly become defined or measured in terms of economic capital.

5.0 Discussion

The relative ease of transferring and exchanging economic capital fails to highlight the gaps created by its substitution for other, less transferable, more localized forms of capital (i.e., technical and social capital). The consequences of this substitution go unnoticed even after some negative consequences have occurred (i.e., major disasters in 1996 and 1997 and another near miss in 2001). Some serious questions have arisen about if fewer teams should be allowed on Everest and other high altitude peaks, a minimum requirements for client skill and experience should be established or if acclimation rules should be strictly enforced (Krakauer 1996; Boukrev and De Walt 1997). But given the mutual dependencies across actors, the outcomes to address these serious questions have not been able to transform the current state of the client-based approach. For example, in 2000 a loose consortium of high altitude climbing companies (i.e., IGO 8000 and others) rejected the idea of having stronger rules or external groups policing them, but suggested that a “voluntary code” be used instead (see igo8000.com). They stated that if “less qualified companies” were forced out then policing or sanctioning would be unnecessary (Keaton 2001; Flynn 1996). The practical issue that remains is what does it mean to be “less qualified,” and who will decide this and enforce it internally. Further, there is a growing recognition that high altitude disasters are now occurring more due to the complications of the client based system and much less so less because of avalanches and freak storms (Roberts, 2001). The client based system makes for more crowded conditions, more pollution and waste, less willingness for teams to help other teams in trouble, and, when something unexpected arises,
less capable of handling problems when the harsh conditions at high altitude grow worse (Child 1997).

The outcome of the client-based system in the field of high altitude climbing is that all actors have contributed to, and in fact are invested in, the commodification of the summit. Paying clients offer economic capital in exchange for the technical and social capital required to reach the summit. Entrepreneurial guiding companies and their employees exchange their technical and social capital required to reach the summit for the economic capital held by the client. This mutual dependency between clients and companies and the ease of transfer, economic capital establishes an “exchange rate” that fails to recognize the gap and measure the value and costs associated with producing these more localized forms of capital (i.e., technical and social). The trajectory of the new actor has transformed the relations in the field, how the old actors use their specific forms of capital to claim what is of value and indeed what is “at stake.” Guides and Sherpas still have their specific forms of capital, but how their abilities and inclinations are used has changed from traditional team approaches based on flexibility and overall expedition success to a client-oriented production system. For climbing owners/guides what is at stake is keeping their enterprise going. For guides and Sherpas what is at stake is their reputation for future adventure endeavors as well as equitable compensation for work done. And, of course, for the client what is ultimately at stake is reaching the summit and whatever gratification or status that provides.

The result of this change has been a “field” of high altitude climbing whose current relations are defined or measured primarily in terms of economic capital. Economic capital is valued by all involved and is legitimately exchanged for more localized forms of capital (i.e., technical and social capital). However the gap that results is not easily measured by economic
capital. The relations of power among actors (and the mutual dependency), now defined primarily by economic capital, make it hard for them to recognize the negative consequences generated by their current approach to high altitude peaks (i.e., failing to acclimatize clients, breaking the 2 PM rule, short-roping clients, poorly managed division of labor, too many groups on the mountain). In short all the actors involved, in one way or another, underestimate the value and the costs of producing technical and social capital that is still so essential reaching the summit.

Depending on what is to be produced in a field, commodified exchanges can either be a good thing or a bad thing. In a field where the relations between actors is well specified (i.e., a traditional economic market or a supplier-parent relationship), price is an effective way to determine what is to be transferred and exchanged because the relations between actors and their forms of capital are well known. Under these circumstances no gap is generated. However, in a field where the relations between actors and their forms of capital are changing and are not easy to measure, using economic capital as a standard (i.e., price) of measuring the actual costs associated at the exchange generates a gap, which can produce negative consequences. In the case described here, the reason why this occurs is that an economic standard is being used as the primary means to measure the exchange taking place, and so cannot adequately define or assess the value of the more localized forms of capital produced by the guides and Sherpas.

From the argument developed in this paper, using economic capital as a standard by which to value—define and assess—a transaction is not always a problem. However, when it is used as the primary standard for defining relations and measuring exchanges, it runs the risk of underestimating the costs involved and mis-recognizing (Bourdieu 1980) the sources that produce the negative consequences. This is why narrow market-based approaches when applied
to relations or exchanges that involve different forms of capital, often prove ineffective in the long-term because such standards used recognize that gaps generated. In the case of high altitude peaks, since there are many other companies and clients vying for the summit, such consequences or externalities are not only hard to recognize for the actors involved, but costly to resolve if one wants to remain in a position to claim the economic capital (and what economic capital can buy) that is currently at stake in the field of high altitude climbing.

6.0 Conclusion

The summit of Everest has become a commodity that can be purchased at a significant price. Today guides and Sherpas exchange their forms of capital for the significant amounts of economic capital that is now at stake in the field. This transfer and exchange of various forms of capital in this field generates value for the paying clients, the guides and their companies, the Sherpas they employ, and various governments that collect fees. That economic capital is easily valued and used by all involved is what renders the economic capital of the paying clients so powerful and legitimate to all the actors in the field of high altitude climbing.

However, this is more than just a technical exchange or a stylized supply and demand story. From this analysis we have seen that the ease of this transfer and exchange not only facilitates the substitution of one form of capital for another, but also glosses over the size of the gap generated by such an exchange. This argument is based on the premise that powerful (and legitimated) forms of capital are seldom questioned even when negative consequences arise as a result. This misrecognition is not simply bounded rationality, but is a response generated out of the relations of power and mutual dependency between actors based on the capital they produce and consume. The sources of these negative consequences are not wholly invisible to the actors involved, but instead are seen as outcomes that are much less consequential than they really are.
Further the analysis reveals that those who possess these powerful forms of capital are not just rampaging Huns breaking down the gates of the field of high altitude climbing. Within the field of high altitude climbing, and perhaps any field that becomes commodified, there is a mutual dependence created as the actors involved become consumers of the forms of capital produced by others. In this case, the substitution of economic capital for the more localized social and technical capital held by the guides and Sherpas has been done willingly because of the benefit that each believes that they derive from it. This type of exchange relation and the standard (i.e., exchange rate) used leads to an obfuscation of what is problematic, the crowding at Base Camp and the summit, the indifference towards other teams in trouble, and the relaxing of many traditional climbing “rules” at high altitude. All of which ultimately leads to a loss of life and disaster.

As illustrated by the May 1996 Everest disaster, actors do not recognize this gap because they are engaged in the field and taken in by their practice and the capital that it allows them to claim. In this particular case and in many others, the sources of these negative consequences go unrecognized because the actors that bring them into existence are not in a position to question them. To do this it would mean for each actor loosing what is currently at stake (i.e., economic capital, the summit) and facing not only the opportunity costs, but also the costs of developing better ways of defining the relations and measuring the exchanges across the various actors involved. We see this in the current reluctance and often resistance to regulate and change the client-based, production system approach by all of the actors involved.

By making this argument, we do not mean to suggest that there should be no paying clients allowed on Everest or that economic capital is not in and of itself a bad measure. From a practical point of view, the exchange of more mobile, more powerful forms of capital for less
mobile, more localized forms cannot be completely avoided or inoculated against. But what can
be the focus of increased attention is how more localized forms of capital are being represented
and measured at a particular exchange relation. Without this additional effort, our explanations
of why such negative consequences exist will either be attributed to “irrationality” or a “failure
in sensemaking” (Weick, 1993) at an individual level; or more structurally, given abstract labels
such as “unintended consequences” or “market externalities.” Clearly, the world is complex, but
by specifying the relations among actors and how they claim what is “at stake” for them, we
have outlined a fruitful ground that lies between the extremes of irrationality and externalities.

What has been of particular value in this analysis is identifying the challenges and the
potential negative consequences that can arise when sharing and accessing various forms of
knowledge and capital across a boundary (Carlile 2002). This brings a clear focus to the
challenges magnified in situations of increasing globalization, where capital and sources of value
that are more localized are facing the pressures of increasingly commodified relations. The
practical and political challenge is and remains one of representing more localized forms of
capital in ways that more powerful actors and the capital they wield can also value.
References


Table 1. Chronology of Key Events of Everest Disaster, May 1996

**Background:** 1985-1995 - Large numbers of commercial climbing companies spring up, providing total climbing packages for about $70,000 (US) to Everest. Hall’s company becomes one of the most successful operations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>May 1, 1996</th>
<th>May 9</th>
<th>May 10</th>
<th>May 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hall and Fischer’s groups ascend to Base Camp 4 at bottom of South Col. After resting, the two groups begin ascent to Everest summit close to midnight. Makalu Gau’s Taiwanese group also departs (ahead of schedule), breaking their agreement not to ascend on May 10.</td>
<td>Hansen reaches top, short-roped by Hall, then begins descent. Hansen and Hall reach Hillary Step, where Hansen collapses. Hall radios for help and spends next 12 hours trying to get Hansen down.</td>
<td>Harris, Groom, and Krakauer get back down to South Summit. Hansen reaches top, short-roped by Hall, then begins descent. Hansen and Hall reach Hillary Step, where Hansen collapses. Hall radios for help and spends next 12 hours trying to get Hansen down.</td>
<td>Hansen has died. Hall, frostbitten and hypothermic, makes it to South Summit but is unable to move further down despite repeated urgings to do so. Rescue attempt fails. Weather becomes hurricane force.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Harris, Krakauer, Beidleman, and Boukreev reach South Summit and wait for almost an hour for Sherpas to fix ropes up Hillary Step. Ang arrives but refuses to fix ropes again. The four go ahead and do it. Lack of rope creates a 100 meter danger zone. A second bottleneck forms.</td>
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<td>Beidleman, Fox, Gammelgaard, Madsen, Pittman, and Schoening reach South Summit. Pittman collapses, is given a shot and recovers. Namba runs out of oxygen and refuses to move. Boukreev starts back up, attempting rescue with four oxygen bottles but has to turn back. All urgently make for Camp 4.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 person queue waits to ascend</td>
<td>Krakauer runs out of oxygen due to Harris’ mistake. Hall expresses disappointment at not getting more of his group to the top.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weather begins deteriorating.</td>
<td>Fischer’s group ascends summit with Fischer dragging slowly behind.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Night, May 9</td>
<td>Night, May 11</td>
<td>Night, May 11</td>
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**Aftermath:** Five have died: 3 guides (Hall, Harris, Fischer) and 2 clients (Hansen and Namba). On May 14, Weathers and Gau are helicoptered off the mountain. Months later, Krakauer, Pittman, and other survivors publish magazine accounts and/or cut movie deals. Hall’s adventure business is sold. Major movie released in 1998.
Figure 1
The Field of High Altitude Climbing
1930s—1990s

The Pre-Client Based Era

The Client-Based Era

TC = Technical Capital
SC = Social Capital
EC = Economic Capital