

Placing Louisiana in the Francophone World: Opportunities and Challenges

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Introduction

A basic geographical principle holds that understandings of phenomena are influenced by the ways they are spatially framed. For example, assessments of the impacts of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans differ if the focus of analysis is the Lower Ninth Ward, the seven-parish area comprising New Orleans proper, the greater New Orleans metropolitan area, or any of a myriad other possible spaces. It follows that geographical inquiry should be concerned not just with how things are organized on the ground, but with the nature and implications of different spatial framings of processes and events.

Until recently much of the work aimed at problematizing the spatial constructs that circumscribe the analysis of social processes focused on relatively small-scale spaces of economic, political, or social significance: neighborhoods, development zones, voting districts, and the like. At larger scales, the state was the dominant, taken-for-granted framework for inquiry—even of phenomena unconnected with the formal practice of politics—and at supra-state scales the geographical backdrop was often the seven continents into which the world has traditionally been divided (Lewis and Wigen 1997). For every reference to river basins or linguistic regions there were thousands to the United States, France, North America, and Europe.

Over the past two decades the larger-scale spatial frameworks that are commonly used to understand the world have come in for increasing scrutiny. One significant impetus for this analytical shift came from changes in the political map that unfolded in the wake of the disintegration of the post-World War II political order and challenges to the state's traditional functions associated with a set of process tied to globalization (to use the commonly deployed term). These developments paved the way for far-reaching critiques of the unexamined assumptions of state-centric social science (see, e.g., Agnew 1994; Murphy 1996; Taylor 1994). Another impetus for change came from the growing influence of post-structuralist perspectives calling for the critical examination of foundational concepts deployed in social science research—including space (see, e.g., Lefebvre 1991). This theoretical turn fostered growing interest in the ways in which spatial framings at all scales reflect ideological and social orientations and are actively used to advance particular agendas.

The turn toward a critical analysis of spatial constructs at large scales represents a direct challenge to the tendency to treat states and continents as unexamined containers for study and analysis. Although much work continues to move forward with little reference to this challenge, the effort to problematize spatial constructs has helped pave the way for innovative approaches to conceptualizing regions and regional relationships (see generally Lewis and Wigen 1999). *Atlantic Studies* is an example of where such innovation can lead. By advancing a geographical framework that cuts across traditional spatial compartmentalizations, *Atlantic Studies* encourages thinking about different questions and relationships from the ones that have long dominated the agenda.

The geographical reframing that an Atlantic Studies perspective invites can influence how we understand the regional situation of a place such as Louisiana. Although historical studies of Louisiana necessarily make reference to the state's roots in French and Spanish colonialism, to a large extent Louisiana is treated as part of the American South, of the United States, of North America. An Atlantic Studies perspective encourages consideration of different regional constructs. One of those is a logical outgrowth of the state's distinctive "French" or "Cajun" character. Is Louisiana a part of the somewhat amorphous geographical construct known as the Francophone World? If so, how and why? What is the relevance of the Francophone World for those living in Louisiana—past, present, and future? These are the questions at the heart of this study.

I begin by considering the various meanings attached to the Francophone World. This provides a basis for assessing Louisiana's status in relation to this construct. I show that despite the importance of French speakers to the state's history, until recently Louisiana has occupied a peripheral position (at best) in the geographical imaginary known as the Francophone World. I next turn to a consideration of the period beginning in the 1960s when an explicit effort was made to highlight and celebrate Louisiana's French character. This period saw an active effort on the part of those in Louisiana to embrace the Francophone World idea—to some effect. I then argue that the post-Hurricane Katrina situation in Louisiana in general, and in New Orleans in particular, has raised the stakes for the effort to position the state within the Francophone World. In practical terms, situating Louisiana more firmly within the perceptual (and loosely functional) Francophone World regional construct could have tangible economic and cultural benefits. In conceptual terms, the developments discussed in the paper highlight

the need to see regions not just as passive spatial compartments, but as actively constructed geographical frameworks that are sometimes used to advance social, economic, and political agendas. There has been much discussion in the geographical literature of a “politics of scale” (Smith 1992; Brenner 2000); the analysis set forth here highlights the importance of a related “politics of regions.”

What is the Francophone World?

Any effort to analyze Louisiana’s place within the Francophone World requires up-front consideration of what the term Francophone World means. Most scholars trace the origins of the word Francophone to the French geographer Onésime Reclus, who in 1880 referred to the French-speaking peoples of the world as *la francophonie* (e.g., Brière 2005). There was an implied spatiality to *la francophonie* from the beginning. As Brière (2005, 167) writes:

The “imagined reality” of *la francophonie* began with mapmaking and the use of color to signal empire. Maps represented the French colonial empire as lavender-hued, distinctly apart from the pink of the British Empire, each appearing as autonomous entities around the globe.

Despite this underlying geographical caste to *la francophonie*—or its English-language equivalent, Francophone—Reclus’ terminological innovation was often used simply to refer to the French speakers of the world. Moreover, it was decades before the term came into wider use. It did not begin appearing in dictionaries until the 1930s, and it did not assume a significant place in the popular lexicon until well after World War II (Sautman 2001, 121-123).

There is no easily traceable history of the practice of appending the term World to Francophone, or of the use of its French equivalent (*le monde francophone*), but the

compound term was not widely deployed before the 1960s. It appears to have arisen out of a desire to acknowledge specifically the loose geographical framing behind the term *francophonie*; the Francophone World referred to those parts of the world where French is spoken. Of course this leaves open a host of questions concerning what areas are included and excluded. Does French have to be the primary language of a significant percentage of a population of an area for that area to be included in the Francophone World? What variants of French qualify for Francophone World status? What percentage of those living in an area have to speak French for the area to be regarded as a part of the Francophone World—and what size areal units should be used in making this determination?

Questions such as these have not received extended consideration, in part because many who use the term Francophone World are simply making informal reference to “those countries and areas of the world where the French language is used as a means of communication, whether officially or not”—to quote from the first definition of the term offered by Dennis Ager (1996, 1). Those deploying the term in this way use it in a general sense to refer to the set of far-flung places that share some significant linguistic, and by logical extension historic, ties to France and the French (see figure 1). What precisely constitutes the Francophone World is a product of prevailing conceptual mappings of these places, not an exercise in precise or formal territorial delimitation. I thus refer to this definition of the term as “informal.”

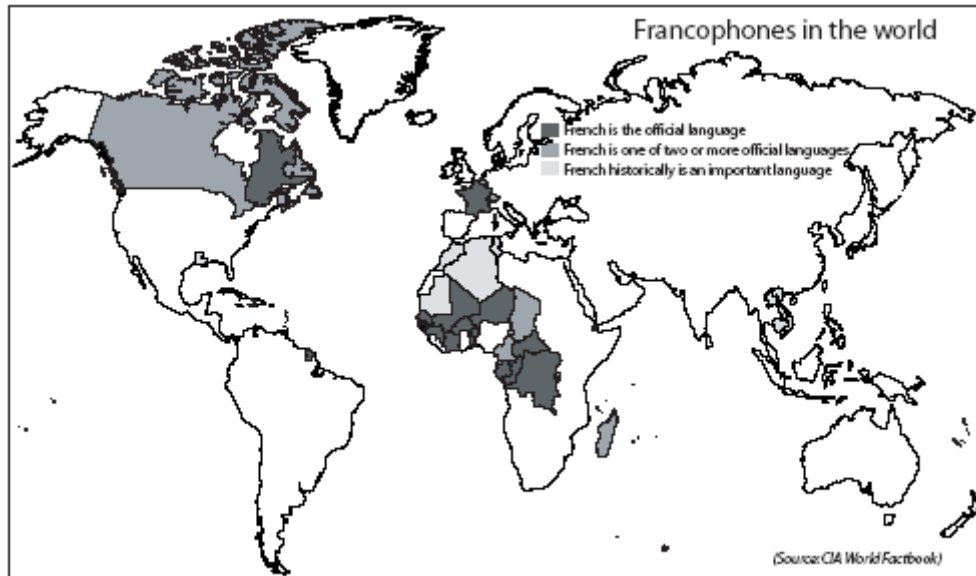


Figure 1

There is a more formal approach to the Francophone World construct, however. This use of the term is tied to the development of an international organization that brings together representatives of French-speaking countries and regions to deal with issues of collective concern. The organization traces its roots to the decolonization of Africa. It allows France to maintain multilevel contacts with former colonial areas and advance the interests of the French language and of French-speaking areas in an increasingly globalized, and by implication English-dominated, world (Martel 1999). Early incarnations of this idea emerged in the 1950s, first with the formation of an international association of francophone journalists in 1954 and then, in 1958, with the founding of a similar organization for sociologists. In the 1960s Paris began organizing official meetings with its former colonies to promote the teaching of French in those countries, resulting in a 1965 agreement with Québec calling for France to share responsibility for language instruction in that province. These early developments were professional-

cultural in nature, but a politically oriented francophone bloc took shape in 1970 when the heads of three African states, in tandem with Paris, created the Agency for Cultural and Technical Co-operation. Over time the organization expanded its membership and scope of activities, eventually taking the form of *l'Agence intergouvernementale de la francophonie* in 1997. A year later the organization was renamed *l'Organisation internationale de la francophonie* (OIF), known in English as the International Organization of the French-speaking Communities (see generally Weinstein 1976).

The OIF today encompasses 55 member states and 13 observing countries. It is headed by an elected Secretary General, a post currently held by Senegalese President Abdou Diouf. Its goals include “providing democracy with strong roots, promoting cultural diversity and interdependent sustainable development” (Ministère des Affaires Etrangères 2006). Though billed as an international organization, France provides 80 percent of the organization’s funding (Bremner 2006, 42). In addition to paying for administration costs of the OIF, this funding is used to support four association undertakings: the University Agency for French-speaking Communities, which handles student and scholar exchanges between 600 universities; TV5, a French-language television station reaching nearly 200 million people worldwide; the Senghor University in Alexandria; and the International Association of Mayors of partially or totally French-speaking capitals and major cities.

The OIF gives the Francophone World the formal geographical configuration shown in figure 2. The tendency to view the Francophone World as defined by this map is a function in part of the strength and visibility of the OIF. The organization has well publicized biannual summits, enjoys observer status at the United Nations, and reaches

large numbers of people through its outreach programs. At the same time, the OIF is the object of some controversy, which adds to its visibility but also undermines its authority to define the Francophone World in the eyes of some observers. The controversy revolves around whether the organization is viewed as an attempt by France to maintain aspects of its empire through neocolonialist practices (see Mengara 1997), as an initiative aimed at defending the position of francophones in an increasingly English-dominated world (Brière 2005), or as an effort to promote the many French-speaking peoples around the world in the interests of pluralism and social advancement (Gazsi 2006).

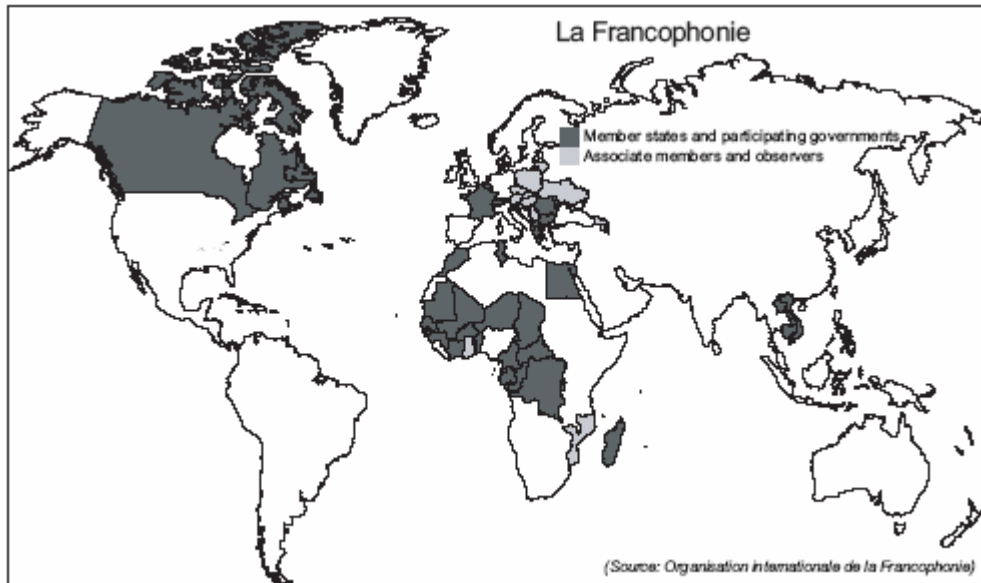


Figure 2

It is beyond the scope of this piece to analyze the controversy in any depth, but it has arguably undermined the OIF’s capacity to shape, in any definitive manner, how the Francophone World construct is understood. Moreover, the somewhat peculiar geography underlying the OIF—a product in part of the organization’s controversial history—works against its status as an authoritative definer of the Francophone World. The organization’s members include decidedly non-francophone states such as Egypt and

Albania; countries enjoying observer status include Hungary, Slovakia, and Ukraine. By contrast, Algeria is not a member (by its own choice). Nonetheless, the power of a formal institution such as the OIF to influence understandings of the Francophone World construct should not be underestimated—particularly when it takes a relatively expansive approach to membership and observer status. Hence, it is not uncommon to find the Francophone World defined as a set of territories that either participate in the OIF (i.e., those in figure 2) or that have explicitly opted out of participation (e.g., Algeria).

Louisiana’s Claim to Francophone World Status

There are certainly grounds for treating Louisiana a part of the geographical construct known as the Francophone World. The lower Mississippi has had a notable French presence since the late seventeenth century, when French explorers began to arrive and Robert Cavelier de La Salle named the region after France’s King Louis XIV. The broad outlines of France’s subsequent involvement in Louisiana are well known. France established a colony extending northwards along both sides of the Mississippi River to its colonial holdings in Canada, and French colonists began to arrive—settling principally along the southern fringes of its vast colony in what is today southern Louisiana and adjacent parts of Mississippi. In 1722 France made New Orleans its colonial capital because of its strategic position near the mouth of the Mississippi River. French Louisiana was not exclusively French, of course. Native Americans were found throughout the territory, and both Spanish and Germans settled in the territory. But the French colonists who came to the southern part of Louisiana represented the first of several historical migrations that would give Louisiana a distinctly French character.

Cultural interactions, including intermarriage between French colonists and Native Americans, Anglo-Americans, Germans, and Spanish, created what came to be known as a White Creole population—particularly in the southeastern part of the present-day state of Louisiana.

France lost its coastal territory east of the Mississippi to the British, and the rest of Louisiana to the Spanish, in the so-called Seven Years' War (1756–1763). Yet the migration of French speakers to the area did not cease. Instead, the francophone population of southwest Louisiana increased when thousands of refugees arrived after being expelled by the British from Acadia. Known initially as Acadians, and later as Cajuns, they strengthened the French character of the region. Additional speakers of a variant of French that developed in the Caribbean began arriving in the late eighteenth century from Saint-Dominique (Haiti). These so-called Afro-Creoles (Hall 1992) brought yet another French element to the territory. Finally, refugees from turmoil in France surrounding the French Revolution brought additional French migrants to Louisiana in the late eighteenth century.

Despite decades of Spanish rule, when Napoleon reacquired the territory for France in 1800, French (in one form or another) was the dominant tongue. Most of Louisiana was transferred to the United States in 1803; the remainder (the southwest corner of the present-day state) was sold to the United States in 1814. Under the terms of the sale, French speakers were guaranteed the right to use their language in education and local governance. This helped ensure that French would remain the principal language of the state for some time. It follows that if the notion of a Francophone World had been around in the early nineteenth century, there is little doubt that Louisiana would have

qualified for membership. As the cultural geographer Eric Waddell (1993, 233) has noted, the state's amalgam of francophone peoples formed a multiethnic nation that stood "apart from the mainstream of English-speaking America and with little minority consciousness." Nonetheless, the in-migration of English speakers and the establishment of English-speaking governmental and commercial institutions in the wake of statehood began to challenge the dominance of French in Louisiana. The general story of the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century is one of the steady erosion of French as a language of public life and everyday communication (Sexton 2000). The erosion began in urban areas, but then spread to rural areas by the twentieth century.

The position of French in Louisiana faced particular obstacles in the post-Civil War era, when a concerted effort to Anglicize the region was launched. A product of the larger nation-building project undertaken in nineteenth-century America (see Shell 2001, 6), French steadily lost ground in public life. The early twentieth century marked an intensification of the Anglicization process. Beginning in 1915 French was banned from schools by the State Board of Education; the following year the Mandatory Attendance Act obligated parents to send their children to school, serving to Anglicize an entire generation in one fell swoop. Then in 1921 English was recognized as Louisiana's sole official language. What followed was a rapid decline in the prestige and practice of French:

Several generations of Cajuns and Creoles were eventually convinced that speaking French was a sign of cultural illegitimacy. Even the Catholic Church, which previously sent French and French-Canadian missionaries to south Louisiana, quickly moved toward the exclusive use of English in religious services (Ancelet 1988, 345).

There were periods when francophone Louisianans were found useful—notably during both the World Wars, when many young men from Louisiana were used as translators in Europe. The overall picture, however, was unquestionably one of decline.

Yet French did not disappear from the picture; there was a strong enough presence of francophones in Louisiana in the late 1960s to mount an ethnic revival movement. Moreover, despite continuing concerns about the declining use of French in Louisiana (Waddell 1993), the state is still home to some 230,000 French speakers (Oudiz 2003). There is also a significant coterie of Louisianans who are aware of their French ancestry. In the 2000 census 545,448 people, or 12.2 percent of the state's population, claimed French ancestry—a number only modestly lower than the 1990 census figure of 550,573 people claiming French ancestry. Since most of these individuals are concentrated in the southern part of the state (see figure 3), a case can be made that the imprint of French remains in at least part of the state of Louisiana. That case is undermined to some extent, however, both by evidence of continued decline in the use of French in Louisiana and by the fact that the percentage of the population considering themselves to be French (as opposed to being of French descent) does not rise above the low-twenties for any parish in the state.

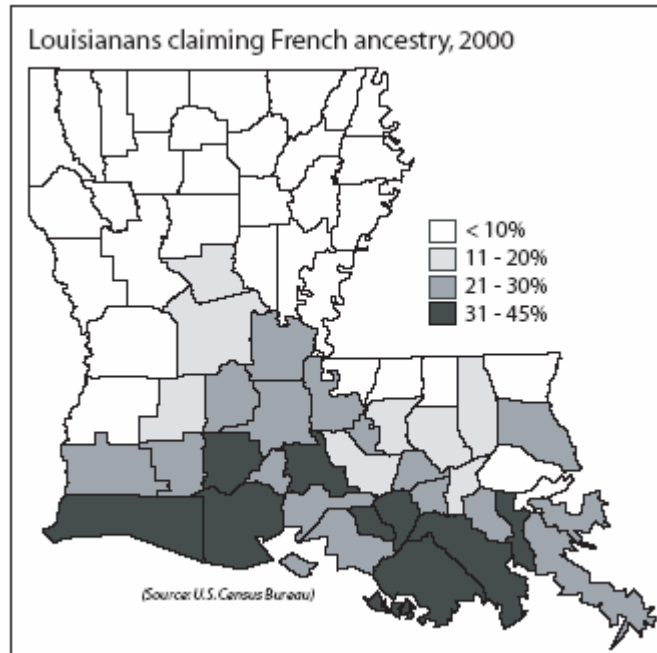


Figure 3

The foregoing suggests that Louisiana might reasonably be considered a part of the Francophone World, but that by the time the Francophone World concept had solidified and attained wider currency (i.e., the second half of the twentieth century), the strength of the claim was becoming more tenuous. It is not surprising, then, that those seeking to advance the Francophone World construct during the 1950s and 1960s paid little attention to Louisiana. Instead, the concept was largely used to refer to France's colonies in Africa and Asia, as well as Québec and French Guinea—an orientation encouraged by a French government concerned with promoting its influence in recently decolonized, or about-to-be-decolonized areas (Mengara 1997).

Beginning in the late 1960s, however, some Louisianans mounted an active effort to raise awareness of the state's status as a member of the Francophone World. That effort has arguably gained new urgency in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Its impact has been modest, but the movement has served to carve out some place for the state in the

Francophone World as informally defined, and even a tenuous foothold in the formalized regional construct associated with the OIF. Examining how and why this happened sheds light on the ways in which regional positionings—both conceptual and functional—reflect and influence developments of significance to places such as Louisiana.

Promoting Louisiana’s Francophone World Credentials in the Pre-Katrina Era

The effort to highlight Louisiana’s Francophone World credentials has its root in a multi-faceted movement that developed in Louisiana during the second half of the twentieth century aimed at combating Anglicized, White norms that had long dominated the territory. The movement is usually seen as a part of a broader “Ethnic Revivalism” sweeping the country, as well as other parts of the globe (Fishman 1985). The movement’s most prominent expression in Louisiana came in the form of demands for basic Civil Rights for the state’s African-American population, but the 1950s and 1960s also saw the emergence of a call for the preservation of the language and cultural traditions of Louisiana’s French-speaking peoples. There was no autonomist or separatist dynamic to the latter movement (Esman 1981); rather it sought to halt or reverse the forces that had led to the marginalization of French language and traditions in southern Louisiana.

The struggle began among French speakers in southwestern Louisiana who sought “to manifest their concern for retaining the most valued elements of cultural difference between them and the Americans” (Gold 1979, 276). Initially resisted by state authorities, the movement gained steam and began to attract the attention of intellectuals by the 1960s. By the second half of that decade a shift in the state’s political climate in

the wake of the Civil Rights movement led to growing interest in the movement in political circles. With the backing of then-Governor John MacKeithen and a group of legislators who saw the economic benefits of embracing the state's French heritage (Trépanier 1991, 162), in 1968 the state legislature established the Council for the Development of French Louisiana (CODOFIL)—an organization charged with doing “any and all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization, and preservation of the French language as found in Louisiana for the cultural, economic and touristic benefit of the state” (Legislative Act No. 409 1968).

CODOFIL set out to reverse the effects of a century of forced assimilation and restore the French tongue to a position of importance in the everyday lives of Louisianans. In an effort to make French available for all Louisianans, the organization successfully backed an initiative requiring Louisiana elementary schools to offer 30 minutes of instruction in the language each day. Yet efforts of this sort did little to revive French among younger people, who were less and less likely to live in households where a variant of French was the principal language of communication (Sexton 2000, 41). Moreover, CODOFIL faced a significant problem advancing its agenda because its popular base was small and fragmented (Trépanier 1991, 162). Hence, while it had some success drawing attention to the state's French heritage and support for the preservation of that heritage, its ability to strengthen the position of the Louisiana French was limited.

Most assessments of the general picture of the Louisiana French during the closing decades of the twentieth century stress three general points:

1. CODOFIL and its allies in the Louisiana French revival movement promoted a harmonization of the diverse French elements in Louisiana—both as a means of

gaining political clout by unifying their constituency and as a reflection of the essentialism that pervaded the ethnic revivalist movement of which it was a part (see, e.g., Trépanier 1991). A certain conflation of Louisiana's French communities (migrants from France, Acadians, White Creoles, Afro-Creoles) had been going on for two centuries. But the late-twentieth-century French revival movement took the position that the "primordial aspects of Cajun-ness" were attributable to the Louisiana French in general (Sexton 1999, 303). CODOFIL and the state of Louisiana were deeply implicated in this project. In the early 1970s the state legislature officially designated the southern part of Louisiana as Acadia—effectively subsuming a diverse array of peoples under the Cajun label. Cajun became synonymous with individuals of French ancestry, and "Cajun Country" came to be seen as an analog for French Louisiana (Trépanier 1991, 164).

2. The potential economic benefits of the French revival movement help explain the partial embrace of the movement by the state of Louisiana. Since the discovery of oil in Louisiana in 1901, the state's economy has been subject to the whims of oil prices. By the time CODOFIL was established in 1968, the price per barrel had stagnated for several years—with demonstrable negative consequences for Louisiana's economy. The ensuing imperative to diversify the state's economy fostered interest in Louisiana's French heritage as a commodity to be marketed for economic gain. A synergy thus developed between the state of Louisiana's efforts to promote business and tourism and CODOFIL's interest in celebrating the distinctiveness of French Louisiana. That synergy found concrete expression

in events and activities aimed at promoting Cajun-French material culture, foods, and traditions. This served to boost the state's economy, but it also led to growing concerns about the commodification of French Louisiana (Lewis 1996).

3. Despite the activism of CODOFIL and its success in securing some tangible gains for the Louisiana French, the French language continues to lose ground in the state. This is confirmed by CODOFIL itself, which notes on its website that between the 1990 and 2000 censuses, the number of Louisianans who claimed they spoke French at home dropped from 250,000 to 198,794. The decline of French has become so significant that some commentators believe that “the present generation of youths of Cajun and French descent is one which will not be able to transmit the French language to its children” (Landry, Allard, and Henry 1996, 442).

Each of the foregoing points captures an important feature of French Louisiana during the closing decades of the twentieth century. Yet they are largely discussed without reference to Louisiana's position in the Francophone World—even though the period saw a growing presence for Louisiana in conceptualizations of the Francophone World, at least in the informal sense of the term. This came about as a result of an active effort on the part of Louisianans to position the state as a part of the Francophone World. Since that effort both grew out of the general trends described above and helped to shape them in particular ways, it is important to insert the state's positioning with respect to the Francophone World into the late-twentieth-century picture.

A variety of contacts existed between French Louisiana and other parts of the Francophone World prior to the late 1960s, but it was not until CODOFIL's founding that concrete steps were taken to embrace the Francophone World construct to Louisiana's advantage. Rocky Sexton (1999, 304) argues that the organization's leaders saw the advantage of "developing a bilingual window to the Francophone World," and they moved quickly to cast French Louisiana in that context. It is instructive to examine their efforts against the backdrop of the three generally recognized features of late-twentieth-century French Louisiana outlined above.

1. Given internal divisions within French Louisiana and little wider understanding of the French history or character of the state, the movement needed an orientation and a focus that the Francophone World could provide. By highlighting Louisiana's place in the Francophone World, CODOFIL's leaders could tie themselves to a regional construct of growing salience that, if ignored, could make it increasingly difficult to stake out a strong claim on behalf of French Louisiana. Advancing the claim, however, necessarily meant treating the peoples and tongues comprising French Louisiana in a generalized, somewhat essentialist way. The way this was negotiated on the language front is made clear on CODOFIL's web page. While acknowledging the diversity of peoples comprising French Louisiana, reference is made to a "Louisiana French that is spoken by the majority of Francophones in this state." This variant of French is, of course, unique, but "the same can be said of the French spoken in places like Québec, Dakar, and even Paris." CODOFIL's approach to this matter reflects the previously noted tendency to collapse French Louisiana's ethnolinguistic

complexity into overarching categories. More importantly for the matter under consideration in this paper, this tendency was not divorced from the effort to link Louisiana to the Francophone World. It came out of that effort, and it helped to facilitate the homogenization of the French communities of Louisiana.

2. Embracing the Francophone World clearly served the joint purpose of promoting certain elements of French-Louisianan culture and strengthening the state's tourism and export economies. With regard to the former matter, initiatives aimed at bolstering interest in Cajun cuisine and music (e.g., the state's first Zydeco Festival in 1981) helped Cajuns shed the image of being a poor, backward people and adopt the mantra of being "cool" (Waddell 1993, 249). As for economics, downturns in the state's economy associated with declining energy prices in the late 1960s, and then again in the late 1980s-1990s (see figure 4), pushed state officials to look for alternative sources of revenue. Making French Louisiana more visible beyond its frontiers offered the prospect of enhanced funding for cultural projects and new sources of revenue for Louisiana's economy. A logical avenue for pursuing that visibility was to play up Louisiana's Francophone World credentials. Cajun culture was the product, and the Francophone World was the potential audience.

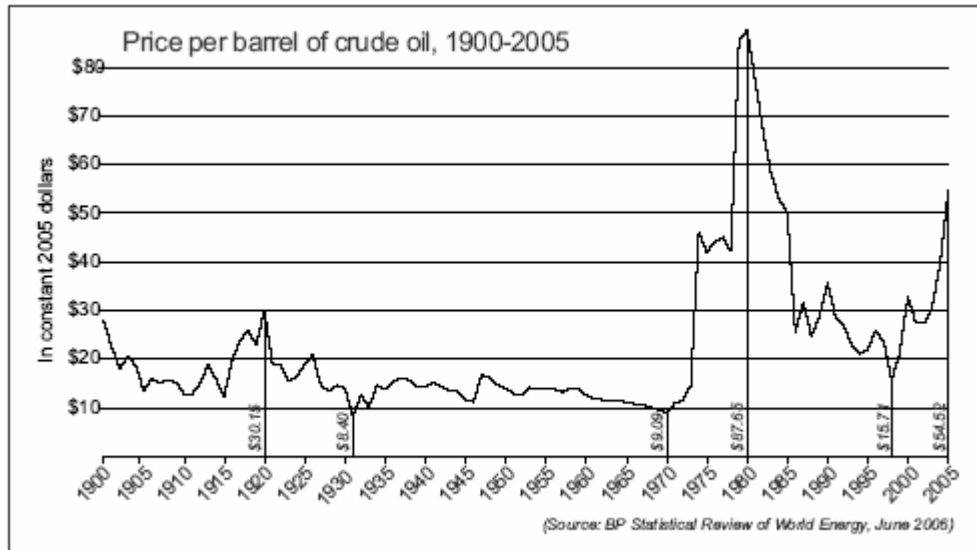


Figure 4

The effort to develop links with the Francophone World took different forms. Members of CODOFIL worked together with interested parties in the public and private sectors to foster links with France. The famous statue of Jeanne d’Arc in New Orleans’ French Quarter, which was given to the city by the citizens of France in 1972, stands as a symbol of the early success of this initiative. By 1977 an organization known as “les Amis de la Louisiane” sprang up, which evolved into France-Louisiane—an entity that came to have fourteen chapters in France and six in Louisiana. Over the years it has held numerous conferences, sponsored exhibitions receptions, organized trips and youth exchanges to Louisiana, and published a quarterly newspaper (<http://flfa.free.fr/webflfaf.html>). The focus of other initiatives extended beyond France to other parts of the Francophone World. International festivals such as the city of Lafayette’s *Festival International de Louisiane* celebrated the links between Louisiana and French speakers in other parts of the world. Exchange

agreements were worked out with France, Belgium, and the Canadian Provinces of Québec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. Although these strategies may have helped Louisiana attract more tourists and develop wider markets for “Cajun” products, the state remained relatively poor (King 1989) and concerns developed that a commodified French-Louisiana culture was trumping anything more authentic (Waddell 1993). The point, though, is that the economic-cum-cultural trajectory of the state in the late twentieth century was influenced by the effort to embrace the Francophone World construct.

3. With little capacity to affect what was happening in individual households, the campaign to halt the decline in the use of French came to be focused on the schools. Satisfying the demand for French-speaking teachers was no easy matter. One solution was to turn to Europe, but there was interest in casting the net more broadly so that standardized Parisian French did not overwhelm Louisiana French (Sexton 2000). The obvious solution was to look to the Francophone World more generally. In the course of reaching out to French teachers not just in France and Belgium, but in Québec, Haiti, and French-speaking Africa as well, Louisianans used the Francophone World construct to address a local need. This likely served to draw attention to the concept of a Francophone World within Louisiana, even as it raised the state’s profile as a francophone domain in other parts of the world. None of this was enough to combat the forces working against the use of French in Louisiana, however, which Rocky Sexton attributes to “the decades of stigma associated with French that created a mindset among adults opposed to practicing French with their children” (Sexton 2000, 41).

Even though the Francophone World construct had significance for French Louisiana during the late twentieth century, the state's position in that construct remained somewhat marginal. This was particularly the case with respect to the formalized definition of the Francophone World as refracted through the OIF. Louisiana has never been invited to join the organization—either as a member or an observer. By the late 1990s the state was, for the first time, invited to send a delegation to an OIF meeting in Vietnam, but Louisiana continues to take a back seat to places such as Egypt and Romania in the formalized world of *la francophonie*. Thus, it is not surprising not to find New Orleans on the list of cities belong to the *Association Internationale des Maires Francophones* (the International Association of Francophone Mayors).

Louisiana was somewhat more successful in establishing a niche within the Francophone World as informally understood. In some North American universities academic programs on the Francophone World began to include Louisiana. In other French-speaking areas, Louisiana's status as a French-speaking territory was sometimes recognized. And as already noted, a variety of exchange agreements developed between Louisiana and other parts of the Francophone World. Even these, however, suffered in the early 1990s when CODOFIL faced a decrease in its budget and a reduction in activity. As a result, places such as Québec began to lose interest and wind down their presence in Louisiana, and international support for things like French-language radio broadcasts declined (Waddell 1993, 249).

CODOFIL's fortunes began to improve in the late 1990s when the precarious position of the Louisiana economy prompted state officials to revisit their economic development strategies. Once again international oil prices were low (see figure 4), and

an assessment of the state's economic situation was needed. This paved the way for "Louisiana: Vision 2020"—a comprehensive plan put together to guide the state's development (Louisiana Economic Development Council 2003). The plan identifies as one of its three main goals "the preservation, development and promotion of Louisiana's natural and cultural assets for their recreational and aesthetic values" and urges policymakers to take "economic advantage of this heritage with a statewide expansion of the tourism industry" (3). This goal is part of a broader initiative to move away from mineral extraction and embrace "the knowledge economy." In discussing the state's strengths in realizing its hoped-for economic transformation, the document identifies Louisiana's "excellent centralized geographic location relative to both domestic and foreign markets" and its "cultural, historical, and recreational resources that offer opportunities to greatly expand tourism" (10). The stage was thus set for a renewal of efforts to deepen ties with the Francophone World at the end of the twentieth century.

The Early Twenty-First Century

Two key foci of Louisiana's early-twenty-first-century economic development strategy were the promotion of tourism and the marketing of the state's distinctive cultural products to the outside world. On the former front, efforts to capitalize on Louisiana's French character helped the state attract more visitors, but the growing numbers came from domestic, rather than foreign, sources (data provided by Louisiana Office of Tourism). France continued to be an important source region for tourists, and when tourists came to the United States from France they were more likely to visit Louisiana than were tourists coming from other European countries (see figure 5). Yet

there is no strong evidence to suggest that Louisiana’s effort to position itself in the Francophone World led to a disproportionate number of visitors coming from French-speaking areas. Indeed visitors from Canada (the country closest to Louisiana with a Francophone population) were more likely to come from Anglophone provinces than Francophone provinces. Nonetheless, the effort to celebrate the state’s distinctive French character was integral to the general rise in tourism, with clear ramifications for the state’s economy. Visitors to Louisiana spent \$9.4 billion in 2003 and \$9.9 billion in 2004 (cited in Louisiana Recovery Authority 2006, 12). By 2004, 9.4 percent of the workforce was directly employed in travel and tourism, 3.8 percent of the Gross State Product came from tourism-related expenditures, and tourism-related tax revenues paid for 8.3 percent of the state budget. Tourism was particularly important to New Orleans, where tourism-related expenditures account for 40 percent of the city’s revenues (cited in New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corporation 2006).

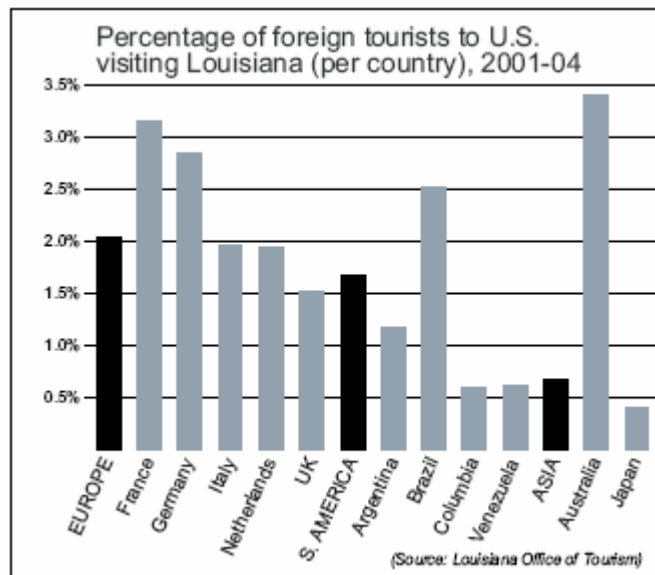


Figure 5

The interest in marketing the state's cultural products to the outside world is underscored in a July 2005 report of the state's Office of the Lieutenant Governor entitled "Louisiana: Where Culture Means Business" (State of Louisiana 2005). The report calls for the careful cultivation and marketing of "culture industries"—with a particular emphasis on distinctly Louisianan products such as cuisine and music. The emphasis of the report is not on attracting visitors to the state, but on exporting the state's cultural products to others. While this is not a strategy that necessarily requires invoking the state's Francophone World credentials, celebrating the distinctiveness of products tied to the Louisiana French is so central to the strategy that it helps to reinforce, and further, the positioning of the state in relation to other French-speaking areas.

Louisiana suffered a major blow in August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina moved across the Gulf of Mexico and slammed into the United States' Gulf coast. Devastation was particularly severe in the southern part of Louisiana—the heartland of French Louisiana. In the wake of the hurricane, the state of Louisiana in general, and the city of New Orleans in particular, were faced with the challenge of rebounding from devastating losses of human life and material infrastructure. In this circumstance, the significance of Louisiana's ties to the Francophone World became manifest in the form of an immediate offer of assistance by France. The Bush Administration initially refused the help, but within a few days the scale of the disaster became clear and the U.S. Secretary of State signaled a willingness to consider France's assistance (CNN 2005). Aid came in the form of relief supplies, airplanes, ships, and medical personnel (Schweid 2005). While no systematic comparative data are available, France was clearly at the forefront of aid

providers—a likely consequence of a sense of connection to Louisiana rooted in the state’s loose, but nonetheless real, ties to the Francophone World.

The immediate post-Katrina aid flowing from France set the stage for a widened set of cultural interactions between France and Louisiana during the following year (General Consulate of France 2007). Under the auspices of various arms of the French government and private-sector groups in France, support was given to the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Historic New Orleans Collection. Cultural exchanges were initiated with schools. Funding was channeled to organizations such as the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, the Cité des Arts, and the Alliance Française organizations in both New Orleans and Lafayette. In addition, musicians from Louisiana were invited to Paris, students from the University of New Orleans were welcome at the University of Orléans, and books were offered to French immersion schools in Louisiana. This all provides a foundation for growing interactions between Louisiana and France, which in turn could help reinforce Louisiana’s position in the Francophone World.

The process of reinforcement is likely to be advanced by the larger context within which Louisiana finds itself in the post-Katrina era. Tourism is a key focus of economic recovery in a number of the state’s southern parishes that were ravaged by the hurricane (Louisiana Speaks 2007). The combination of high energy prices and strong demand has helped Louisiana’s oil and gas industries rebound fairly effectively (Louisiana Economic Development Department 2007), but if cities such as New Orleans are to prosper it will be important to build upon the pre-Katrina efforts to expand tourism and market the state’s distinctive cultural products. This, in turn, will likely translate into continuing efforts to celebrate the state’s French character and its ties to the Francophone World.

The near-term picture, then, is one in which Louisiana's status as part of the Francophone World may be growing, at least as that regional construct is informally understood. And with increasing opportunities for Louisiana to participate in OIF events, the prospect that the state might be seen as part of the more formalized Francophone World may be growing as well. Yet there is an irony to this, as it is happening precisely at the time when the future of the French language in Louisiana is in considerable doubt and when concerns are mounting that, in the effort to attract tourists and market the state's cultural products, the culture of the Louisiana French is being commodified in ways that could ultimately undermine its essence. This suggests that the process of claiming a place in the Francophone World may carry with it a fundamental challenge to the very foundations on which that claim is based.

Conclusion

Regions are typically viewed as spatial constructs that bring together different places based on perceived or actual similarities. They grow out of physical and social processes that create continuities across space—or at least the illusion of continuity. As functional constructs they shape patterns of interaction and exchange. As conceptual constructs they provide a means of imposing some order on the infinite complexity that characterizes the surface of the earth. All of these dimensions of regions find expression in the case of the Francophone World. Yet this study suggests that it is not sufficient to view a region such as the Francophone World merely as the product of conceptual and functional arrangements. The region is also actively constructed by actors pursuing

political and social goals—with implications both for the Francophone World and for the political and social goals of its makers.

There is nothing particularly novel about viewing regions as social constructs; a literature advancing this perspective has been around for some time (Murphy 1991; Thrift 1994). But the case explored in this paper introduces a twist on this somewhat familiar theme. The Francophone World is not simply a product and shaper of social forces; it is a target of social activism that is used to advance economic and cultural ends. To put it another way, it is a framework through which a “politics of scale” is played out. Over the past decade and half, a growing number of studies have argued that scale is not simply a level of representation but something that is actively used to promote social outcomes (see, e.g., Cox 1997; Marston 2000). Yet relatively little has been said about how large-scale, non-governmental regional constructs such as the Francophone World play into that process. Louisiana’s encounter with the Francophone World highlights the ways in which a “politics of regions” infuse scalar politics. Carving out a place for Louisiana in the Francophone World has been driven in significant part by a set of economic and social goals that many believe will be served by being a part of that regional construct: increasing tourism, new markets for cultural products, enhanced support for the French language in Louisiana, and the like. The project has had mixed success, but it has reflected and shaped some of the major economic and cultural struggles of the state over the past several decades. It therefore needs to be seen as a part of those struggles.

Beyond this basic point, it is important to recognize that Louisiana’s pursuit of Francophone World status has meant privileging certain ideas and issues over others. The trade-offs come into particularly sharp focus around the issue of the status of French

in Louisiana. There is substantial evidence of declining use of variants of the French language in the state, yet focusing attention on the decline—or even on the diversity of French variants—is at odds with the effort to champion the state’s Francophone World credentials. As a consequence, an essentialized notion of Louisiana French easily becomes the focus of attention, and outside of narrow circles relatively little attention is directed to the prospect that the French language will be an unimportant medium of communication in Louisiana by the middle of the twenty-first century. It may well be that the best hope of retaining some elements of the Louisiana French heritage lie in the effort to position the state within the Francophone World, but if the initiative is to proceed in a manner that serves the interests of the Louisiana French as much as possible, the contradictions and silences that go with that positioning should not be ignored.

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Figures

Figure 1 – Francophones in the world

Figure 2 – La Francophonie

Figure 3 – Louisianans claiming French ancestry, 2000

Figure 4 – Price per barrel of crude oil, 1900 - 2005

Figure 5 – Percentage of foreign tourists to U.S. visiting Louisiana (by country), 2001-2004