Asked, a year before his death in 1922, why it was important to climb Mount Everest, the climber and writer George Mallory famously replied: ‘Because it is there’. Mallory’s intention was to stress the fact that, though the systematic climbing of mountains emerged within explicitly scientific paradigms (Schama 1995), science was not the point of mountaineering. Rather, its main point lay in exploring a meaningful response to the inviting ‘there-ness’ of landforms that were previously viewed as lying, like medieval forests, beyond the frontier of truly human being. In the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, such thinking led to the cultivation of specific bodily techniques (Mauss 1934) for climbing mountains and to the parallel development of the material technology required to surmount steep snow, ice and rock.

Today, base camp for a distinctly anthropological approach to mountaineering (rock-climbing being one of its offshoots) is the premise that the inviting ‘there-ness’ of mountains and the technical response of modern actors to this symbolic charge is historically generated and culturally embedded (Ortner 1999, MacFarlane 2004). Three questions suggest themselves. Firstly, what, in modern times, is the cultural nature of this compelling ‘there-ness’? Secondly, how do climbing practices technically and culturally elaborate its evocative, if elusive, meaning? And, thirdly, why is it important to ask why? Indeed, should anthropologists even take time out from studying ‘matters of life and death’ (such as ethnicity, economy, religion or new forms of reproductive technology) to examine a traditionally marginal, if now rapidly growing, pastime?

The counter-cultural and the mainstream

Rock-climbing began to be distinguished from mountaineering as a specialized sport or ‘activity’ towards the end of the 19th century. It shared with the latter a passion for grappling with forms and degrees of the vertical in natural situations and a reliance on similar technology. Nowadays rock-climbing equipment consists of ropes, helmets, harnesses, small ballet shoe-like rock boots and a rack of metallic protective ‘gear’ made up of karabiners, ‘friends’ and ‘rocks’, as well as fabric slings and ‘quick-draws’, all of which are either temporarily slotted into cracks in the rock by ‘leaders’ and taken out by ‘seconds’, or draped over ‘spikes’, pinnacles or ‘bollards’ of rock and then removed. (Alternatively, in ‘sports climbing’, leaders clip karabiners and rope into metal pegs or bolts, drilled and driven permanently into the rock.) Friction devices and anchors are held by the ‘second’ so that an active, ‘lead’ climber can be held without effort in the event of a fall; thus, provided that the equipment is in good operational condition and arranged correctly, and given enough cracks (courtesy of natural weathering), a system of ‘protection’ can be organized that, relative to high-altitude snow and ice climbing, confers reasonable levels of safety.

Indeed, because of the relatively high levels of safety, because they are not normally affected by altitude, and because they wear footwear that adds friction, stays on the tiniest of ledges and toe-pokes the smallest of ‘pockets’ of rock, rock-climbers can make far more gymnastic ‘moves’ on much smaller ‘holds’ than can high-altitude mountaineers (whose feet are shod with big, tough, insulated
Life, death and play

Recreationally, rock-climbing occupies a sphere that was once situated on the leisurely periphery of modern societies, but now functions increasingly at their cultural centre. In fact nowadays recreation stimulates economic investment, makes for political gain and ideological interest and, not infrequently, borders upon a quasi-religious practice. In this way, recreation develops pervasively as a ‘social fact’ (Mauss 1925). Moreover, whilst culturally ramifying and ascendant, forms of recreation and leisure have massively multiplied in both type and social appeal. Rock-climbing, for example, now belongs to a large corpus of extreme adventure or ‘lifestyle’ sports (Wheaton 2004) whose number increases by the year. And, stylistically transforming in various social quarters (Bourdieu 1984), rock-climbing increasingly draws into its own little world advertisers, educators, team-builders, management trainers, birthday boys and girls and even stag- and hen-parties (in search of a supposedly last illicit adventure). All of these types find in rock-climbing reflections of their own diverse relations to the world and valuable metaphors for communicating and crystallizing elusive features of these relations. Why, one may ask, should climbing rock furnish so rich a symbolic resource?

Rock-climbing involves play, to be sure. However, the rock-climber’s passion for the steep, hard and vertical in nature also makes her/his activity a crucial ‘matter of life and death’. In fact, whilst many games are objectively dangerous (rugby, boxing and horse-riding, among others), at every technical turn, climbers subjectively activate highly visible insurance against calamity by wearing on their persons and placing in cracks in the rock a variety of forms of protective ‘gear’. In this way, their practice routinely embodies at the heart of the game (in a way that other games do not), the sense that death as well as pleasure is a standard possible outcome of each and every move.

boots). Consequently, rock-climbing is acknowledged by climbers as being more a recreational than an expedi- tionary activity and, as if to underscore this fact, artificial climbing facilities have been constructed in nearly every major city in Europe to cater for a desire to rock-climb in reasonable safety. (Once upon a time, middle-class parents held birthday parties for their young children in a local branch of McDonalds. Now they are just as likely to treat the kids to an hour or two of instructed climbing ‘experience’ down at the local climbing wall.)

This surprising popularization of rock-climbing over the last 20 years cuts against the fact that, until the recent decline of ideological politics in the West (Bell 1960), globally rock-climbers tended to congregate subculturally (Wheaton 2004) around a small number of almost sacred centres. These were, most notably, Chamonix in the French Alps, the canyon of Verdon and Boux in Haute-Provence (also in France), Arco in the Italian Dolomites, the Troll Wall in Norway, around Boulder in Colorado, and Yosemite in California. Beneath these great cliffs, resistant cultural mores developed in tandem with huge advances in technique and performance. At Camp 4, for example, a legendary campsite in Yosemite Valley, and despite the camp’s stated 14-day limit, many climbers ‘dossed’ in tents or vehicles for months at a time. Dressed in signature Gore-tex and Polartec clothing, constantly clawing at random boulders as if forever glued to a world of surrounding rock, swilling from communal bottles and smoking marijuana, strumming instruments and shunning paid employment, it seemed that parties would only occasionally depart, to return bearing backpacks overflowing with ropes, karabiners and other climbing paraphernalia. ‘Why did we spend so much time in the valley?’ one big-wall pioneer mused:

Perhaps the key word is ‘rebellion.’ Many of us regarded the 1950s and 1960s as a time when the world – and especially our country – had lost its way. We saw materialism and complacency during the Eisenhower years… Perhaps we stayed close to the cliffs because we didn’t want to join mainstream society. (Roper 1994: 15)

In effect, climbers of the 1960s generation tended to describe their activity in countercultural terms, much as street skateboarders (Borden 2001), urban free-runners or Cornish cliff-jumpers (Abramson and Laviolette 2007) still tend to do today. Dropping out of society for a nomadic odyssey from campsite to campsite, and from one great rockface to the next, climbers felt they were re-establishing value, creativity and purity of being in nature and ‘on the edge’ (the name of more than one climbing magazine), switching their allegiance, as it were, from the moral bankruptcy of society to the authoritative power and compelling ‘there-ness’ of rock.

However, for an anthropologist, it is essential to explore the inner meanings adhering to the technical practices of climbers (whilst climbing), as well as analysing the codes and mores of climbing groups who come to represent the practice culturally in relation to external historical circumstances. This is partly to account for the paradox that, whereas in the climbing milieu climbers often consciously see themselves as wholly resisting the mainstream, on the rock itself climbing practices tend to resonate with certain mainstream sensibilities. In particular, the active climber happily submits to familiar short-term ordeals (e.g. dwelling for a great length of time on a single crucial move) in exchange for the ultimate pleasures, relief and satisfactions achieved in finally completing the climb. In microcosm, this time-bound exchange mirrors the essential ingredient of the Protestant ethic for which the habits of self-scrutiny, self-discipline and deferred gratification ideally transcend spontaneous pursuits of the moment in favour of higher goals and values (Ehrenreich 1989).

Consequently, the latter-day expansion of rock-climbing is more credibly viewed as a physical and symbolic extension of efforts to garner value from promised human futures – by absorbing risk, pain and self-sacrifice in the immediate here-and-now – than as a rebellious ‘dropping out’ of this same social present. Thus, the question is rather one of how and why members of this relatively contrary subculture nonetheless transpose such dominant moral values onto the compelling ‘there-ness’ of primordial rock.

Life, death and play

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In this respect, playful as it is, the climber’s epic pursuit of dangerous pleasure is similar to the pursuits of other ‘voluntary risk-takers’ (Lyng 1990), including soldiers, cosmonauts and urban gang members, all of whom adventurously add value to life only by risking death. In this respect, too, rock-climbing and other extreme sports also occupy the same clan (but different lineage) as sacrifice and self-sacrifice, both of which practices require a human death or the obliteration of a symbolic substitute for the release of life-giving powers. (Hence, there is every reason why anthropologists should be drawn to studying extreme recreation.) In fact, adding value to life by risking life symbolically is probably essential to all forms of competitive play. However, in adding value to life by really risking life, rock-climbing and other extreme games both foster the experience of play and dangerously transform its meanings. But what is it that is playfully transformed at the interface of life and death in rock-climbing, and what values are positively created in the process? The answer to these questions lies in a general examination firstly of the secular frontier between life and death in contemporary times, and secondly of the epic repositioning of social actors in relation to life, death and value as climbers play with these great issues in extreme and primordial settings.

Risk, modernity and deadliness
To modern religious and paranormal sensibilities, death and mortality belong to a realm set apart from the social sphere of the living. These forces inhabit a supernaturally or paranormally animated space from which – as demons, the Devil, the Angel of Death, the Grim Reaper, Old Father Time or God – they actively visit the human realm to claim human lives in ways never entirely knowable to men and women. By contrast, modern secular images inscribe death and mortality within the limits of theoretically knowable and empirically demonstrable knowledge. These images depersonify and deanimate the death space, emptying it of wilful powers, and rendering futile worshipful supplication and sacrificial or paranormal communication. Here, mortality morphs into an impersonal set of machineries and processes, and death itself into a waiting presence, potentially incarnate in all material states.

In fact, the perceived riskiness and potential deadliness of ordinary situations has been significantly intensified in contemporary modern societies with the demise of previously strong beliefs in the power of rational knowledge to exert control over the world at large. In the optimism of enlightenment, expert discourse was offered which could powerfully inform, grip and shape the progressive transformation of technology, political and natural relations. However, assailed from the left by post-modern and green liberations and secondly of the epic repositioning of social actors in relation to life, death and value as climbers play with these great issues in extreme and primordial settings.

Transformations, relocations and partial resurrections
Together with other extreme recreations, contemporary rock-climbing reverses the main relationship between individualizing culture and the risky ‘world at large’ by transporting and subjecting individuals to the core of nature’s dangerous forms and flows (Deleuze 1995). However, unlike ‘adrenalin junkies’ who may well celebrate the insecurities occasioned by decreasing faith in the wilful power of knowledge and increased certainty of the unintended effects of nature, rock-climbers reluctantly air these anxieties at the bottom of crags and cliffs. Thus, still rooted firmly to the horizontal plane, it occurs to climbers to ask: is this the right crag? Is this the correct route? Is this the right place to ‘ab in’ (i.e. abseil or rappel down the cliff)? Is the route ‘in condition’ (i.e. is it still wintry wet or has it ‘dried out’)? At this preparatory stage, inhibited by excessive uncertainty, chosen cliffs are frequently aborted, leads passed over to a more composed and willing
Moreover, familiar rituals translate into practical terms the initial fear that the great complexity of nature might well pursue the climber vertically up the route. The wiping of feet on beer-mats, towels or calf muscles to clean them of dirt, the incessant querying of the weather, the nervous relief of bowels and bladder, the neurotic voicing of fears regarding the dampness or hopelessly polished nature of the rock ahead: this regular concatenation of thoughts and bodily urges palpably gives vent to the climbers’ fear of being unable to seize control of the moment. At this point, though always an ignominious option, retreat is still easily possible.

By contrast, a shift from the horizontal to the vertical plane inverts all of the terms. In the first place, the rock-climber’s practice locates precise direction within the fuzzy complexity of nature, factoring out a route which becomes the ‘true line’ of the climb. On the basis of ‘the true line’, the chosen route progresses the climber metrically from low to high, but also from situations of dire insecurity – particularly at the difficult and often dangerous ‘crux’ of the route – towards relative safety at the top of the climb. In this respect each move made – for example, jamming a crack with hands, fists and feet tightly inserted, then fractioning up a moderately angled slab on flat palms and soles, then pulling over overhanging rock using high feet, strong biceps and speed of movement, then back-and-footing a chimney with back on one wall, feet on the opposite one and then, feet sideways on, carefully balancing on tiny ledges up a steep wall before ‘topping out’ – registers progress as well as mere movement.

Such a progressive deployment of the body involves cumulative consequence as well as sequential action. And, to this end, a climber’s technical knowledge of the cliff, the route and her body’s climbing capabilities are usually sufficiently insightful to secure either a predictably successful outcome to each intended move, or the successful protection of a move that leads to a fall (where the leader merely backs off” before a point of irreversible ‘commitment’ is reached.

rock climbing (a) through the discovery of linear forms in large chunks of rocky nature, and (b) through the accumulation of such knowledge, technology and technique that tends to guarantee a mechanically causal and clearly consequential relationship between practical intention, action and outcome. Thus rock climbing playfully restores to contemporary actors confidence in the transparent agency of willful action, and significant direction within what otherwise appears to be a complex natural world of uncertain knowledges, multi-directional forces and doubtful controls over action.

Then again, whilst a strong awareness of risk and uncertainty accompanies the climber on the climb, this technically informed awareness differs from ordinary risk consciousness. Thus, where typically ordinary risk consciousness tends to (illusorily) remove social practices from perceived situations of risk, often by refusing the measured, many-sided assessment of conceivable risk, the rock-climber moves directly through passages of risk, continually pinpointing the danger, measuring up the risk of succumbing to it, and protecting appropriately against it by temporarily placing metallic gear into natural cracks in the rock or clipping the rope into artificial bolts drilled into the cliff-face. And this is a process carried out to moral, not just technical effect. Thus, because each climbing decision not only possesses the capacity to progress the climber up the route but also the ability to preserve him or kill him, each move and decision made assumes a manifestly ‘serious’ character. In fact, as regards the terminological classification of their climbs, climbers regularly (and favourably) juxtapose . most forms of celebrity entertainment and Western electoral practices), and with inner passions and callings that are rudely trumped by the short-term requirements of market forces.

In this regard the introduction of the trained climbing body to ‘true natural lines’ of ‘serious’ rock seems to redeem the rock-climber symbolically from a familiar world of circumscribed simulacra and structural inconsequence. In fact, the climber’s controlled but ultimately risky progress through rocky passages of vertical nature is frequently spoken of by climbers in terms of epic. And though climbers tend to reserve the use of this term for jovial description of climbs that unfold with near- lethal effect, the entire global project of climbing rock is storied as a generalized proliferation of ordinary heroes, legendary routes and extraordinary feats. In fact, having seemingly transcended the diffuse matrix of natural forces acting down below, and committed to the perceived logic of the sharp natural line soaring up above, climbers tend to imagine their climbs unfolding as an epic struggle between two opposed forces – the climber and the particular configuration of rock – for temporary sovereignty over the route and the climber’s destiny. In this binary opposition, the personal feeling is of having undergone a vital and dangerous test, set deep within nature, one requiring and bringing to life all of the climber’s faculties. Out of such experience, epic recollections of particular routes then crystallize in a range of books, journals, lifestyle magazines, club newsletters, personal guidebooks, albums, blogs and websites as if the very act of climbing is finished not when the ropes are coiled up but when the story is finally told.

This is because, by way of its epic structure of journey, danger, test and story, the adventurous activity of rock-climbing partly reincarnates in the recreational sphere what formerly appeared as the progressive making of history in the ‘real world at large’. (This was a history which was generally linear, often dangerous, frequently testing, and always storied.) In a particular respect, though, the adventurous progress of the rock-climber is made on the basis of a quite different relationship with nature than that implied by progressive historical models of human
Fig. 5. Rock-climbing is a gear-intensive sport.


Incorporated into cultural practices, the activity of rock-climbing is signified in both epic and environmental terms. However, though rock-climbing evokes these broader human scenarios to greater or lesser extents (depending on the situation), there remains the fact that the growing popularity of the activity is also firmly rooted in its distinctly playful status. From this angle, rock-climbers play up the singular aspects of body technique, technology and style which are formally specific to the activity whilst, in parody, self-deprecation and ‘black’ humour, they also regularly play down and generally subvert the moral seriousness of a practice for which they otherwise risk their lives.

Indeed, climbing rock ‘because it is there’ meant wresting the implicit seriousness of mountaineering and rock-climbing away from bigger enterprises that used it as a symbol of overarching sovereignty (especially the powerful agencies of science, nation and empire), marrying it instead to the lighter being and greater freedoms of play, sports and humour (Kundera 1984). Within this marriage, rock-climbing came to provide the climber with the feeling of being thrown into a mighty natural world whose mountain masses and rocky courses seemed themselves to compel heroic human ascents. However, paradoxically, the climber’s place in this world of Nature’s making and calling also seemed to require that these ascents be made recreationally and sportingly (rather than ideologically) as a means of freely bringing inhabitants of this world to summits of their own self-realization.

To this imagined end, rock-climbing has been developing from the late 19th century onwards as an instance of epic practice, deep ‘eco-play’ (Geertz 1973) and, where rocks are not part of mountains, merely as serious sport.