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Conference Catherine Desbarats “Where is New France?” (12/02/2014)

Clément Martin

- 1 This conference was held on February 12, 2014 at the Université Paris Diderot, as part of Allan Potofsky’s seminar “La France en Amérique, XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles”. In his opening remarks, Allan Potofsky introduced speaker Catherine Desbarats from McGill University (Montreal) Catherine Desbarats then started off with what she called an “almost silly sounding question”: “Where is New France?”

Where is New France?

Decolonizing History

- 2 Catherine Desbarats started by pointing out that the present tense in her title was intentional: far from being a typo, its use was to draw our attention to our conception of New France. It also questioned assumptions about where the French imperial space was, and on how it was thought about, written about and narrated. Her paper was written in the spirit of an essay: it did not provide a definitive answer, but showed that the question was worth asking, as she had argued in a recent article co-written with Allan Greer (Desbarats & Greer, 2011).
- 3 Catherine Desbarats first presented the theoretical underpinnings of her paper. Two common preoccupations guide her and Greer’s recent works.¹ Above all, they seek to decolonize the history of the Americas, meaning they are careful not to let the language of the historians replicate the language of the colonizers. Second, they critique the “blind spots” created by national historical memories. Our living in the world of nation-states very subtly shapes the way we think about the past: New France can thus be seen as a simple stage on the way to modern-day Québec, or Canada.

Ironically, she warns, historians who try to transcend the national level may end up with similarly restrictive interpretations, albeit on a different scale.

- 4 Catherine Desbarats illustrated this point with reference to Richard White's landmark book, *The Middle Ground* (White, 1991). White's book was a deeply innovative study and a brilliant example of an early attempt to decolonize history. He wrote about the area and the inhabitants of the Great Lakes, bringing a focus on a place and a people which had been obliterated by historians of the French empire. As Desbarats underlined in her preface to the French edition of the book, White created the very fertile metaphor of the middle ground, a space in between the worlds of colonies and polities. Although *The Middle Ground* transformed the historiography and was deemed revolutionary, it still had its limits. For instance, Canadian authors pointed out that White's *middle ground* stopped at the Canadian border. Catherine Desbarats thus showed the persistence of national frameworks, which have to be set aside to write a decolonized history of New France.

Textbook New France

- 5 What is the common understanding of New France? The best way to find it, Desbarats argued, is to go to Wikipedia. There, the standard map of New France can be found, portraying it as blue, huge and unbounded.² Catherine Desbarats then showed a series of textbook maps from various national origins and paid attention to how they differed from each other. In the *Atlas Historique du Québec*, New France is thus basically everywhere outside the thirteen colonies, an unlimited swath of blue, while in the *Atlas National du Canada* it is much smaller.³ Interestingly, this last map depicts New France as it stood in 1667, and it takes Rupert's Land out of it, while this territory only came into existence in 1670. This is a plain example of projecting our present worldview on the past.
- 6 Another instance of such projection was shown through a map taken from Bernard Bailyn's *The Great Republic* (Bailyn, 1977). Desbarats remarked that whereas in some of the previous maps Louisiana was part of New France, here the two were clearly separated by the Great Lakes. She added that there was a simple interpretation here: New France is not part of US national territory, while Louisiana is, and the two were placed accordingly. Despite these geographical differences, something united all these textbooks: the conviction that New France is something that can be mapped and limited by drawing lines around it. At a profound level, we are prisoners of our contemporary geographic imagination which we project on the past: we take for granted the world of well-delineated nation-states. In order to free ourselves, Catherine Desbarats maintained, we must look at this space as historically constituted. We must try to see in what context contemporaries thought about New France and the meanings and purposes that this phrase had back then.

Sites of the possible: what was New France?

- 7 The paper then moved on to the first inscriptions of New France: those did not describe an actual place, but a wish, a possible place for the French to settle. A prime example of this, and one of the very first occurrences of the phrase, was Giovanni Da Verrazano's "Nova Gallia".⁴ He put French people on the map and named places after French cities

then famous. In histories of old, Desbarats noted, this would have been described as the French taking possession of that part of the new world, thus naturalizing the French presence. But according to her, Verrazano was rather honouring Francis I in order to get the sovereign's backing.

- 8 Whatever Verrazano's New France actually was, the more the idea of it was discussed, the more it became legitimate. This legitimizing process took place within the republic of letters, so much so that the first people reading about New France did so in Italian, Desbarats explained, as for instance in the collection of travel narratives compiled by Giovanni Ramusio. Although New France was not precisely located, many authors agreed on the fact that Francis I had a legitimate claim there.
- 9 It is to strengthen this claim that Marc Lescarbot, a lawyer, published his *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France* in 1609; it was a crucial text, notably because it was the first narrative claiming this place had a history. But his writings must be put in the religious-legal context to which they belong, Catherine Desbarats added. Indeed, since the Christian message was universal, those who brought it to the natives gained a right of jurisdiction over them, by authority of the papacy. There was thus a race to find people who did not know God and thus gain power over them. Another way to legitimize a territorial claim was through the seas: in the context of Grotius' incipient theories on territorial waters, maritime control was paramount. To Catherine Desbarats, this explained the watery character of New France, variously depicted as a land crossed by many waterways, as an island, or even as a sea.

Changing conceptions of sovereignty: mapping ambiguity

- 10 The competing claims generated ambiguity, but most of it was already present in the documents giving legal power over the new world. To show this, Catherine Desbarats invited the audience to look at the commissions of the viceroys and governors of New France, and emphasized the fact that the geography in these documents was not clear at all. This impression of confusion is again a projection on our part: sovereignty then was not about having power over territory, but over people and different sorts of entities (fiefs, domains...). What we see as the complicated idea of sovereignty of the Ancien Régime naturally turned up in New France: the commissions could not bind the sovereigns to a territory because they would travel, and sovereignty would travel with them.
- 11 But how to transcribe this on a map? Taking the example of a 1708 map by Franquelin, a French hydrographer living in Quebec, Catherine Desbarats showed that jurisdiction was not asserted through lines, but rather through the names of places. Thus, Franquelin's map is literally covered in names, many of which are in indigenous language. That the French presence seemed drowned in native populations was not a problem because of the French feudal vision of empire; although the natives possessed the land, Louis XIV had an all-encompassing power over all of them. This was part of what Catherine Desbarats called "the French baroque empire and its extraordinary power to co-opt". Lines were thus few and far between, mainly used for decorative purposes, until the 1750s: they then became essential to a cold war of cartography opposing the British and French interests in North America before the Seven Years' War.⁵ Ironically, maps were soon excluded from boundary negotiations by contemporaries: they were deemed too political.

Concluding Remarks

- 12 Professor Catherine Desbarats concluded her paper by applying the ideas of anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler on empire to the French imperial space that was New France. Stoler said empires thrive on ambiguity: they are macro-polities that have never been nor ever will be clearly bounded, because they need to be able to take possession of sovereignty. Every time an empire is mapped, a gross political simplification occurs, creating shadow populations and ambiguous identities. This is illustrated by the people of Kahnawake: living in the heart of the St Lawrence's valley south of Montreal, their territory is included in every vision of New France, yet they strongly reject this appellation. In the discussion that followed, the difficulty of the project was underlined: was writing a fully decolonized history of New France, a colonial concept, even possible? Professor Catherine Desbarats expressed doubts, but claimed it made it all the more challenging.
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NOTES

1. See for instance Greer, 2005, or Desbarats' 2009 preface to White, 1991.
2. See http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nouvelle-France_map-fr.svg (last accessed on February 19th, 2014).
3. See Boudreau, 1997 for Québec, and <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/confederation/023001-5001-e.html> (last accessed February 19th, 2014) for Canada.
4. Verrazano's travel narrative in fact remained unpublished for some time; the phrase "Nova Gallia" first appeared on a 1529 map made by his brother Girolamo. Giovanni had preferred the term "Francesca" for this territory, an even plainer homage to Francis I.

5. See the Mitchell map of 1755: <http://www.loc.gov/item/74693187> (last accessed on February 19th, 2014).

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