

The Infancy of France's First Agricultural Syndicate: the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher 1881-1914*

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FRENCH peasants — like those elsewhere — were accustomed to confronting both man-made and natural hazards, both edicts of Government and acts of God.¹ Against such threats, individual peasants traditionally sought group protection within the immediate family and the proximate village community rather than remotely in larger organizations (such as unions and political parties) and institutions (such as Church and State). Peasant recognition of a real world of scarcity coupled with an imagined world of equality encouraged mutual aid and cooperation within families and communities. Thus the idea of equality mediated between the conflicting concepts of liberty and fraternity, of individualism and collectivism.

One of the basic structures underlying French agricultural history has been the conflict between individualism and collectivism. The nineteenth century has, in this respect, been described as a hiatus, a period in which collectivist traditions were suppressed while peasants struggled for individual ownership of land.² The cult of

individualism which triumphed with the French Revolution considerably damaged pre-existing concepts of collectivism and acted as a brake on the emergence of new forms of collective action in agriculture, even when these were advocated as a means of preserving a class of individual owner-occupiers on their farms. Numerous contemporary observers and modern historians of French peasants during the nineteenth century have certainly portrayed them, but almost equally certainly caricatured them, as reactionary individualists wedded securely to their parcels of land and to their lives of routine.³ Thus Marx contemptuously dismissed French peasants as 'rural idiots', describing their mode of production as 'a non-homogeneous and non-unified agglomeration of autonomous units of autarchic production. A small-holding, a peasant and his family; alongside them another small-holding, another peasant and another family. A certain number of these families form a village, and a certain number of villages a *département*. Thus the great mass of the French nation is made up of a simple addition of units bearing the same name, just as a sack filled with potatoes forms a sack of potatoes.'⁴ Emile Zola, in his novel *La Terre*, has the exasperated school-teacher castigating the peasantry: '... you don't know anything and you don't want to,

* The author thanks the British Academy, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, the Social Science Research Council and the University of Cambridge for support grants for the general research project on fraternity in the French countryside during the nineteenth century upon which this particular paper is based.

¹ J Berger, 'A class of survivors', *New Society*, 42, 1977, pp 611-13; J Berger, *Pig Earth*, London, 1979; E Le Roy Ladurie, 'Peasants' in P Burke (Ed), *The New Cambridge Modern History XIII. Companion Volume*, Cambridge, 1979, pp 115-63; J Blum (Ed), *Our Forgotten Past: Seven Centuries of Life on the Land*, London, 1982.

² T Zeldin, *France 1848-1945: I: Ambition, Love and Politics*, Oxford, 1973, pp 131-97. See also G Wright, *Rural Revolution in France. The Peasantry in the Twentieth Century*, London, 1964, pp 1-39.

³ M Bloch, 'Technical change as a problem of collective psychology', *Journal of Normal and Pathological Psychology*, 1948, pp 1014-115, reprinted in M Bloch, *Land and Work in Mediaeval Europe*, London, 1967, pp 124-35.

⁴ Karl Marx *Friedrich Engels Werke*, VIII, Berlin, 1960, pp 198 and 201.

just stuck in your rut'.⁵ Later, Hannah Lynch described the French peasant as 'being content to accommodate himself to circumstances' and as having 'a sturdy passion for independence'.⁶ Early this century, Mary Duclaux wrote: 'the [French] peasant is, as a rule, intellectually idle, incapable of combination, suspicious and impatient of new-fangled ideas. . . . The principle of solidarity has scarcely penetrated as yet into rustic parts.'⁷

None the less, there did gradually emerge within rural France during the second half of the nineteenth century a range of agricultural unions (*syndicats*) in the form, for example, of livestock insurance societies, threshing associations, anti-phylloxera syndicates and general purpose agricultural syndicates whose principal aim was to provide their members with supplies (especially of chemical fertilizers) of guaranteed quality and at reduced prices.⁸ Agricultural *syndicats* in France may be interpreted as individual farmers socializing in order to overcome scarcity (to make the most effective use of limited resources) and in order to preserve their freedom (to ensure the survival of small, sometimes uneconomic, farms under pressure from competition from large and efficient farms not only elsewhere in France but also abroad, particularly in North America). The *syndicats*, groupings of peasants, mediated between the individual

farmer and his social totality.⁹ The function of these syndicates was by no means narrowly economic, for the lesson of solidarity was both taught by the State and preached by the Church in their struggle for the social control of the peasantry. The promotion of agricultural syndicates represented materialism in the service of idealism.¹⁰ Recent major studies of the modernization of rural France have ignored the role of agricultural syndicates and have instead stressed the part which the coming of the railways played in that process;¹¹ but some thirty years ago Augé-Laribé claimed that the practice of association had brought to the social fabric of agriculture in western Europe a change almost as great as that engendered by the railway network in the economic sphere.¹² The purpose of this paper is to examine the development, diffusion and diversification of France's first general purpose agricultural syndicate: the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, which was founded in 1883 at Blois, in the middle Loire valley (Fig 1).

I

According to Roger Dion, no other locality in the entire Loire Valley had a more

⁵ Zola's novel was first published in 1887; it has recently been republished in English as *The Earth*, Harmondsworth, 1980. For historical as well as literary assessments of Zola's depiction of the French peasantry, see: G Robert, 'La Terre' d'Emile Zola. *Etude Historique et Littéraire*, Paris, 1952; C Marcilacy, 'Emile Zola: "historian" des paysans beaucerons', *Annales Economies Sociétés Civilisations*, 12, 1957, pp 573-86.

⁶ H Lynch, *French Life in Town and Countryside*, London, 1901, 172-82.

⁷ M Duclaux, *The Fields of France*, London, 1905, pp 79-131.

⁸ P Barral, *Les Agrariens Français de Méline à Pisané*, Paris, 1968, pp 104-28; M Aguilhon, G Desert and R Specklin, *Apogée et Crise de la Civilisation Paysanne 1789-1914*, Paris, 1976, pp 518-29 (being volume 3 of G Duby and A Wallan (Eds), *Histoire de la France Rurale*, Paris 1975-6). For two much earlier accounts written during the formative years of agricultural syndicalism in France, see: H W Wolff, 'The agricultural syndicates of France', *Journal of the Royal Agricultural Society of England*, Third Series, 11, 1900, pp 252-62 and A Souchon, *Agricultural Societies in France*, Paris, 1915.

⁹ Some of the contextual ideas touched upon briefly here have been considered at greater length in A R H Baker, 'Reflections on the relations of historical geography and the Annales school of history' being pp 1-27 of A R H Baker and D Gregory (Eds), *Explorations in Historical Geography: Interpretative Essays*, Cambridge, 1984.

¹⁰ For some case studies of agricultural syndicates in various regions of France before 1914, see: M C Cleary, 'The plough and the cross: peasant unions in south-western France', *Ag Hist Rev*, 30, 1982, pp 127-36; R Faucon, 'Les origines du syndicalisme agricole dans la région du Nord (1884-1914)', *Revue du Nord*, 48, 1966, pp 67-89; G Garrier, 'L'Union du Sud-Est des syndicats agricoles avant 1914', *Le Mouvement Social*, 67, 1969, pp 17-38; R H Hubscher, *L'Agriculture et la Société Rurale dans le Pas-de-Calais du Milieu du XIX^e siècle à 1914*, Arras, 1980, pp 614-35; C Mesland, 'Le syndicat agricole vauclusien (1887-1939)', *Le Mouvement Social*, 67, 1969, pp 39-60; E Lesueur, *L'Agriculture et les Syndicats Agricoles dans le Département du Pas-de-Calais*, Paris, 1905; R Leveau, 'Le syndicat de Chartres (1885-1914)', *Le Mouvement Social*, 67, 1969, pp 61-78; J Sallet and J Girault, 'Les mouvements vigneron de Champagne', *Le Mouvement Social*, 67, 1969, pp 79-109.

¹¹ E Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the Modernization of Rural France 1870-1914*, London, 1977; R Price, *The Modernization of Rural France: Communications Networks and Agricultural Market Structures in Nineteenth-Century France*, London, 1983.

¹² M Augé-Laribé, *La Révolution Agricole*, Paris, 1955, p 258.

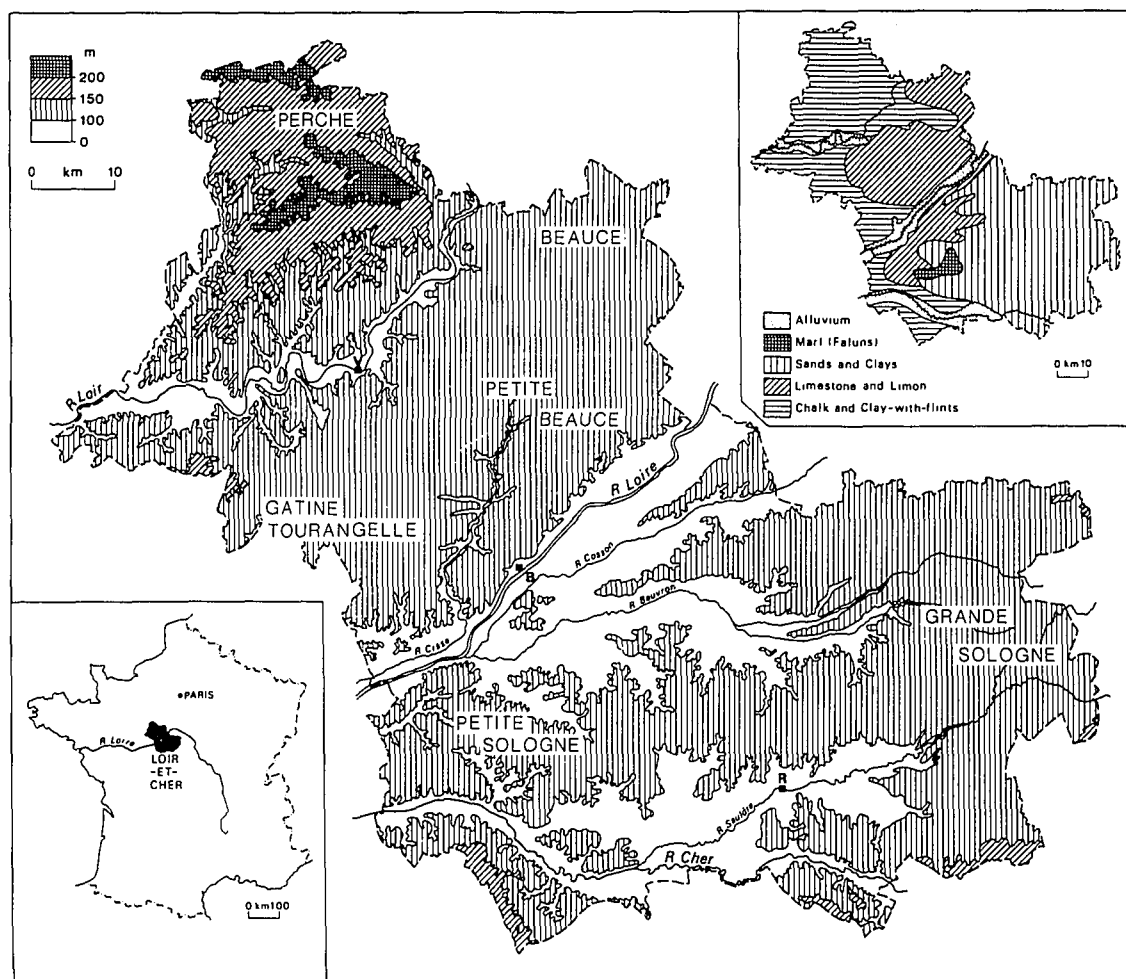


FIGURE I

The département of Loir-et-Cher (B = Blois; R = Romorantin; V = Vendôme)

precocious awakening of the spirit of peasant association than the region around Blois: in support of his view he cited the creation in 1878 of a threshing association at Saint-Claude-de-Diray (a commune on the left bank of the Loire, opposite Blois) and the foundation in 1883 of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher at Blois (but whose members came from viticultural *pays* throughout the *département*).¹³ Surprisingly, Georges Dupeux made scant reference to the development of peasant associations in his monograph on Loir-et-Cher during the nineteenth century, suggesting

¹³ R Dion, *Le Val de Loire. Etude de Géographie Rurale*, Tours, 1934, pp 705-11.

that this new emphasis appeared only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Progress in the nineteenth century was attributed by Dupeux to biological improvements (to crops, to livestock and to soils) and to technological developments (notably, mechanization). Although Dupeux acknowledged the creation in July 1883 of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher he did so merely when assessing the growing use of chemical fertilizers and he claimed that the principal, indeed only, role of this Syndicat was to become and to remain a fertilizer cooperative.¹⁴ In fact, as will be

¹⁴ G Dupeux, *Aspects de l'Histoire Sociale et Politique du Loir-et-Cher 1848-1914*, Paris, 1962, pp 211-13.

shown, peasant associations contributed to the agricultural development of Loir-et-Cher much sooner and in more diverse ways than envisaged by Dupeux. Furthermore, their emergence needs to be viewed not only in terms of their *general* historical context but also in terms of the *particular* individuals whose *charisma* provided the necessary link between *structure* and *action*.

The success of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher owed much to the enthusiasms and energies of its first two Presidents, Jules Tanviray and Alphonse Riverain, but their achievement must be set against its background. During the 1880s and 1890s many farmers in the *département* were feeling increasingly the impact of foreign competition while *vignerons* saw their livelihoods being undermined by the invasion of the phylloxera. But the State — in the form of central as well as local authorities — was keen to support the peasantry for political reasons and saw the promotion of agricultural syndicates in particular as one way of offering effective aid, channelled through its officially-appointed Professors of Agriculture.¹⁵

Jules Tanviray was Loir-et-Cher's first Professor of Agriculture, taking up his post on 1 April 1879. Coming from a farming family, Tanviray was one of the tiny minority of peasants who received a formal education in agricultural methods, first at the farm school of the *département* and subsequently at a national farm school. He then worked his own farm from 1871 until appointed, after an open competition, Professor of Agriculture in the *département*.¹⁶ During his first four years Tanviray was principally concerned with encouraging *vignerons* to combat phylloxera and with educating peasants into applying more

chemical fertilizers in order to increase crop yields.¹⁷ Somewhat disappointed by the results of his numerous lectures throughout the communes of the *département*, Tanviray concluded by mid-1883 that the best means of fighting phylloxera was the creation of *local* anti-phylloxera syndicates (to administer chemical insecticides to afflicted vines) and that the best way of promoting the use of chemical fertilizers was the foundation of a *central* agricultural syndicate which would combat fraudulent commerce in fertilizers and also reduce their price. In March 1883 Tanviray called together a meeting of about fifteen people to consider the statutes which he had drafted for an agricultural syndicate; copies of the amended statutes were then sent to the more than 300 mayors of the *département*, seventy of whom replied, submitting the names of more than 200 people who had indicated their support for such a syndicate. The first formal meeting of the Syndicat approved its statutes on 7 July 1883; by the end of the year the association had 345 members.¹⁸ Tanviray left Loir-et-Cher three years later, to direct a farm school elsewhere in France. During his seven years as Professor of Agriculture, he had worked energetically and effectively as a government official whose primary aim was agricultural improvement. Tanviray's example of close cooperation between the local authority and the farming community — and especially his promotion of their joint interests in the Syndicat — was followed both by M. Trouard-Riolle, who succeeded him as Professor of Agriculture in 1886 and by M. Vezin who moved into the post in 1897.

That the Syndicat and the local authority worked hand-in-hand was acknowledged by Alphonse Riverain, who in 1886

¹⁵ Dupeux, *op cit*, pp 181–289; A R H Baker, 'Devastation of a landscape, docttrination of a society: the politics of the phylloxera crisis in Loir-et-Cher (France) 1866–1914', *Wiirzburger Geographische Arbeiten*, LX, 1963, pp 205–17.

¹⁶ A Vezin, 'Jules Tanviray', *L'Agriculture Pratique du Centre*, 27 January 1901, p 28; Anon., *Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher: Fête du 25^e Anniversaire (5 Juillet 1908)*, Blois, 1909, pp 11–12.

¹⁷ Professors of Agriculture submitted to the Prefect annual reports on their work and on the condition of agriculture in the *département*. Reports for the period 1876–1914 have been consulted at Blois in the *Archives départementales de Loir-et-Cher* (hereafter A D): Série N Conseil Général-Rapport du Préfet et Procès-Verbaux des Délibérations.

¹⁸ J Berthonneau, *Monographie du Syndicat des Agriculteurs et des Caisses de Crédit Mutuel Agricole de Loir-et-Cher*, Blois, 1905, pp 3–7.

succeeded Tanviray as President of the Syndicat. He held office until his death in 1929. Like Tanviray, Riverain was a practising farmer who had also been a pupil at la Charmoise, the farm school of the *département*, near Pontlevoy. On his large farm at Areines, near Vendôme, Riverain carried out agricultural improvement — draining, marling, cultivating artificial meadows, applying chemical fertilizers — and maintained a passionate interest in practical farming even though he became increasingly involved in the ramifying activities of the Syndicat.¹⁹

Both Riverain and Tanviray recognized that the advantages which the Syndicat offered to farmers were fundamentally material in character but both harboured republican views which embraced associations as practical manifestations of the concept of *fraternité*. Riverain especially conceived a moral and social role for the Syndicat but both he and Tanviray considered that in order not to prejudice its growth their own political opinions had to be suppressed or at least restrained. In public, the Syndicat made claims to 'complete neutrality politically'; in private the fact that it was led by Republicans was certainly known to the Police Commissioners of Blois in the 1890s and was very probably recognized by those joining the Syndicat.²⁰

From its birth in mid-1883, the Syndicat steadily increased its membership to reach a total of almost 4000 by the end of 1892. It remained at about that level until 1901, when growth was renewed and continued uninterruptedly to reach a figure of almost 17,000 by 1914 (Fig 2). Growth in membership was almost exactly paralleled by an expansion of the volume of business conducted by the

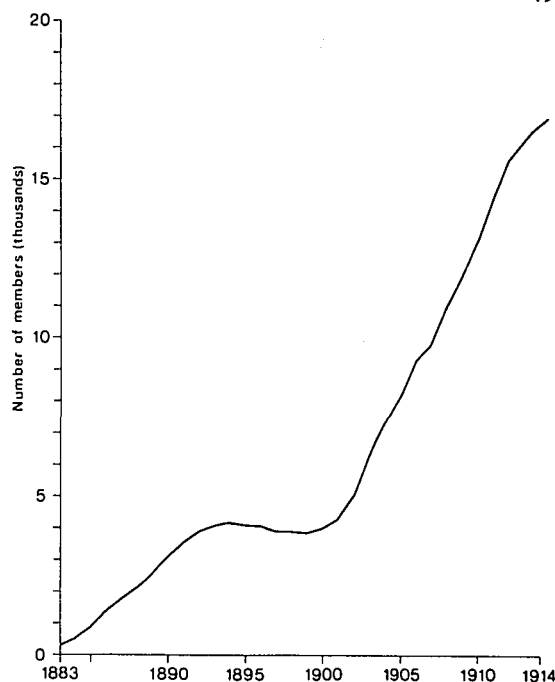


FIGURE 2

Membership of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher 1883-1914

Syndicat. During 1883 the Syndicat supplied 80,860 kg of fertilizers to its members; by the end of 1892 the annual volume of merchandise supplied had mushroomed to 5,760,225 kg. It remained at about that level

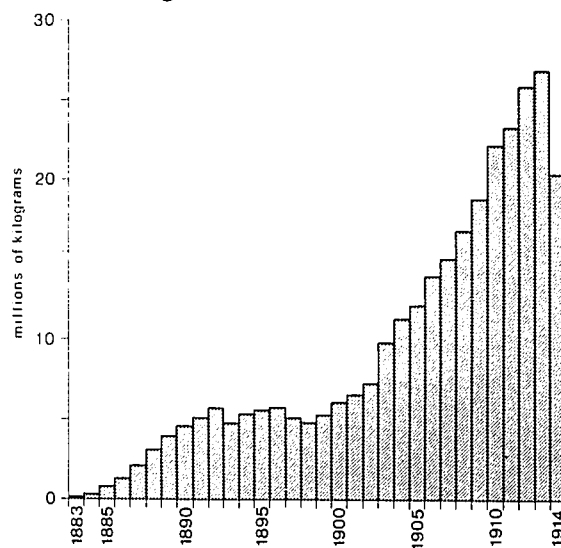


FIGURE 3

Trading of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher 1883-1914

¹⁹ M H Hitier, 'A. Riverain', *Procès-verbaux de l'Académie d'Agriculture de France*, Séance du 26 Février 1930.

²⁰ Anon., *Monographie du Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher*, Vendôme, 1920, p 13. Manuscript reports of the Police Commissioner on the activities of agricultural syndicates were consulted in the following uncatalogued *liasse*, which also contained diverse correspondence and statistics relating to syndicates: A D Série M Syndicats professionnels et agricoles. Etat des syndicats existant 1887-1902.

until 1901, when it expanded again to reach 26,904,435 kg by the end of 1913 (Fig 3). The hiatus in the development of the Syndicat during the 1890s has erroneously been explained by its leaders as being a consequence of the competition which the Syndicat felt from the creation of 'numerous communal or cantonal syndicates' in the *département*.²¹ By the end of 1892 there were indeed twenty-five other general purpose agricultural syndicates operating in Loir-et-Cher but by 1901 that number had only increased by two. By comparison with the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, the other syndicates were small: their memberships at the end of 1892, ranging between 25 and 490, averaged 205; and by January 1900 they averaged only 193, ranging between 19 and 463. The total membership of these syndicates grew hardly at all during the 1890s, from about 5125 in 1892 to about 5211 in 1900.²² The check to the growth of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher during the 1890s cannot be attributed to the competition for new members constituted by other agricultural syndicates. Indeed, many of these were right-wing associations — established, according to the Commissioners of Police at Blois, by reactionaries — and might not have appealed to those who preferred to join a syndicate which was ostensibly neutral politically but which was known to be run by left-wing republican sympathizers.²³ The

fact remains that all agricultural syndicates, whatever their political leanings, suffered arrested development during the 1890s. Two reasons for this may be tentatively suggested. Cereal prices in Loir-et-Cher had been on a generally downward trend since about 1870 but they fell dramatically during the early 1890s; wine prices had been on a broadly upward trend from about 1870 until 1890 but then began a steady decline.²⁴ Moreover, the failure of anti-phylloxera syndicates to achieve their aims became increasingly obvious from the late 1880s and throughout the 1890s.²⁵ Falling prices for Loir-et-Cher's principal agricultural products and the demise of anti-phylloxera syndicates might have combined to undermine confidence in farming generally and in agricultural syndicates specifically. More remarkable than the Syndicat's irregular development through time, however, was its uneven distribution through space.

II

From the outset, leaders of the Syndicat appreciated that the principle of association would be optimally practised if its activities were to encompass farmers throughout the *département*: the larger the real membership, the greater the potential economies of scale which could be passed on to them, provided that the administrative and distributional costs could be kept as low as possible by establishing a network of local, commissioned, agents. Tanviray's initiative during the spring of 1883 included alerting the mayors throughout the *département* about his proposal but both the immediate and the long-term responses to his campaign to recruit members for the Syndicat varied from one *pays* to another.

The geographical pattern of membership which had emerged by 1887 was not only one of uneven spatial distribution but also one which was remarkably enduring. By the

²¹ Berthonneau, *op cit*, p 5.

²² Data on the number and size of agricultural syndicates have been obtained from uncatalogued documents in Série M of the *Archives départementales*, consulted in *liasses* with the following titles: Syndicats professionnels et agricoles. Etat des syndicats existant 1887-1902
Travail. Syndicats professionnels. Enquêtes, statistiques. 1910-1930
Industrie. Syndicats professionnels. Enquêtes sur les syndicats professionnels 1919-1926
Travail. Syndicats professionnels. Enquêtes et statistiques. 1929-41
Industrie. Syndicats industriels, commerciaux, agricoles, 1908-12
Industrie. Syndicats professionnels. Dossiers de syndicats
Industrie. Syndicats professionnels. Dossiers de syndicats dissous 1889-1930

²³ The Commissioner's reports of 15 January 1891 and 5 March 1892 both refer to certain agricultural syndicates which had been established by reactionaries: A D Série M Syndicats professionnels et agricoles. Etat des syndicats existant 1887-1902.

²⁴ Dupeau, *op cit*, pp 183-8.

²⁵ Baker, *op cit*, pp 213-15.

end of 1887, the Syndicat's members were located mainly in the Val de Loire and the Petite Sologne, and in the valley of the Loir and in Perche: there were relatively few in Beauce and very few in the Grande Sologne (Fig 4). By 1892, this overall pattern of membership had intensified rather than altered in outline (Fig 5). Even the massive numerical expansion of the Syndicat from 1901 onwards did not significantly change the basic distributional pattern of its members: by 1910 most were concentrated in the Val de Loire and the Petite Sologne and in the valley of the Loir (Fig 6). From its

inception, the Syndicat relied to a considerable extent upon local agents to recruit and provision members, and from the early 1910s it additionally established local depots for supplying and servicing agricultural machinery.²⁶ The networks of local agents and of machinery depots which the Syndicat had established by 1910 broadly reflected but did not mirror exactly, the distribution of its members in that year (Figs 7 and 8). Explanations of that distribution have to be

²⁶ Lists of local agents and of machinery *dépôts* appeared frequently in the syndicat's publications, which are discussed later in this paper.

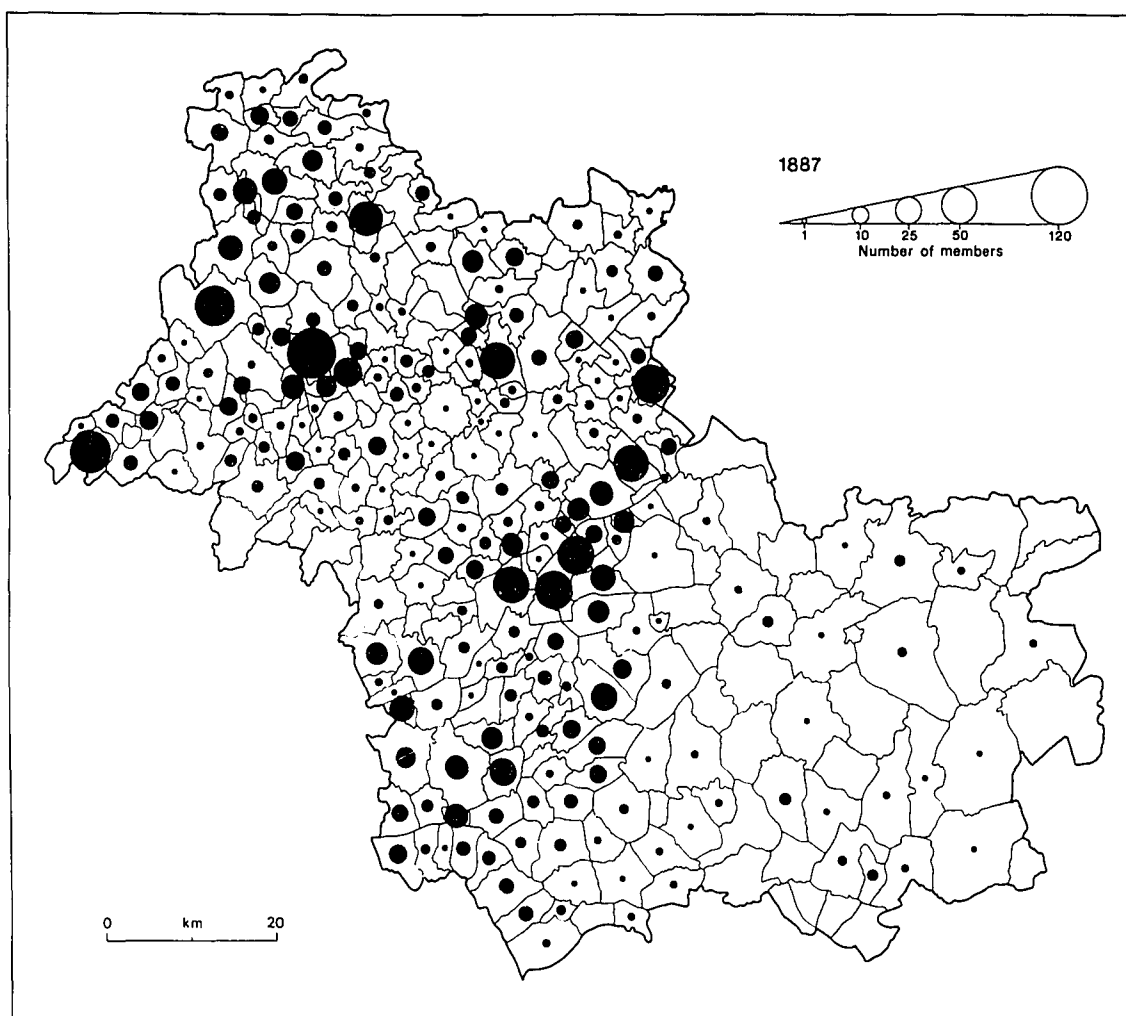


FIGURE 4

The geographical distribution of members of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher in 1887

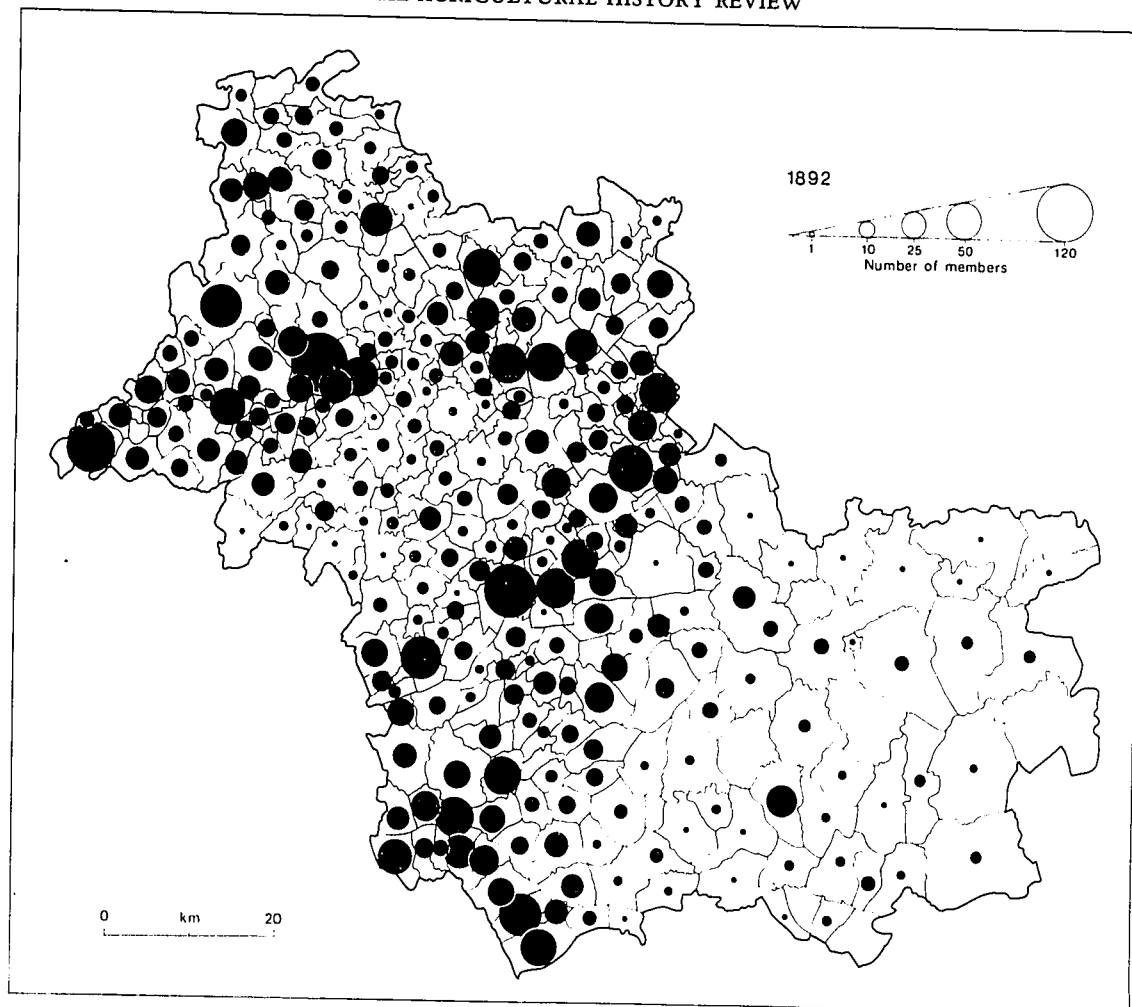


FIGURE 5

The geographical distribution of members of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher in 1892

sought which, in part, are external to the organization of the Syndicat itself.

The development and spread of membership of the Syndicat during the late nineteenth century was part of a wider process involving the transformation of rural communities engulfed in the ever-widening spheres of influence of urban centres: the colonization of the French countryside by the town was an integral component of the spatial extension of capitalism. Detailed analysis of the geographical distribution of membership of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher in 1892 has revealed that it was negatively related to physical distances from Blois and

positively related to literacy levels: a clear tendency has been demonstrated for peasants in cantons closer to Blois to join the Syndicat in significantly larger numbers than those in more remote cantons, and also for peasants in cantons with higher male literacy levels to join the Syndicat in significantly larger numbers than those in less literate cantons (it being inferred that the more literate cantons included the better educated and more adaptable sections of the peasantry).²⁷

²⁷ A R H Baker, 'Ideological change and settlement continuity in the French countryside: the development of agricultural syndicalism in Loir-et-Cher during the late-nineteenth century', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 6, 1980, pp 163-77.

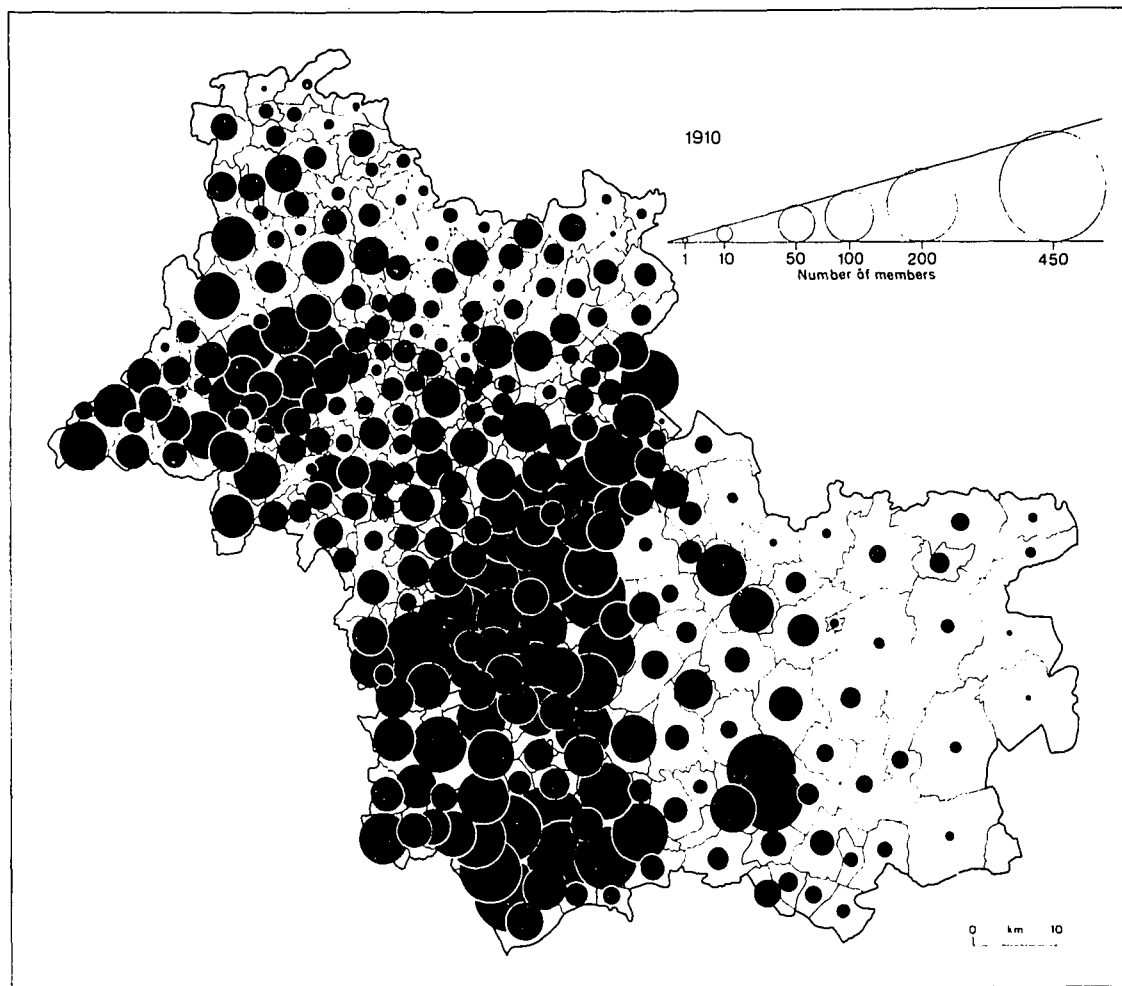


FIGURE 6

The geographical distribution of members of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher in 1910

But the spatial diffusion of the Syndicat needs also to be set within an appropriate agrarian context, taking particularly into account factors of farm size and type. The Syndicat acquired members most readily in those *pays* characterized by small farms (often but not exclusively owner-occupiers) and especially by *vignerons*.²⁸ In his report to the Minister of Commerce on 15 January 1891, the Police Commissioner for Blois said that *les petits agriculteurs* had flocked to the Syndicat: it had, he claimed, hardly any large landowners among its members and only a few owners of medium-sized farms, while three-quarters of its members were small

farmers 'democratic in spirit and supporters of the institutions of our regime'. Small farmers of all kinds, it seems, joined the Syndicat in large numbers, presumably hoping thereby to improve their economic health and to protect their social independence. Additionally, the largest concentrations of members were to be found among the *vignerons* of the Val de Loire and the Petite Sologne and of the valley of the Loir.²⁹ Not usually possessing more than one or two cows, these *vignerons* had limited supplies of manure and therefore turned to the Syndicat

²⁸ Dupeux, *op cit*, pp 78–81 and 97–119; Baker, *op cit*, 1983, p 206.

²⁹ For confirmation of the importance of *vignerons* in the development and spread of the Syndicat, see: A R H Baker, 'Les syndicats agricoles de la vallée de la Cisse 1883–1914', *Vallée de la Cisse* (forthcoming).

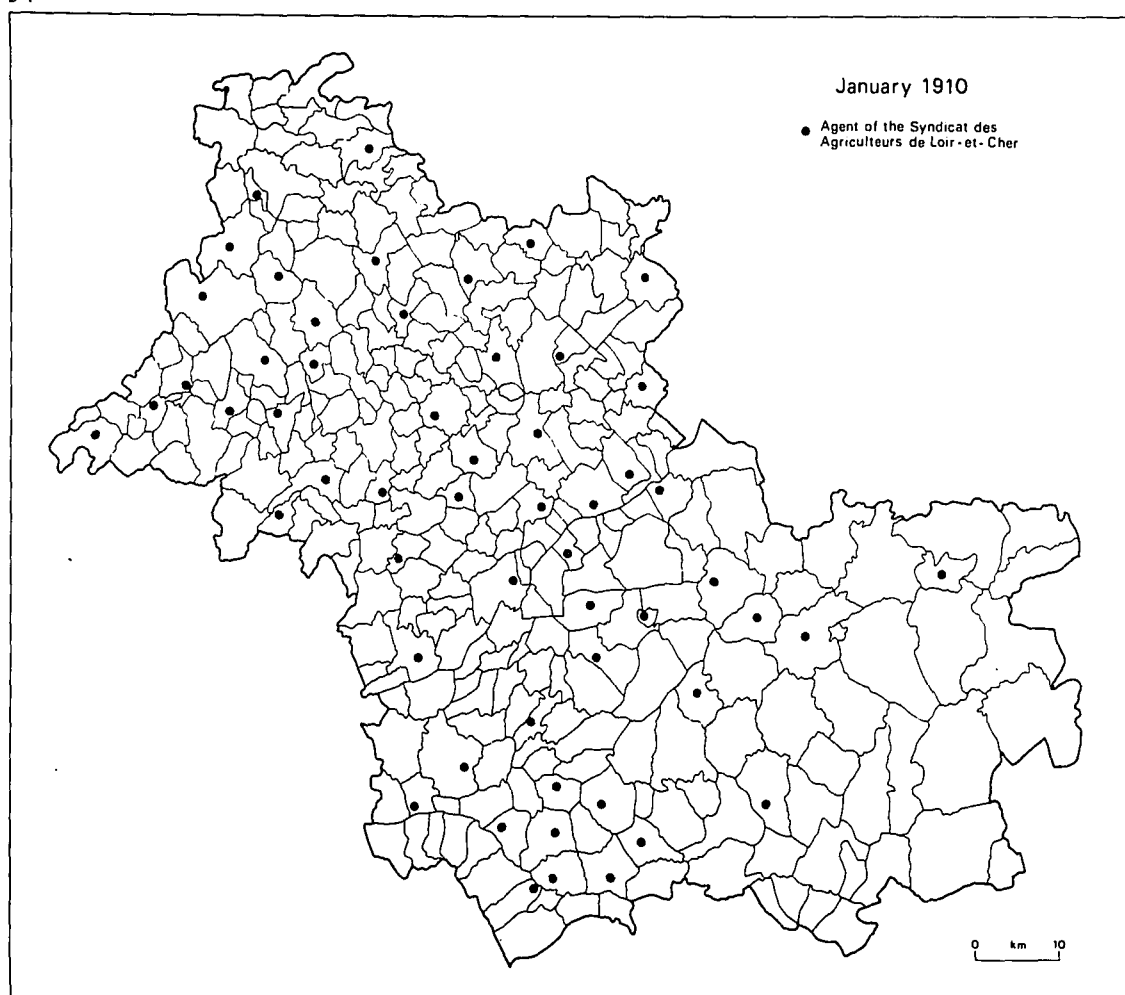


FIGURE 7

The geographical distribution of agents of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher in 1910

for fertilizers (as well as for other materials). Furthermore, Dion has linked the growth of agricultural syndicalism in the Loire valley with the decline of viticulture: when vineyards were devastated by phylloxera many *vignerons*, as an alternative to expensively reconstituting their vineyards with vines grafted onto American phylloxera-resistant root-stock, turned instead to cultivating other crops which dramatically increased their demand for fertilizers and considerably added to their production costs.³⁰ Membership of the Syndicat, as a source of good quality and reasonably priced fertilizer, came to be seen by many small

³⁰ Dion, *op cit*, p 706.

farmers as an integral component of their survival algorithm. With a growing membership, the Syndicat in turn diversified its activities well beyond supplying chemical fertilizers.

III

The material rationale of the Syndicat was its power to purchase agricultural supplies in bulk and to pass on the economies of scale to its individual members.³¹ During its formative years the Syndicat twice-yearly invited manufacturers and wholesale

³¹ The following account of the functioning of the Syndicat is based upon Berthonneau, *op cit*, pp 10-26 and upon the monthly and weekly publications of the Syndicat, discussed later in this paper.

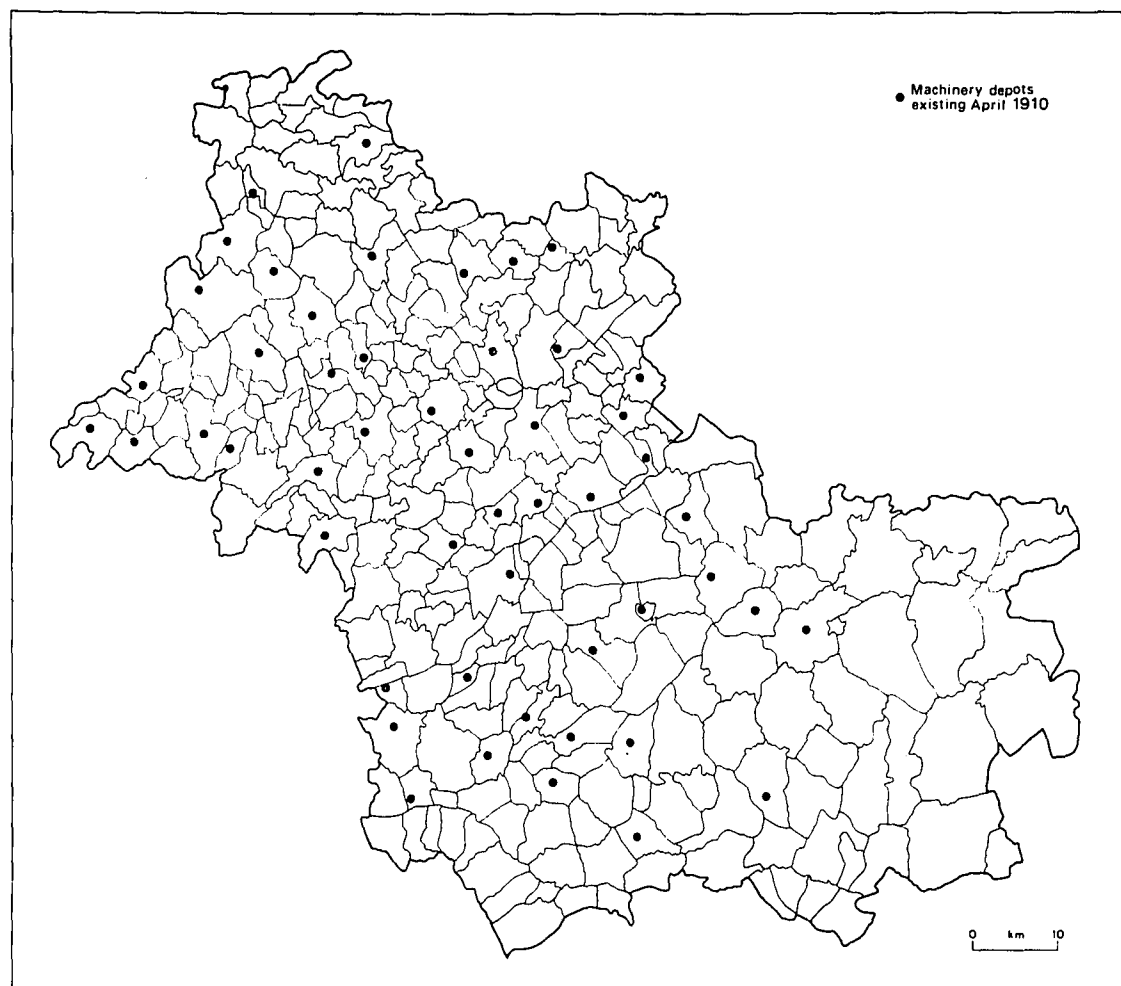


FIGURE 8

The geographical distribution of machinery depots of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher in 1910

merchants to submit price lists for their products; the six-man *Bureau d'administration* of the Syndicat then selected those with whom agreements would be made for meeting, at fixed prices for the following half-year, all of the orders placed by the Syndicat, whatever the quantities. Such fixed-price and unlimited quantity contracts, unsurprisingly, were not favoured by manufacturers and merchants of goods whose prices fluctuated considerably (such as superphosphate, soda nitrate, sulphate of ammonia and copper sulphate, as well as animal fodder such as Saigon rice, which was fed to calves, and cattle cake made from

cotton seed, linseed, maize or copra) and soon the Syndicat was also entering into fixed-price and fixed-quantity agreements for such supplies. Similar bulk-purchasing deals were made by the Syndicat with major seed merchants and with manufacturers of agricultural tools and implements.

Its purchases agreed, the Syndicat then notified its members in their monthly *Bulletin* the prices at which fertilizers and other goods could be ordered from the Syndicat and collected at any railway station in the *département*. The staff of the Syndicat at its headquarters in Blois grouped together the diverse orders to be despatched to each

station, addressing the railway *wagon* to one named member to whom were also sent details about the consignment so that it could be appropriately divided up and distributed. Such an exclusively informal arrangement was adequate for a few years but from 1888 onwards, with the increasing volume of business, the Syndicat came also to establish a formal network of local *dépôts* run by agents whose task it was to collate the orders of the Syndicat's members in the district, to collect payments, and to store and distribute the materials supplied. While the Syndicat continued throughout the pre-War period to deal directly with individual members, the coordinating role of its local agents increased and their numbers grew from nine in April 1888 to twenty-eight by August 1892 and to sixty-one by August 1910. For their services and to meet their costs (which might include renting or providing a store for the goods supplied) the agents were allowed a small commission (which was initially at a flat rate but which was subsequently converted into a percentage figure).

During the 1880s, the Syndicat was mainly supplying chemical fertilizers (especially superphosphates, sulphate of ammonia, soda nitrate and compound fertilizers) but it was also dealing in small quantities of organic fertilizers (crushed bones and dried blood), chemicals (such as copper sulphate and salt) for controlling pests and diseases, cattle cake, sugar (for fermenting wine), seeds and agricultural tools and materials (such as hay-forks, weighing machines, wire for trailing vines, and *pulvérisateurs* for applying insecticides). Fertilizers (predominantly chemical fertilizers) remained in absolute terms the major product supplied by the Syndicat between 1883 and 1913 but they declined relatively as the Syndicat increasingly dealt also in animal feedstuffs, seeds, tools, equipment and machinery. Fertilizers comprised, by weight, 98 per cent of the goods supplied by the Syndicat in 1888; by 1913 the proportion had fallen to 83 per cent, although the annual

volume of fertilizers supplied had increased seven-fold during those twenty-five years, from just over 3 million kg to more than 22 million kg. In terms of value rather than weight, fertilizers comprised 60 per cent of the Syndicat's turnover in 1910; seeds represented 4 per cent, animal feedstuffs 8 per cent, miscellaneous materials (chemicals for treating pests and diseases, sugar, string, etc) 14 per cent, and farming tools, equipment and machinery 15 per cent.³² Growth of the Syndicat during the 1900s was paralleled by an expanding trade in implements and in 1909 the Syndicat decided to establish throughout the *département* a network of agricultural machinery *dépôts* where members could not only purchase equipment but also have it serviced and repaired. In April 1909 there were twenty-six such *dépôts* and the number had been increased to fifty-one by the spring of 1910. They were run mainly by farriers, cartwrights and ploughwrights. Having from its beginnings always supplied a range of small farming tools and equipment, from 1909 onwards the Syndicat widened its scope to include machinery, such as reapers, harvesters and threshing machines. In 1909 and 1910 together it supplied 234 reapers, 149 harvesters and two threshing machines.³³ As well as contributing to the diffusion and widespread adoption of the use of chemical fertilizers by the farmers of Loir-et-Cher, the Syndicat now both encouraged and facilitated the mechanization of agriculture.

In addition to providing members with material supplies, the Syndicat offered other agricultural services, notably in the field of information and of credit. Having within four years of its creation acquired almost 2000 members, the Syndicat soon recognized the importance of maintaining close links between its central officers and its

³² These statistics are calculated from data drawn from the Syndicat's *Compte-Rendu Annuel* for 1888, and *L'Agriculture Pratique du Centre* dates 23 April 1911 (for 1910 data) and 19 April 1914 (for 1913 data).

³³ *L'Agriculture Pratique du Centre*, 10 April 1910 (for 1909 data) and 23 April 1911 (for 1910 data).

peripheral members. Since its foundation the Syndicat had published at the end of each year an *Annuaire* which summarized the operations of the Syndicat for that year and listed in full, by communes, the names of all of its members. It was assumed that such a publication promoted interest in the work of the Syndicat in general and that in particular it encouraged those not already members to have their names added to the lists, emulating friends and neighbours who had already joined. But the *Annuaire's* educational role was greatly enhanced from 1887 onwards by the additional publication each month of a *Bulletin* which served both to instruct members of the Syndicat about its activities and operations, and also to provide them with informative articles about agricultural practices and policies. The *Bulletin* was frequently contributed to by Trouard-Riolle, the Professor of Agriculture of Loir-et-Cher: recognizing the potentially powerful influence of the press among a farming population from which illiteracy had virtually been eliminated, Trouard-Riolle persuaded the Syndicat to replace the monthly *Bulletin* by a weekly journal, *L'Agriculture Pratique de Loir-et-Cher*. The first issue, published on 13 March 1894 with a print run of 5000 (at a time when the Syndicat itself had just over 4000 members), contained an editorial by Trouard-Riolle which stressed the importance of diffusing among the farmers of Loir-et-Cher new information about innovations in agriculture. Within a year the journal had become so successful that it was decided to extend its circulation and sphere of influence into adjacent *départements*: although the journal remained the official publication of the Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher, from April 1895 it became *L'Agriculture Pratique du Centre*, edited by Trouard-Riolle in association with the Professors of Agriculture of Indre-et-Loire, Loiret, Cher and Indre.³⁴

³⁴ Issues of the *Annuaire*, the *Bulletin*, *L'Agriculture Pratique de Loir-et-Cher* and *L'Agriculture Pratique du Centre* have been consulted

Articles in the journals of the Syndicat gave prominence, inevitably, to the action it was taking on behalf of its members. But they also frequently discussed, and hardly less frequently encouraged, the promotion of other ways in which local groups of farmers might cooperate in furtherance of their mutual interests. In addition, therefore, to articles on the role of general purpose agricultural syndicates, the journals also included discussion of livestock insurance societies, threshing associations, and processing and marketing cooperatives. Although not venturing directly into these fields itself, the Syndicat did indirectly encourage the extension of the principle of association into the whole range of practices in agriculture: it did so both through information provided in its journals and by advice presented by its officers.³⁵ Its own most direct extension of its services was in the creation of credit facilities. During the 1890s the Ministry of Agriculture was actively encouraging the founding of agricultural cooperative banks; its circulars on the subject in the late 1890s sent to the Prefect of Loir-et-Cher were duly passed on to the Professor of Agriculture, Vezin, who in turn disseminated the idea among the officers and members of the Syndicat. Of the three agricultural credit societies established in Loir-et-Cher before 1902, when the Syndicat became seriously interested in arranging credit facilities for its members, one had lasted only three years (that at Chitenay, 1894-7) and the other two had few members (that at Pontlevoy, established in 1897, had forty members in 1901 and that at Saint-Laurent-des-Eaux, also established in 1897, had thirty-four).³⁶ The activities of these societies were soon to be eclipsed by those of the Syndicat.

To a General Assembly of the Syndicat at

for the whole of the study period: sets (not complete in every case) are available in the *Archives départementales* and at the offices of the Syndicat's modern successor, the Groupe Française, at Blois. I am grateful to Monsieur R Moreau of the Groupe Française for his advice and assistance.

³⁵ Berthonneau, *op cit*, pp 27-33.

³⁶ A D Série M Sociétés de Crédit Agricoles. Enquêtes, Instructions, Correspondence 1898-1922 (an uncatalogued *liasse*).

Blois on 26 January 1902 Alphonse Riverain, its President, explained that the provision of credit facilities to members would enable them to obtain the best prices for their products, because they would be able to decide when was the most opportune time to sell rather than having selling determined by the need to raise funds in order to purchase fertilizers, seeds and equipment at certain periods of the year. During 1902 the Syndicat established at Blois a local branch of the *Caisse Régionale de Crédit Agricole de la Beauce et du Perche*, based at Chartres. Immediate success for this venture led the Syndicat to set up a *Caisse Régionale* at Blois in 1903. Its share capital of 100,000 francs enabled it to obtain an interest-free advance from the State of 400,000 francs; each share of 50 francs enabled its holder to call upon a loan of 500 francs, to be repaid within six months with an interest of 3½ per cent. The *Caisse Régionale* was inaugurated and based at Blois but, as a result of an intensive campaign led by Vezin, the Professor of Agriculture, local branches were soon opened in cantons throughout the *département*. In addition to making short-term loans available to its share-holders, the *Crédit Agricole* made funds available to the Syndicat which in turn enabled it to authorize its local agents in the *dépôts* to allow reputable individual members to defer settling their bills for supplies for three months at a time, at an interest of 1 per cent per quarter or 4 per cent per annum (such deferrals could not be extended beyond one year).³⁷

One of the purposes of creating credit facilities was, of course, to enable small farmers to cope immediately with the increasingly capitalistic nature of their enterprises. Another was to ensure the long-term survival of the farming community: the urgent aim, according to Jules Berthonneau — Director of the Syndicat since 1899 — was to make money available for investment in agriculture and especially to make it accessible to those

'petits cultivateurs pour lesquels un billet de 1,000 francs peut être la source d'une prospérité capable de s'étendre dans l'avenir à toute une lignée de bons travailleurs du sol'. Always material and practical in its emphasis, the Syndicat's economic superstructure was erected on a social foundation which gave priority to the retention on the land of a large and preferably prosperous farming community. While the political and social purposes of the Syndicat were not often explicit, indeed they were usually suppressed, they did come to the fore in 1913. Anxiety about the declining birth rate and the threat this posed to traditional rural society led the Syndicat in that year to initiate annual competitions for mothers of large families. In 1914 the competition held in the *arrondissement* of Blois brought together 74 competitors who together had given birth to 738 children. Such events, during which prizes, medals and certificates were distributed to those judged to be winners, were explicitly intended to convey a social message, to portray the charms and fecundity of the rural way of life, to fortify family traditions and to reinforce respect for one's forebears.³⁸

IV

The development, diffusion and diversification between 1883 and 1914 of France's first general purpose agricultural syndicate contained a number of internal contradictions, resolved to differing degrees during this period of its infancy. The success of the Syndicat, measured in terms of its growth in membership and activity, was based on its ability to engage effectively in the process of agricultural improvement which was under way in Loir-et-Cher before the birth of the Syndicat itself. Its activities resulted in — and were intended to produce — economic *changes* which themselves undermined the rural social fabric whose *continuity* the Syndicat was designed to ensure. The

³⁷ Berthonneau, *op cit*, pp 39–52.

³⁸ Anon., *op cit*, 1920, pp 13 and 17–18.

progressive policies and practices of the Syndicat promoted agricultural improvement but simultaneously and paradoxically conflicted with its *conservative* conception of a traditional farming society whose interests should be defended. Not until after the First World War — indeed, not significantly until after the Second World War — would this contradiction between economic change and social stability be fully acknowledged.

Nonetheless, the Syndicat during its early years offered what was perceived by many farmers as an acceptable compromise between *collectivism* and *individualism*. By 1914 perhaps one-third of the farmers of Loir-et-Cher were members of the Syndicat:

they had collectivized to the extent considered necessary to preserve their freedom as individual farmers. Most, it may be inferred, had done so as *materialists* rather than as *idealists* for the collectivism of the Syndicat left individuals as owners of the means of production. The Syndicat was a collective, but of individuals. But its material and collective character stemmed from ideals held by a few individuals. Although the organization and activity of the Syndicat has to be set within the *context* of the *general* process of agrarian change in France, it is to the *charisma* of its leaders that one has to turn for a fuller understanding of the *particularity* of its development.

(continued from page 44)

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, 1986

The 34th Annual General Meeting of the Society will be held at 9.15am on Tuesday 7 April 1986 at Scale-Hayne College, Newton Abbot, Devon. Nomination forms for officers and members of the Executive Committee should be inserted in this issue of the *Review*. Nominations should reach the Secretary no later than Tuesday 1 April 1986.

1870' which will include sections on international trade, agriculture and economic progress, and government policy. The papers from this theme will be published and further details will be available in a subsequent issue of the *Review*. Information on the Conference may be obtained from Neuvième Congrès International d'Histoire Économique, Neubrückstrasse 10, CH-3012 Berne, Switzerland.

NINTH INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC HISTORY CONGRESS, 1986

The congress will take place in Berne, Switzerland from 24 to 29 August 1986. Several sessions will include papers with an agricultural content including the 'A' Theme on 'Mountain Economies and Societies' and the 'B' Themes on 'International Comparisons of Productivity 1750-1939', 'Long-Term Changes in Nutrition and the Standard of Living', 'The Structure of Internal Trade, 15th-19th Centuries', and 'Pastoral Economies in Classical Antiquity'. Professor F M L Thompson and Dr E J T Collins are organizing a 'C' Theme on 'Agriculture in the Industrial State since

THE HISTORIC FARM BUILDINGS GROUP

This Group was formally established during its first conference on 12 October 1985. Its objects are the advancement of the study of the history of farm buildings in the British Isles, including their related equipment and the agrarian and economic systems of which they formed a part, and the promotion, where appropriate, of their conservation. Membership is open to all interested in the past, present and future of old farm buildings and the annual subscription to the Group is £5. Further information may be obtained from the Group's Secretary, Mr Roy Brigden, Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading, Whiteknights, PO Box 229, Reading RG6 2AG.