

Cheminevements

# Conférences

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« L'UNION FAIT LA FORCE,  
AIDONS-NOUS LES UNS  
LES AUTRES » :

Towards a Historical Geography of Fraternal  
Associations in Loir-et-Cher (France) 1815-1914

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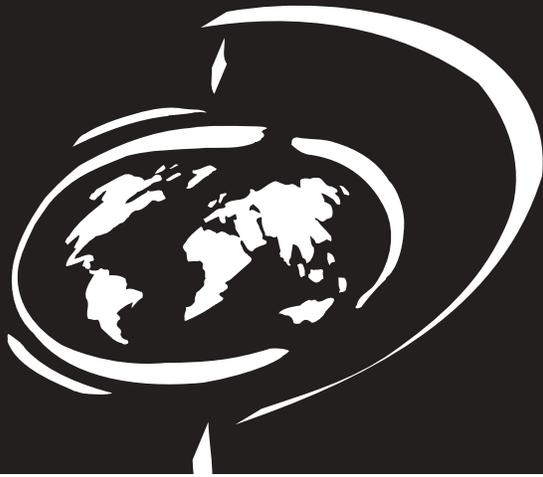
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**CONFÉRENCES**

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# « L'UNION FAIT LA FORCE, AIDONS-NOUS LES UNS LES AUTRES » :

## Towards a Historical Geography of Fraternal Associations in Loir-et-Cher (France) 1815-1914

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Alan R. H. Baker

### Representations of the French peasantry

There have been many myths about the French peasantry and the nature of the rural community in nineteenth-century France remains problematic. It has often been argued that post-Revolutionary France witnessed the decline of collectivism and community and the rise of new forms of class conflict within the countryside as well as of the peasant as a competitive individualist. Many representations of the peasantry both by contemporary observers and by historians have emphasised the significance of the ideology of individualism, of *liberté*, in rural France during the nineteenth century.

Two influential foreign observers were Arthur Young and Karl Marx. Young likened the peasants of Brittany to savages, to the Hurons of North America, while Marx described French peasants as 'barbarism within civilisation', emphasising their individualism and lack of class consciousness, likening them to potatoes huddled into a sack but retaining their individuality. The image of a barbarian peasantry was also widely held and promoted by urbane novelists, many of whom adopted a 'realist' stance towards their subjects. For example, Stendhal's peasants in *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830) were greedy and brutal; in Balzac's *Les Paysans* (1844) they were materialist, selfish, immoral savages, self-confessed stupid animals; in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) they were gullible, subservient to bourgeois officialdom; and Zola's peasants in *La Terre* (1877) were described specifically by the village schoolmaster as brutes and generally characterised as fighting among themselves for the possession of land, of women and of money. The overall picture portrayed by novels located in different places in France and

situated in different periods of the nineteenth century is of a rural society founded upon competition among individuals, of a peasantry grounded both in environmental and social conflicts and in a self-preservationist conservatism. Similarly, many nineteenth-century paintings of French peasants, most famously those of Jean-François Millet, portrayed them 'realistically', as individuals who were close to the soil, struggling heroically with nature and with each other in order to survive. Again, around 1900, a number of topographers commented upon the French peasant's passion for independence and his distaste for co-operation. For example, Mary Duclaux, in *The Fields of France* (1905), opined that the French peasant was 'intellectually idle, incapable of combination, suspicious of new-fangled ideas' and concluded that 'the principle of solidarity' had 'scarcely penetrated' into rural France.

These literary and pictorial portrayals of the peasantry both reflected contemporary attitudes and reflexively contributed to the production and reproduction of those attitudes themselves. Peasants were represented as individuals, or at best as members of a family, rather than as members of wider social groups. Furthermore, many of these image makers portrayed the peasant world as if it were virtually timeless: they at best neglected, at worst ignored, the transformation - some would say modernisation - of rural France which was going on around them.

Not only contemporary 'poets' and 'journalists' but also many modern historians have viewed the French peasantry negatively, arguing that it was in considerable measure to blame for the slow growth of the agricultural sector during the nineteenth century and consequently for the relatively slow growth of the French economy as a whole. That pessimistic view about the nature of the agricultural economy has come increasingly to be challenged by

revisionist historians and historical geographers, and the peasant sector is no longer seen as being as backward as it has so often been depicted. Nonetheless, an emphasis upon the collapse of the community and the rise of peasant individualism continues to permeate accounts of rural France during the nineteenth century. A vivid and influential narrative of the 'modernisation' of rural France during the nineteenth century has been provided by Eugen Weber in his book, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernisation of rural France, 1870-1914*, published in 1977. Put simply, Weber's thesis was that well into the nineteenth century most of rural France was comprised of local, at best regional, autarchic peasant economies, diverse and almost unchanging, poor and primitive, with little contact with each other and even less with towns and markets. The village or commune, at most the *pays*, constituted the limits of social intercourse for most peasants, whose knowledge and experience were fundamentally rooted in their immediate locality. This 'traditional' rural society was, Weber claimed, 'modernised' from the 1880s onwards, under the increasingly transformative impact of roads and railways, primary schools, and military service. These processes of change incrementally integrated local, essentially rural, communities into a national, essentially urban, culture. Peasants became Frenchmen. Weber's broad-sweeping thesis has become probably one of the most influential interpretations of French rural society, despite the fact that several and severe criticisms have been levelled against it. Questions have been raised, for example, about Weber's identification of the timing and of the generality of the changes described, as well as about his explicit use of limited, largely anecdotal evidence, and his implicit use of discredited theory.

Like many accounts of the French peasantry during the nineteenth century, Weber's thesis presupposes the decline of rural communities and the primacy of peasant individualism. Rural France during the nineteenth century has come to be seen as having witnessed the triumph of individualism over collectivism. In 1956 Albert Soboul provided a classic portrayal of the decline of the French rural community during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and of the corresponding growth of 'unchained individualism'. His view, that 'the rural community was bound to disappear in the course of the great revolution which integrated agricultural production into the capitalist economy', has underpinned much of the discourse on the French peasantry for an entire generation of scholars. In 1973 Theodore Zeldin's panoramic survey of the *mentalités* of French peasants from 1848 onwards concluded that the old community spirit was collapsing, that it was breaking up, that collective

controls and traditions of co-operation were gradually abandoned. Weber's wide-ranging survey included within its compass autarky but not associations, conscription but not co-operatives, furniture but not fraternities, sewing machines and suicides but not societies or syndicates, and undergarments but not unions. In his portrayal of 'traditional' societies Weber did, of course, have something to say about those activities which involved opportunities for socialisation, such as fairs and markets, and baptisms, weddings and funerals. But his massive survey did not recognise, or even suggest, that the 'modernisation' of rural France might have involved the emergence of new social groupings, new forms of sociability, new expressions of fraternity, within and among peasant communities. Weber's concern was with the process by which peasants were transformed into Frenchmen, a stance which left no room for new social groupings intermediate between the individual and the State.

The purpose of this present paper is to question the long-standing orthodoxy about peasant individualism in nineteenth-century France. It will do so by examining in detail the emergence of new fraternal associations of peasants in one part of rural France during the nineteenth century. But before moving into that empirical study, some theoretical positions require brief consideration.

## **Fraternity and sociability among the French peasantry**

Rural France during the nineteenth century came increasingly to be influenced by the Revolutionary concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity. There was, of course, a gap which was only narrowed slowly between the philosophical debates among the intellectual elite about the meanings of those concepts and their practical application in the every-day lives of peasants. There was, in particular, an important discourse on fraternity: in general terms this involved a reappraisal of the relations between the individual and the State, while specifically it required a reassessment of the status of secondary groupings (such as voluntary associations) which were intermediate between those two structures.

Although relegated to the background during the Revolutionary period and for many decades thereafter, the concept of fraternity, often expressed as sociability, can be identified as a theoretical thread which ran through the entire fabric of the nineteenth century: the private virtue of politeness and respect for other individuals was generalised into a public virtue of tolerance of other groups

within a politically-pluralist society. Fraternity was often portrayed as being synonymous with social progress. Thus Jean-Étienne-Marie Portalis, the Catholic thinker and Minister of Religion under Napoleon I, linked the perfectioning of Man to the practice of sociability, and in 1876 Jules Ferry, the anti-clerical statesman of the early Third Republic, argued that sociability (which he said was the scientific term for fraternity) combined the concepts of tolerance and charity, that fraternity was superior to all other dogmas, religions and philosophies. The principle of fraternity was expressed in practical terms as association or co-operation. Socialist utopians like Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825), Charles Fourier (1772-1837) and Étienne Cabet (1788-1856) were important in promoting a discourse on fraternity during the first half of the nineteenth century and, although they were discredited as a nascent political movement by the failure of the Second Republic (1848-1852), their ideology underpinned socialist and solidarist polemics during the second half of the century. The idea of solidarity, of solidarism, was actively-debated during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century. The Radical Party - which was to be the largest single political party in France from 1902 until 1936 - came to adopt it as its central doctrine. With its basic formula 'Every man his neighbour's debtor', solidarism represented a republican reinterpretation of the principles of the Revolution of 1789. It now came to be argued, as Zeldin has pointed out, that 'the individualism which the Revolution had consecrated was an evil and a delusion; the liberty of the individual which it proclaimed was an abstraction, for people were not independent beings without obligations and ties to each other. The principle of *laissez-faire* came during the course of the century to be rejected by those who came increasingly to argue that social progress had actively to be constructed.

The rhetoric of fraternity was, of course, only partially translated into practice. For its part, the State's suspicion of societies and associations meant that it made strenuous efforts to control their activities within a clear legislative framework. Broadly speaking, fraternal associations were carefully monitored until the late-1870s, then tolerated for the rest of the century, and finally liberated in 1901. But the empirical history of such associations in rural France during the nineteenth century does not parallel exactly that of the legislation relating to them, so it needs to be interpreted also in terms both of the existing general theories about voluntary associations and of the concept of sociability as developed by the social historian, Maurice Agulhon.

Voluntary associations constitute an organised and institutionalised form of sociability. Although *la vie associative* can be expected to have great variety and to be dynamic in character, it is a precisely identifiable form of *sociabilité* and so is amenable to close examination. This paper looks at the emergence of voluntary associations as practical expressions of the principle of fraternity in the French countryside during the nineteenth century. It does so in relation to one department, that of Loir-et-Cher, and to one category of associations, not the 'expressive' groups which come into existence in order to express or satisfy specific interests which members have in relation to themselves (such as sports' clubs and musical associations) but instead the 'instrumental' groups which focus their activities upon the wider society in order to bring about a situation within a limited field which will be of benefit to their members.

The historical geography of fraternal associations in rural France remains very imperfectly known. Agulhon has noted that political historians have focused selectively upon secret societies, religious historians upon *confréries* or *congrégations*, and labour historians upon *compagnonnages* and mutual aid societies. In his view, other kinds of association have been relatively ignored. What is needed are more comprehensive studies of the entire range of voluntary associations which existed in particular places during the nineteenth century.

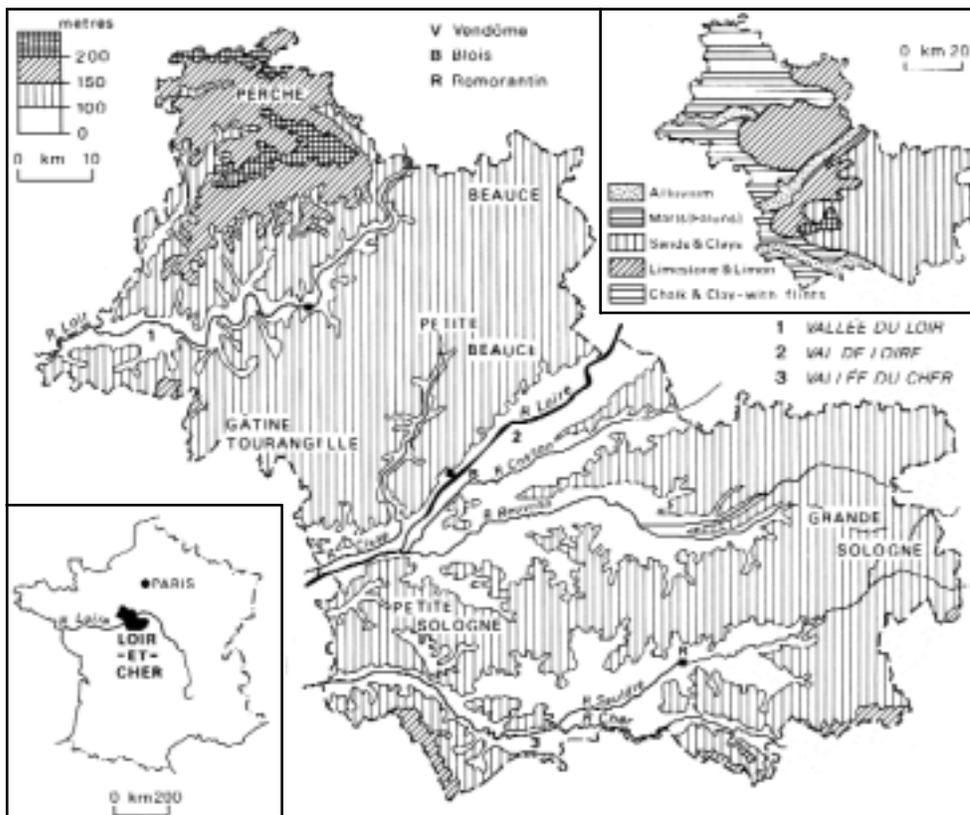
## Fraternal Associations in Rural Loir-et-Cher 1815-1914

### Identifications

The *département* of Loir-et-Cher has been selected for study both because it straddled the frontier between the 'two Frances' which have been famously observed as existing on either side of a line joining Saint-Malo and Geneva, and because it was in Loir-et-Cher that France's first agricultural syndicate was founded. Additionally, but in this respect like many other *départements* of France, Loir-et-Cher embraced within its boundary a set of diverse *pays* (Figure 1).

Research in the Archives Départementales of Loir-et-Cher and the Archives Nationales in Paris has brought to light the existence of approximately six hundred work-related, instrumental voluntary associations in the department at some time between 1815 and 1914. The close monitoring of voluntary associations by the State until 1901 and their continuing registration after that date produced a mass of mainly unpublished records relating to their activities. The prefect of the department maintained dossiers on each individual association which included correspondence (or copies of correspondence) with Ministries in Paris, with the association's officers, with the mayor of the commune in which it was based, and with the department's own officials such as its professor of agriculture. They often included copies of the association's statutes and rules. In addition, from time to time the prefect compiled lists which were intended to include all of the associations of various types existing in the department on specific dates, detailing their memberships and financial positions. The surviving records are, of course not complete and the data are by no means consistent through time and over space and across all kinds of association. But from this mass of unpublished (and, during the period when the research was conducted, uncatalogued) material it has been possible to reconstruct the historical geography of fraternal associations in Loir-et-Cher between 1815 and 1914.

Figure 1  
The location, physical geography and pays of Loir-et-Cher



The impressive total of approximately six hundred associations identified in Loir-et-Cher during that period averages out at two per commune and immediately suggests that fraternalism among the peasantry of Loir-et-Cher must have been an important feature of its rural social economy. Five sets of associations have been identified and each of them has been examined in terms of their historical timing, their geographical spacing and their social significance. The findings from that detailed and extensive research can only be summarised in this paper.

### **Livestock insurance societies**

Insurance societies came to be established in rural Loir-et-Cher for a variety of purposes, including the provision of protection against damage to property by fire, by floods and by hail storms. Such associations, however, were few in number and were vastly overshadowed by the very numerous livestock insurance associations. These were established in order to provide an indemnity to members who had insured their large animals (mainly horses and cattle) upon which they depended both for their draught power and for their products. At least 160 such societies were established in Loir-et-Cher from the 1830s onwards, but mainly in the 1860s and early-1900s. They were widely distributed throughout the department, with concentrations in the Val de Loire, the Petite Sologne and in the Loir valley.

Most societies restricted their membership to farmers living in a particular commune: they were based upon a geographically identifiable set of individuals who were all known personally to each other. This geographical limitation, itself a means of ensuring the effective operation of an association and especially the policing of its regulations, meant that these fraternal societies did not have large numbers of members. At the end of the nineteenth century their memberships ranged from 21 to 156, and the mean membership was about 80. That it was the principal of solidarity which underpinned such societies was symbolised in the slogan of the livestock insurance society of the commune of Droué, which proclaimed that "L'Union fait la force, aidons-nous les uns les autres". Most farms in Loir-et-Cher in the mid-nineteenth century had one or two horses, donkeys or mules, and many had a few dairy or beef cattle. The latter were, of course, valued for their products (mainly milk and meat, but also manure and skins), while the former were especially prized as draught animals and were essential to many farming operations. For varied reasons, therefore, horses and cattle were highly prized by farmers and represented a considerable capital investment, second only to that of their land

if they were owner-occupiers and of foremost importance if they were not themselves landowners. Livestock insurance societies enabled their members to insure their beasts against death by accident or natural causes, against serious injury which rendered an animal useless, and perhaps against compulsory slaughter required by the authorities during an epidemic. The earliest societies did not require their members to pay fixed insurance premiums; instead, members had to make payments when a claim by one of them was recognised (and in return for such payments members would receive joints of meat from the dead animal, if the carcass were deemed to be edible). Gradually, however, societies came to be established increasingly on the basis of the payment by members of regular cash premiums.

### **Mutual aid societies**

These were established in order to provide their members with benefits in cash and/or in kind when a member was unable to work his own land because of injury or ill-health. A mutual aid society normally achieved its aims by providing its members with medical diagnosis and medicines (free or at a reduced cost), with a cash indemnity or substitute labour during the recognised period of illness or incapacity, and with a contribution towards the funeral expenses of a member. In addition to these material benefits, a society offered opportunities for sociability, for both public demonstrations of fraternity (for example, by attendance at a member's funeral by other members of the society and by attendance at the Mass to celebrate the festival of a society's patron saint) and for private affirmations of solidarity (for example, through visiting the sick and at occasions arranged mainly for social drinking and eating). About 200 of the 300 communes of Loir-et-Cher formed such a society from the 1840s onwards, and especially during the 1850s and 1860s, with significant numbers being created in the towns and larger rural centres but also more generally in the Val de Loire, the Petite Sologne and the Cher valley. Societies varied considerably in size, but the median number of 'ordinary' members (as opposed to 'honorary' members or patrons) was about 60 during the second half of the nineteenth century.

### **Fire-fighting brigades**

At least 160 - more than half- of the communes of the department set up *Corps de sapeurs-pompiers*. The first were established in the late-eighteenth century but most were formed between 1850 and 1875 and most were located in the Beauce, in the Val de Loire and in the Petite Sologne.

In the 1850s and 1860s, brigades usually numbered between 30 and 40 men, whose average age was 35 years. Within agricultural communes the *corps* were composed mainly of *cultivateurs* and/or *vignerons*. By contrast, men from a wide range of crafts and trades formed the *corps* of small towns, such as cantonal centres. Disciplinary codes were largely self-imposed, reflecting the fact that membership of a brigade (and so also acceptance of its rules) was voluntary. Rules which constrained the behaviour (and thus the *liberté*) of members of a *corps* were accepted because they applied to all of them (and thus conformed to the concept of *égalité*) and because they were acknowledged as being in the interest of the brigade as a whole (and thus in the *fraternité* of this voluntary association).

### **Anti-phylloxera syndicates**

These were established between 1884 and 1895 to stop the spread of phylloxera by the application of insecticide to vineyards. They were unable to achieve their objective and only 33 such syndicates were formed, mainly in and near to the Val de Loire.

### **Agricultural syndicates**

General purpose agricultural syndicates were created in order to supply their members with goods (mainly, but not only, chemical fertilisers) of a guaranteed quality at discounted prices. Although more than thirty such syndicates were created in Loir-et-Cher, by far the most important was the first one to be founded, in 1883, the *Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher*. Its membership of 350 by the end of 1883 had swollen to almost 17,000 by 1913, distributed throughout the department but with concentrations in the Val de Loire, the Petite Sologne and the valley of the Loir. The other syndicates were much smaller, with an average membership of only slightly more than 200 in 1908. In addition to these agricultural supply syndicates, the department was also to see from the late-1870s onwards the creation of 22 threshing syndicates, mainly in or near the Val de Loire and the Petite Sologne.

### **Interpretations**

Interpretation of this large body of voluntary associations identified in Loir-et-Cher is best endeavoured through a comparative synthesis. Clearly, in the space available here, only a few conclusions can be presented and one or two conjectures offered.

Many contemporary observers of farming practices in Loir-et-Cher during the nineteenth century commented upon the reluctance of its peasants to change their ways and identified *la routine paysanne* as a major obstacle to agricultural improvement. For example, responses by mayors of communes to the decennial agricultural enquiry of 1852 painted a picture of conservatism, of a cautious attitude towards innovations and even of an almost superstitious reliance upon traditional beliefs and practices. In one canton they revealed a continuing belief in the existence of propitious and non-propitious saints' days for certain farming activities. In reply to the enquiry's question about which fertilisers were being used, one mayor said that, despite the advocacy of chemical fertilisers by the department's agricultural societies, farmers in his commune were content to use organic manures (from cattle, horses and sheep): 'ils n'ont pas de récoltes étonnantes, mais ils engrangent toujours: cette vieille méthode leur suffit; ils ne sont pas disposés à en changer'. In that phrase is encapsulated the peasant farmer as a 'satisficer' rather than as a 'maximiser' but it also hints at the peasant as someone unwilling or unable to experiment, to take risks.

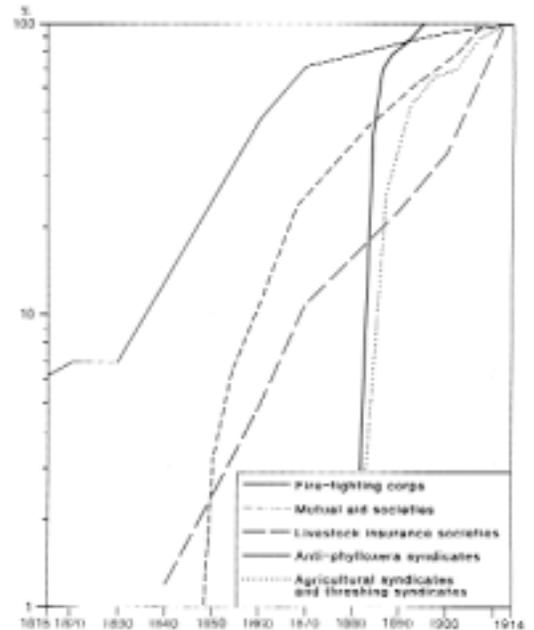
Representations of the peasantry of Loir-et-Cher, like those of many other parts of France, as routinised individuals have relied very considerably upon such contemporary anecdotal evidence. Such an image can be countered in a variety of ways. First, it is based upon what could be interpreted as the possibly non-comprehending remarks of non-peasant observers, often those of *notables* and local government officials committed to an Enlightenment model of progress based upon scientific knowledge and reasoning. In such a vision, the 'real' world was always likely to be lagging behind the 'theoretical', improved and even utopian, world which some thought it could become. Second, historical studies have shown that farming and the rural social economy did change considerably in Loir-et-Cher during the nineteenth century. Third, to the extent that the image of a routinised peasantry is correct such conservatism can be rationalised as a way of managing risk. An empathetic view of the peasantry, as taken by John Berger, sees it as 'a class of survivors' which recognises a world of scarcity rather than of surplus, a world of uncertainties, risks and dangers which only some survive. Routine made sense to the peasants themselves: it should therefore have made sense to their contemporaries and should make sense to us today.

Co-operation had long been part of the French peasants' survival algorithm. What is now clear, however, is that during the nineteenth century new strategies of co-operation - in effect, of risk management - were adopted by some of them as they fought increasingly for their survival. In Loir-et-Cher, as has been shown, there developed between 1815 and 1914 a vast number and a great array of instrumental voluntary associations. Each set of associations needs to be considered in discrete terms, in absolute terms. That has been done, but there is not space in this paper even to summarise those analyses. What will be endeavoured here is a comparative study of the whole *ensemble* of associations, in terms of their development in time, their distribution in space, and their social significance.

In order to compare the historical development of voluntary associations between 1815 and 1914, the growth of each of the five sets has been plotted over time as a cumulative percentage of the total number that came to be established within that set during that period (Figure 2) in terms of their timing, these five sets of associations fell into three groups. The fire-fighting corps alone form the first 'group': they originated before 1815, they had an origin phase which continued until about 1830 and a main diffusion phase from then until about 1870, after which their rate of formation slowed but continued through to 1914. Fifty per cent of the corps which came to be established in the department had been created by about 1860. The second group embraces the livestock insurance societies and the mutual aid societies. The former originated in the 1830s and the latter in the 1840s. The livestock insurance societies grew steadily to about 1900, by which period about 40 per cent of their ultimate total had been established; thereafter their rate of founding increased through to just before 1914. Mutual aid societies originated in the 1840s, expanded in number rapidly in the 1850s and until the mid-1860s, after which their rate of development decelerated. The third group, comprising the anti-phylloxera syndicates and the agricultural and threshing syndicates originated in the 1880s and grew rapidly during that decade, but the formation of new anti-phylloxera syndicates ceased in the early 1890s while that of the other syndicates slowed down.

Taken together, the most significant periods for the formation of these associations were the mid-1840s to the mid-1860s, the 1880s, and the early-1900s. Almost half of the more than 500 fire-fighting corps, livestock insurance societies and mutual aid societies that were to be created in Loir-et-Cher had been established by the mid-1880s.

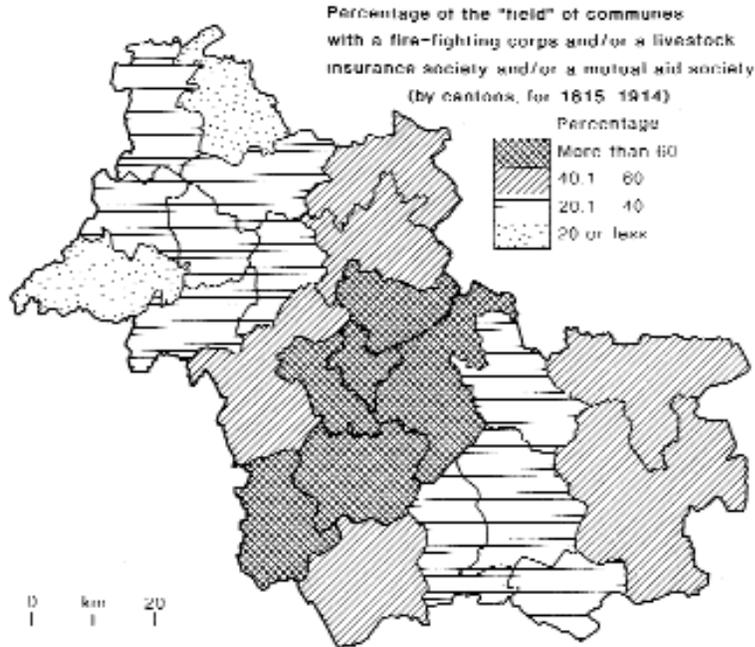
**Figure 2**  
The comparative historical development of fire-fighting corps, mutual aid societies, livestock insurance societies, anti-phylloxera syndicates, and agricultural and threshing syndicates in Loir-et-Cher between 1815 and 1914



The periods of active development of these associations correspond neither with periods of significant legislation nor with periods of active promotion of such associations by the central authorities. Sometimes the creation of voluntary associations ran ahead of the legislation relating to them, sometimes the formation of associations lagged behind such legislation. And while there can be no doubt that from time to time the central authorities of the State were keen to promote the setting-up of some kinds of voluntary associations, it is not evident that their efforts were directly or immediately rewarded. The advocacy and advice of the central authorities were not always heeded, for a variety of reasons: promises of financial support were not always kept (or perceived by potential recipients to have been kept); when grants were awarded, their payment was often made only after considerable delays; and the advice and intentions of the central authorities were often viewed with suspicion. Explanations of the historical development of voluntary associations need to look beyond their legal and official contexts.

All of these associations were, in fact, forms of risk management and it is therefore of interest and significance to note the historical sequence in which they developed. The earliest to be created were the fire-fighting corps, intended to provide

**Figure 3**  
The comparative geographical distributions of three sets of fraternal associations in Loir-et-Cher, by cantons, between 1815 and 1914



protection against the risk to *property* from fire damage: a peasant's house and farm buildings were likely to be his largest capital asset and could also contain other valuable property, such as stored cereals, animal fodder and livestock. The second group of associations (the livestock insurance societies and the mutual aid societies) offered protection against risks to *labour*, be it animal power or human effort, on both of which the running of peasants' farms depended (and a peasant's beasts, not only his draught animals, were likely to be a major *property* asset, after the peasant's land and farm house). The third group comprised associations (the anti-phylloxera syndicates and the agricultural and threshing syndicates) whose objectives were to provide protection against risks to crops on the land which a peasant cultivated, protection against the dangers for example of insect pests and of impoverished soils, and consequently of poor crop yields. This ordering of the emergence of voluntary associations reflected to some extent the relative importance which peasants attached to the different components of their livelihoods: their farmhouse and outbuildings, their own labour and that of draught animals, their other animals, and their crops.

If we put to one side the question of timing and consider that of the spacing of associations, then they can be seen in a different light. Within the geographical distributions of the five sets of associations studied, the recurrent importance of some *pays* stands out: especially the Val de Loire and the Petite Sologne, but also the valley of the Cher, parts of the Petite Beauce, and the valley of

the Loir. This general impression can be checked more rigorously in relation not to *pays* but to cantons. For each canton has been calculated the percentage of its constituent communes (its 'field' of communes) which acquired a fire-fighting corps and/or a livestock insurance society and/or a mutual aid society (hereafter referred to as 'indicator' associations) at some time between 1815 and 1914. As each commune had the opportunity to acquire three different kinds of association, the 'field' of communes within a canton was in effect three times the actual number of communes. Anti-phylloxera syndicates have been excluded from this analysis because they could not potentially be established throughout the department but only in those communes in which viticulture was practised. Similarly, agricultural syndicates (and so also threshing syndicates) have been omitted because of the clear dominance of the *Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher* in the domain of agricultural syndicalism. But the livestock insurance societies, the mutual aid societies and the fire-fighting corps together numbered more than 500 so that they represented a very considerable proportion of the grand total of almost 600 voluntary associations embraced by this study.

This synthesis of the geographical distribution of 'indicator' associations by cantons confirms the impression already obtained (Figure 3). A central core of cantons with the highest densities of associations during the nineteenth century straddled the Val de Loire but also included part of the Petite Beauce in the north-east of the department, and the Petite Sologne and part of the Cher valley in the south-west. They were fewest in

the north and north-west, in that part of Loir-et-Cher which lay within Perche.

Superficially attractive explanations of the geography of associations are soon found wanting. The distribution of livestock insurance societies did not reflect the distribution of livestock within the department; the distribution of mutual aid societies did not reflect that of the overall population who could all have benefited from them; the distribution of fire-fighting corps was not related to the incidence or risk of fires; the distribution of anti-phylloxera syndicates was not directly related to the diffusion of phylloxera throughout the department; agricultural syndicates (other than the *Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher*) were focused largely on one *pays* rather than spread throughout the whole of what was dominantly an agricultural department, and membership of the *Syndicat des Agriculteurs de Loir-et-Cher* was itself much greater relatively in some *pays* than in others. Voluntary associations had specific geographies within Loir-et-Cher but they were by no means always to be found in the numbers and in the places which a straightforward, functionalist, fundamentally economic interpretation might suggest.

Closer analysis of the social significance of voluntary associations suggests that they were developed to the greatest extent in those *pays* characterised by *vignerons* and their small farms, in cantons with high percentages of their populations concentrated in the *chef-lieux* of their communes, in localities close to Blois and in or close to the Val de Loire, a major historical corridor of communication and contact. But even this somewhat simplistic interpretation, with its emphasis on spatial distance and economic function, needs to be probed further.

More than seventy per cent of the communes of Loir-et-Cher had established within them at least one of the kinds of association which are the subject of this present study. They were numerous as well as being widely spread through both time and space. Fraternalism clearly mattered in rural Loir-et-Cher during the nineteenth century. But is not my intention to replace the myth of individualism with another, that of fraternalism. I want instead to emphasise the need for a more nuanced interpretation of the peasantry and of their voluntary associations which takes account of the complexities and contradictions of such associations. As far as the associations of Loir-et-Cher are concerned, a number of key issues can be emphasised:

- Many associations were unsurprisingly located in the towns and larger rural centres, but they also penetrated deeply into the countryside. Fraternalism was far from being uniquely, or even principally, an urban phenomenon.
- Many associations had not only manifest but also latent agendas; many of them represented materialism in the service of idealism. Although they were by law prohibited from engaging with political or religious issues, many associations had political or religious underpinnings.
- Although associations were based upon the principle of fraternity, in practice they could be responsible for promoting not only social cohesion but also social conflict, both internally within a single association and externally between an association and the central authorities or another association.
- The instrumental associations studied here constituted a new form of risk management, that of an insurance society; as such they reflected the declining role of religion within the rural social economy during the nineteenth century and the rising influence of scientific reasoning. They also encouraged in peasants a greater confidence in their ability to control their own lives, to create their own histories: and they also provided them with a local example of democracy at work. Thus voluntary associations contributed to the secularisation and the politicisation of rural Loir-et-Cher during the nineteenth century.
- Voluntary associations were new social institutions but they were able to build upon both a pre-existing informal tradition of mutual help among the peasantry at times of crisis and to some extent upon some antecedent confraternities (such as the *confréries de métiers* and *confréries de vignerons*).

Many of Loir-et-Cher's *confréries* of the Ancien Régime and many of its post-Revolutionary voluntary associations had chequered histories and it would not be sensible to argue in terms of any direct link or continuity between them. It may, however, be conjectured that there might have persisted from the earlier period in the Val de Loire, and especially in its viticultural districts, *un esprit d'association* which favoured the development of voluntary associations in the valley and its adjacent *pays* during the nineteenth century.

### Note

This paper presents in summary an argument set forth at length in my research monograph, being published by Cambridge University Press, *Fraternity among the French Peasantry: Sociability and Voluntary Associations in the Loire Valley, 1815-1914*. Publication is anticipated in 1998 (and for that reason detailed referencing to the primary and secondary sources upon which this essay is based is not provided here).

## **Publications du Centre**

### ***Cheminements***

Mathieu, Jacques, Alain Laberge et Louis Michel, (dir.). *Espaces-temps familiaux au Canada aux XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Avec la participation de Jacinthe Ruel, Isabelle Rodrigue, Claire Gourdeau, Tommy Guénard. Sainte-Foy, CIEQ, 1995, 90 p.

Courville, S. et B. Osborne (dir.), *Histoire mythique et paysage symbolique, Mythical History and Symbolic Landscape, Actes des colloques de Québec et de Kingston*, Sainte-Foy, CIEQ, 1997, 113 p.

### ***Cheminements-Conférences***

Baker, Alan R.H., « *L'Union fait la force, aidons-nous les uns les autres* »: *Towards a Historical Geography of Fraternal Associations in Loir-et-Cher (France) 1815-1914*, Sainte-Foy, CIEQ, 1998, 7 p.

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**A**lan R. H. Baker est spécialiste de géographie historique et de la France rurale. Il a signé et cosigné plusieurs ouvrages et articles à caractère épistémologique et méthodologique. En avril 1997, il était l'invité du Laboratoire de géographie historique de l'Université Laval, composante du Centre interuniversitaire d'études québécoises qui associe également le Centre d'études québécoises de l'Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières. En plus de participer aux activités régulières du Centre, Alan Baker a présenté un aspect de ses travaux sur le Loir-et-Cher. Nous sommes honorés d'en faire état dans ces pages, qui inaugurent aussi la Collection Cheminements-Conférences.