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H-France Review Vol. 14 (June 2014), No. 91

Marc Conesa, *D'herbe, de terre et de sang: La Cerdagne du XIVe au XIX siècle*. Perpignan: Presses universitaires de Perpignan, 2012, 556 pp. Color plates, tables, figures, notes, and indices. €35 (pb). ISBN 978-2-35412-171-6.

Review by Peter Sahlins, University of California, Berkeley.

Here is yet another book about the Cerdagne (Cerdanya), a once lost valley in the Catalan Pyrenees that along with the border between France and Spain has drawn an unusually large number of university scholars writing in three languages. Full disclosure: I published *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* nearly a quarter century ago (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1989), and I am partly responsible, according to Marc Conesa, for the disproportional and unjustified attention paid to the political boundary and the division of the valley between France and Spain by the Peace of the Pyrenees in 1659. My book is not alone. The works (in Catalan) of Oscar Checa Jané and (in French) of Alain Ayats, among others, are all accused of using the frontier as the “dominant axis of a history” (p. 19).<sup>[1]</sup> We are wrong (if wrongly accused) in seeking to explain the totality of the social transformations of this fertile and populous valley by “the fact of the frontier” without regard to “other factors, perhaps older and more structural” (p. 19). Conesa does make the interesting point that the characteristic object of study of the Pyrenees, which in the nineteenth century was the “stem-family” made famous by Frederic Le Play, has now become the boundary and borderland of France and Spain. And he wants no part of it.

Conesa seeks to “analyze the relations of territories and societies in the long duration” (p. 17), but the “territory” that he identifies is resolutely a local one. The book thus takes up the traditional concerns of rural history: the relations between the town and countryside, the fate of the seigneurie in the early modern period, inheritance and property ownership among the peasantry, the organization and transformation of the agro-pastoral system, all forms of “territory,” but all disengaged from the history of the political boundary. The distinctive and multilayered conception of territory that came into being during the sixteenth century was transformed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the narrative arc of a story that refuses to engage the history and fabrication of the political boundary between France and Spain. Ignoring the boundary, Conesa nonetheless seeks to avoid writing another local study. His announced “attempt at global history will be nothing like a regional monograph, a village or a family study” (p. 21) because of the constant “game of scales” (*jeux d'échelles*), a term made famous by Jacques Revel, that makes connections and comparisons with broader regional, national, and European contexts.

Unfortunately, the book cannot quite measure up to its own ambitions. The connections and comparisons are allusive and incomplete, and, more importantly, Conesa cannot avoid the history of the international boundary in the Cerdanya. If the index is to be trusted, that “frontier” (*frontière*) is discussed on more than eighty occasions in a five-hundred page book. More importantly, his choice of archives and of sources was shaped by the political boundary, and so is the resulting history that, with the exception of Puigcerdà, is far more weighted towards the French Cerdagne and France than to the Spanish Cerdaña, Catalonia, and Spain.

The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of two chapters, that frame a different but related history of the valley from the fourteenth to the late eighteenth century. Part I considers the town of Puigcerdà, its medieval privileges and fiscal governance, and especially its demographic, political, and agrarian domination of the valley in the fifteenth century (when it was the fifth largest settlement in Catalonia) to its continuous decline and marginalization afterwards. By the early seventeenth century, Puigcerdà had become a “destituted town,” and in the late eighteenth century, it ranked ninety-fourth among Catalan settlements. In its demographic decline, the town lost control of its agro-pastoral resources and political dominance of the valley, but Conesa says little about the central role of the rise and decline of textile manufacturing in the late medieval period that had assured the town of its prominence in the valley and the region, and that contributed to its decline. Instead, he attributes the demographic decline to three factors: the rise of Barcelona; the relocation of the boundary (in 1659) that turned Puigcerdà into a fortified if increasingly marginal border town; and the rise of viticulture (that caused the depopulation of northwest Catalonia) (pp. 114-5).

So in fact, the boundary is not so unimportant after all. (The other two regional factors are only mentioned, not explored—so much for the “game of scales”). Conesa insists that the decline predated the Treaty of the Pyrenees and was not its result, but he himself documents extensively the royal authority of the Crown of Aragon over Puigcerdà as a fortified border town before the Treaty, and the pressure from France (through the presence of the newly-construction fortified town of Mont-Louis) after 1659. While not denying the role of the state (or states) in shaping the demographic and institutional decline of Puigcerdà, Conesa seeks to underscore that the Treaty of the Pyrenees did not have a significant impact on the social fabric (and evolving social structures) of the valley. Thus, for example, he constitutes a corpus of 6,870 marriage acts from eighteenth-century French parishes, registered by the French state and thus conserved in the departmental archives in Perpignan. The political frontier was not an obstacle to intermarriage, he concludes, and if endogamy increased in the eighteenth century (he argues, using far more sources than I was able to collect), it was because of the simple demographic fact that the villages grew demographically in size at the expense of Puigcerdà (pp. 120-1).

The second section, “The Land and the Blood,” documents the modes of appropriation by different actors—from local seigneurs to the youngest sons of peasant families—of the resources in this agro-pastoral system between the late medieval period and the late eighteenth century. Again, the ambition is to be commended. The 7,000 marriage acts are supported by an (unlinked) study of 900 marriage contracts, 400 lease agreements, and over 100 land registers (*cabreus, livres terriers*)—countless hours of coding and running descriptive statistical analyses. But these large datasets remain unlinked, and are used serially in a string of detailed inquiries that range from the modes and changes in landholding and agro-pastoral practices of the seigneurie to the transmission of property among the rural populations of the valley.

The conclusions drawn from these impressive but unconnected descriptive statistical studies are hardly surprising. Most of the seigneuries in the French Cerdagne were royal (indeed, French), and ecclesiastical and noble lords, where they existed, were distant figures, not even particularly powerful when they lived on site (as the case of the vicomte d’Evol and his pastoral lands suggests). The (French) Crown had long captured their “high justice,” and peasant communities competed, often successfully, for the use of their pastures and prairies. As seigneurial manses were dismembered into houses after the sixteenth century, property holding in the villages became more concentrated, and the social hierarchy became more stratified. The demonstration of these and related trends, once again, is impressive. For example, Codesa crunches 13,026 tithe returns from a single village in the French Cerdagne during the eighteenth century (another unlinked dataset) to analyze fluctuations in production, extension of arable lands, and the fragmentation of territory.

Similarly, his study of 3,564 property transactions in the seigneurie of Estavar over two hundred years is rich data that yields relatively little—especially with respect to the ostensible framing concern of the

book, the changing nature of territory. The author's datasets testify to an intense and largely unreflexive positivism, and the intellectual payoff is often limited to simple observations about the family cycle or a neo-Malthusian explanation of historical change. More convincing are the descriptive, qualitative case studies, including the *Pasquiers* of Carol or the canal of Puigcerdà. (Both cases involved, after 1659, communities on both sides of the border, a fact that fundamentally changed the nature of contention and of territory, which Conesa documents but does not interpret). These cases best reveal his central claim, albeit one drowned out by the relentless descriptive statistics—the emergence in the early modern period of a notion of territory (including pastures and water) marked by overlapping ownership, mixed jurisdictions, fragmentation, and a layered, historical relation to the land—an Old Regime territoriality that would come to an end in the eighteenth century.

The third and final section of the book in fact traces the unraveling (or rather, consolidation) of property and territory, and the changing spatial logic of the agro-pastoral system. The transformation seems straightforward enough, from “feudal rights” to “full property,” a transformation that came from above, and threatened the territorial regime and social order of the local communities of the French Cerdagne. Yet Conesa refuses to tie the genesis of a new relation to territory and space that emerged between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the history of the Franco-Spanish boundary. Instead, the author traces the “fixation of territories” in which landed property was delimited, unencumbered, and counted as an exclusive possession of citizens.

Alas, the very best evidence he has lies in his highly detailed and plausible readings of the forms of property dispute resulting from the imposition of the Spanish *catastro* in 1732 and the French *cadastre* in 1830—both of which revolved heavily around the political enclave of Llívia, a Spanish “town” completely surrounded by French “villages.” Conesa wishes to tell a familiar story about the end of the seigneurie, the abolition of usufruct, and the reduction of the multiplicity of “boundaries” of any given property. In his account, the state is acknowledged but remains largely absent as an historical actor. The author offers neither detail nor new interpretation of the role of the Enlightenment or the French Revolution in this process of territorial consolidation, nor does he consider the broader movements of “territorialization” and border delimitation beginning in the late eighteenth century, including in the Pyrenees.

What the cadasters do reveal, then, is the fundamental and growing importance of the political boundary in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although Conesa devotes many pages to the cross-boundary disputes over land, the author is not at all interested in the question of identities, local or national, Catalan, French, or Spanish, which have been central to border studies in the Pyrenees and elsewhere. Nor is Conesa interested in considering a history of the border that constantly if fleetingly appears in his work as a stable, transhistorical fact. But in trying too hard to ignore the boundary, while denying that the frontier itself has a history, he misses a remarkable opportunity to make sense of a borderland using archival sources and methods for the study of rural history that were simply not available a quarter century ago. Conesa deliberately ignores the holdings of national archives in Madrid and Paris, convinced that these would only gloss a rich local history of the valley with an artificial and political history of the border, but without recourse to national archives, it is impossible to write the history of *both* sides of the valley after 1659—something that he never in fact tries to do. He does dig deep into the rich local archives of the (Spanish) town of Puigcerdà, holdings now inventoried thanks the relentless efforts of the late and much beloved Sebastia Bosom i Isern over the last twenty years (to whom the book is dedicated). And he has spent countless hours in the French departmental archives in Perpignan, from where he constituted many of his statistical datasets, made possible by the registration and *contrôle* of most social transactions, from birth to marriage to commercial law.

Conesa confesses that the region of the “French Cerdagne” is consistently more privileged in the study because it has more archival traces, since “it was less touched by destruction” (p. 173), but there are deeper logics at work that have kept him largely on the French side of the border, even regionally. The

ecclesiastical archives of the Seu d'Urgell, or those of Baga and Berga, mostly still not inventoried, would have allowed him to work his "scales" on adjoining seigneuries, especially in the southwestern ("Spanish") part of the valley. Was the Church over-represented among lordships in the archives of the "French" (after 1659) Benedictine abbey of Saint-Martin du Canigou, he asks? (p. 175). Only work in "Spanish" archives, incomparable because of their differential "survival" but nonetheless rich and revealing, can say for sure. And there is no doubt that a fuller exploitation of the Crown of Aragon archives would have shed more light for him on the "Spanish" villages of the lower part of the valley.

My point here is that the "survival" of archives is not only the sum of random events but has historical and structural (and national) implications. The French state and its bureaucracy not only recognized, recorded, and registered the many transactions of civil society, but over time its presence—in borderlands and beyond—shaped the trajectories and choices of its subjects and citizens, as Conesa himself is forced to admit. Conesa suggests how the late eighteenth-century consolidation of territory took shape in the borderline cases of Llivia and the surrounding French villages. The shape of these changes was different in the Spanish villages of the Cerdanya, as other archives reveal—including national ones—but these are not within Conesa's brief.

Despite its heft, the book is a "reduced version" of a 2010 doctoral thesis at Montpellier III, and it unfortunately reads like one. Conesa regrets the reduction and omission of footnotes and examples, although the general reader may not miss them, and it is certainly unfortunate that the Press chose not to include a bibliography or a more detailed list of archival sources consulted (these are included only in a strange "thesaurus" of keywords, pp. 518-19). To their credit, Conesa and the Press were able to include sixteen superb color plates of maps and GIS data and have included a usable set of indices. But the book lacks a strong editorial hand that could have not only corrected the numerous typos and formatting issues, but given more importance to the book's true subject, a history of "territory" from the late medieval to the early nineteenth century.

Indeed, scholars of the spatial turn may want to take note of this book. Conesa's "fixation" theory of the changes that began during the eighteenth century configures nicely with the broad consensus of geographers and jurists alike, and in this sense, the book makes a modest contribution to the debate about territoriality and modernity. Its contribution to a more old-fashioned rural history will interest historians of agriculture and the rural world, but only if they have not gone over to the field of environmental history, about which this book has nothing to say. Conesa's published thesis will certainly interest historians of the Cerdagne and the Cerdanya, and perhaps some rural and social historians of early modern France can make use of parts of it. Border and borderland scholars will not only be slighted, but disappointed and a little puzzled. The specter of "The Frontier" haunts this book, and the author's account of the boundary's absent presence in the Cerdagne (Cerdanya) has left this reader unconvinced, even if he is impressed with all the author's hard work.

#### NOTE

[1] Oscar Checa Jané, *Catalunya i França al segle XVII : identitats, contraidentitats i ideologies a l'època moderna, 1640-1700* (Catarroja : Afers, 2006) and Alain Ayats, *Louis XIV et les Pyrénées catalanes, de 1659 à 1681 : frontière politique et frontières militaires* (Canet: Trabucaire, 2002).

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ISSN 1553-9172