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LOUISE BEAUMAIS

A researcher between data and geopolitics

Louise Beaumais focuses on an underexplored theme: the use of data in foreign policy. An original career path led this doctoral student with a literary bent to focus on defence and security issues early in her studies. It took her all the way to the Arctic, where she looked at the technical vision of this part of the world that data convey.

By Ismaël El-Bou Cottereau

Louise Beaumais doesn't like psychoanalysis. When the doubts of a PhD student assail her, she prefers to immerse herself in figures rather than the Freudian unconscious. 'When I was working on my research question, Frédéric Ramel, one of my thesis advisors, told me to go back to basics and remember what drives me,' she recalls when we met on 5 July 2024 in a café in the heart of Paris. 'He saw something psychoanalytical in it, because my father is an econometrist (laughs). Louise's research at the Centre de recherches internationales (CERI) (Centre for International Studies) focuses on the use of figures in foreign policy. An empirical approach has led her to mix the hard sciences with the social sciences, echoing her early academic training. Despite her literary bent, she pursued a science baccalaureate at her parents' request. In addition to maths and physics, she took a number of electives in history and geopolitics. 'I wasn't that interested in science,' she explains. 'It's funny, when you see the subject of my thesis now ... Sometimes it feels like our paths are predetermined from the start. In fact, that's not really the case. We also somewhat reconstruct our stories.'

After a year of preparatory classes in Rouen, she enrolled at Sciences Po Lille. 'I felt like I was living again after the years of maths and physics,' she says. Curious about everything, she read compulsively, delved into her courses, and took an interest in current affairs. She developed an interest in international defence and security issues – topics that she studied in her Masters and during a study abroad period in Montreal. Her interest in the military began to take shape, and she wrote her dissertation on the sale of Rafale fighter jets to Qatar and worked at the Ministry of the Armed Forces, in the arms export support section. It was an opportunity to get close to this world and stimulate her research. 'I was fascinated by this world and wanted to understand it.'

Her thesis advisor told her that Sciences Po had an opening for a PhD student as part of the Datawar project, a research programme looking at the repercussions for practitioners (journalists, humanitarian workers, military personnel, diplomats) of putting war and conflict into figures. She was admitted for the 2020 academic year. Initially, Louise Beaumais wanted to devote her PhD thesis to conflict early warning systems, but then refocused her research on the use of data in foreign policy. 'I decided to study a field that goes beyond security threat assessment,' she says. 'I wanted to understand the role of numbers in foreign policy more generally, whether they play a role in decision-making and, more generally, how they are used and perceived by practitioners. It's a subject that isn't often explored, yet it's an essential one.' She used the politics of the Arctic as a case study, travelling to Scotland and Iceland, where she was able to 'understand the connection between landscapes and political identities'. 'The use of data,' she adds, 'conveys a very specific perception of the Arctic and contributes to a technical vision that can ignore important aspects such as local indigenous knowledge.'

Besides writing her thesis and various publications, she began teaching a course on global space at the Dijon campus. It was a challenge. 'You're at the beginning of your thesis and you're thrown in at the deep end. My students were only three or four years younger than me. It was very stimulating, and I tried to make my lectures open to discussion. I was happy to take it on, despite the stress of the early days,' she says.

Over the years, Louise Beaumais has honed her research talent. She says she appreciates the 'freedom of speech', the exchange of ideas at conferences and the ties forged with other researchers. What about her academic future? 'Ideally, I'd like to join the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research), because research is still my main focus and there's also the prospect of travel, which I really like,' she says. But she's not closing the door to teaching. 'Even if I'm at the CNRS, I'll still teach. And if I become a lecturer I'll be very happy with that too.'