CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information

Introduction

This study of popular politics in a rural context originated in a thesis[1] devoted to the revolutionary Terror in the department of the Aveyron. More precisely, it springs from a sense of dissatisfaction at what can be achieved within the confines of an academic thesis. Exploring the dynamics of grass-roots politics through the medium of the Terror is like watching a roundabout through the wrong end of a telescope. At best the fleeting images offer part-answers to the big 'how' and 'why' questions which the historian is duty-bound to ask. At worst they conceal the complexities of human motivation behind a facade of rhetoric and posturing. One is left wondering who these cardboard revolutionaries strutting in the *comités de surveillance* and the jacobin clubs really were. Whence did they come? And what fate befell them as the receding brilliance of the Republic of the Year Two (1793–4) cast everything into shadow? The Revolution, it is worth recalling, was made by men who had grown to maturity during the *ancien régime* and on them devolved the task of picking up the pieces at the end of the decade. Unavoidably, therefore, revolutionary and post-revolutionary France bore the imprint of the *ancien régime*.

One way or another this insight pervades the present book, for once its subject-matter had been settled the format unfolded naturally. The decision to concentrate upon the evolving political apprehensions of a largely peasant electorate requires little justification. Most readers will be aware that studies of the process of *prise de conscience* in the countryside are few and far between. In contrast to urban social groups, the country dweller plays a strictly walk-on part in most of the standard histories of France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[2] If the great *jacquerie* which launched the Revolution and the more recently documented provincial insurgency which greeted the news of Louis-Napoléon's *coup* in 1851 are set aside, one might easily conclude that the French peasantry had no history in this period.

[1] P. M. Jones, 'The Revolutionary Committees of the Department of the Aveyron, France, 1793–1795', (University of Oxford, D.Phil. thesis, 1977).
[2] An honourable exception is R. Magraw, *France 1815–1914: The Bourgeois Century* (London, 1983).

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information

Social historians have scarcely neglected the study of rural society, but they have chosen instead to split it up into manageable units which is arguably worse. The 'poor', the 'criminal', the 'landed' and the 'landless', the 'mobile' and the 'immobile' attract the attentions of batteries of specialists, while the essential integrity of 'le monde rural' goes by default. Among political historians even this degree of sensitivity is lacking. For them the country dweller remains an enigma: unstudiable because he resists inclusion in any readily identifiable political tradition and hence unstudied.

What is required is a synthesis of the two approaches: a harnessing of the methodology of the social sciences to the preoccupations of the political historian. In retrospect it seems obvious that this was the challenge posed by our earlier study of revolutionary politics in the department of the Aveyron. Little of that thesis has been incorporated in the present work, but the ambition to explain the dynamics of opinion formation in the countryside remains the same. So, too, does the broad territorial context, for subsequent research vindicated our original contention that the department of the Aveyron harboured a rural civilisation of unusual richness and vitality. But this civilisation transcended the borders of the Aveyron to embrace the entire highland plateau of the southern Massif Central. The specific characteristics of village politics on the uplands rising out of the Garonne plain were replicated in the villages overlooking the valley of the Rhône and the Mediterranean littoral. In short, the southern promontories of the Massif Central formed a whole and deserved treatment as such.

The Aveyron became, thus, the pivot for a study which soon encapsulated the departments of the Lozère, the Haute-Loire and the Ardèche too. But it is as well to remember that these administrative categories convey little that is meaningful about the history of the region. They are invoked chiefly as signposts in order to orientate the reader. The best definitions of the scope of this book are geographical and ecological: it concerns the so called 'hautes terres' of the southern Massif Central;[3] that is to say the population living on or above the 500 metre contour. Scant attention is therefore paid to the inhabitants of the lowland periphery of the Ardèche whose historical evolution was quite distinct from that of the mountain peasantry. On the other hand, it is less easy to specify the northerly frontiers of the region for there exists no natural divide separating the southern buttresses of the Massif Central from those of the Monts d'Auvergne. It is to be hoped that the subtle ecological and cultural pressures that helped to differentiate the peasantry of the northern and north-western Massif Central from their near neighbours in the south and south east will emerge in the chapters that follow. Even so, a substantial margin of interpenetration must be allowed for, and we have not hesitated to

[3] See A. Fel, *Les Hautes Terres du Massif Central. Tradition paysanne et économie agricole* (Paris, 1962), p. 13.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information

draw examples from frontier departments when the argument justified so doing.

Nevertheless, in a study which straddles the political watershed of 1789 department labels should be pinned down firmly, for otherwise they will mislead. The Aveyron corresponds to the old province of the Rouergue; the Ardèche to the Vivarais and the Lozère, *grosso modo*, to the Gévaudan which is straightforward enough. Only the Haute-Loire presents a problem. After considerable in-fighting between interested parties, its boundaries were drawn to embrace not only the Velay, but also the Brivadois and a corner of the Gévaudan. The legislators of the Constituent Assembly deemed the diminutive province of the Velay too small to constitute a department in its own right and attached to it a portion of the province of the Auvergne. In so doing, they thrust together two populations who shared little in common beyond physical proximity. The Brivadois was a *pays d'élection* whose administrative centre of gravity lay to the north in the town of Riom, whereas the Velay was a *pays d'état* subject to the political authority of the Estates of Languedoc in Montpellier and the legal jurisdiction of the Parlement of Toulouse. The Gévaudan, likewise, formed part of the highland *arrière pays* of the extensive province of Languedoc while the Rouergue, being a *pays d'élection*, looked westwards to Montauban where the intendant had his seat. That is, until 1779, when Jacques Necker set up the Assemblée Provinciale de la Haute-Guienne which linked the Rouergue and the province of the Quercy (subsequently to become the department of the Lot) in a brief political union. The southern Massif Central, in short, can be described as an administrative no man's land where the three great provinces of the Auvergne, the Languedoc and Guienne converged to form a mountainous cul-de-sac.

The ecclesiastical structures of the *ancien régime* contributed a further layer of administrative incoherence. The diocese of Mende and the Gévaudan dovetailed neatly and so did the diocese of Le Puy and the Velay, more or less. Not so the diocese of Viviers and the Vivarais, however, for this province also embraced a substantial number of parishes belonging to the dioceses of Valence and Vienne. As for the Rouergue, it was divided into two dioceses on the eve of the Revolution. All the parishes to the north of the river Tarn owed allegiance to the bishops of Rodez, while those to the south were subject to the bishops of Vabres. In 1790 this ecclesiastical fabric was hurled into the melting-pot along with so much else and diocesan boundaries were remodelled to coincide with the newly created departments. However, the change proved less than dramatic, for like the provinces, the old dioceses lived on. Rodez regained control of the one hundred and fifty parishes it had lost to Vabres nearly five centuries earlier; the ancient bishopric of Le Puy assumed responsibility for one hundred and thirty-four parishes situated in the Brivadois for the most part; Viviers took over the eighty-nine parishes of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information

the dioceses of Valence and Vienne enclaved in the Vivarais, and the bishopric of Mende emerged from the change of regime pretty much intact. Only one other administrative adjustment deserves mention and that occurred in 1801 when the Concordat reduced the number of *évêchés*. Briefly, the bishoprics of Rodez, Le Puy and Viviers ceased to exist and were merged into the adjacent dioceses of Cahors, St Flour and Mende respectively. But this typically Napoleonic attempt to trim the budget of the restored church soon proved unworkable and the revolutionary format of dioceses contoured around the departments was reinstated in 1823–4.

If the quest for cohesion informs the choice of territorial context for this study, the quest for causality underpins its chronological scope. The narrow time-slice approach is unsuited to the purpose for which this book was written for it fails to capture the secular nature of change within rural society. This is a truism of social history, of course, but one which political historians confronting the evolution of the peasantry have been slow to acknowledge. Examine the dynamics of popular politics through the medium of the Terror and the result is tunnel vision, as we have discovered. Examine the dynamics of popular politics through the medium of a chronological sequence of cathartic events and the structure of political commitment in the countryside begins to emerge. The existence of such a structure – or structures – is probed at several levels, but the demographic cycle provides the basic framework of analysis. After 1750 or thereabouts, the southern Massif Central entered a phase of dynamic population growth which barely faltered before the 1880s. Rural society attained the last apogee in its millennial development. Yet these decades also witnessed the beginnings of the ideological subversion of the rural community by the liberal-democratic state. Naturally, this attrition was not unique to the southern Massif Central; every village in France experienced similar problems of adjustment. But the population of the southern highlands *was* unusual in the degree of resistance it offered to the process of integration. And that resistance flowed, in turn, from the vital stores of energy built up by the rural community in the years of recuperation after 1750.

How the rural community of the southern Massif Central cohered despite a low density human habitat is explored thoroughly in the pages that follow. The issue is important, for it is our contention that individuals acted – and reacted – within a framework of ethnicity and territorialism that effectively segmented the countryside into discrete communities. This is not to re-state the case for 'histoire immobile',[4] nor is it an attempt to chart the evolution of a peasant civilisation in purely anthropological terms. Our intention is rather to examine the interplay of endogenous and exogenous factors which served to crystallise allegiances at the grass roots. The argument outlined, it is true,

[4] See E. Le Roy Ladurie, 'L'Histoire immobile', *Ann. E.S.C.*, xxix (1974), 673–92.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information

lays heavy stress upon the insularity of the rural community, but the temptation to dismiss peasant politics as a contradiction in terms should be resisted. Peasant communities evinced a political character like any other community; what they so often lacked was a definable ideological character. All too frequently, historians have devoted disproportionate energy to labelling the elusive ideological component in peasant behaviour while neglecting the internal architecture of the rural community. This study seeks to redress the balance somewhat. It pays serious attention to so called parish pump conflicts in the belief that they performed a fundamental role in shaping opinion in the countryside.

The vitality of parish pump alignments had a temporal dimension, too, for it seems that the querulousness of the rural community expressed a developing perception of equilibrium and well-being. As the villages repopulated in the decades after 1750, peasant sociability revived and so did the strident tribal loyalties that would bedevil the functioning of representative institutions for a century and more. But community assertiveness reflected more than simply the contours of secular rivalry. It reflected the integrative capacity of rural catholicism. In the southern Massif Central the catholic church exercised a virtual monopoly over all forms of collective expression. Popular culture and the culture of rural catholicism overlapped inextricably. The vigour of the former informed the vigour of the latter and vice versa. Unsurprisingly, since the parish pump issues which established the lines of demarcation between households and between communities often concerned provision for chapels, cemeteries, church schools and the like. In widening the arena of collective expression, the rituals of electoral democracy initially reinforced the purchase of the catholic church upon the rural community. The advent of the ballot-box, that symbol of the new political order, coincided with a fast-flowing tide of popular religiosity in the southern Massif Central and the resultant synthesis found apt expression in the columns of peasant-citizens whom the clergy led to the polls in April 1848. In clericalism, the upland peasantry found a refuge from the encroaching power of the state. A temporary refuge as it turned out, however. With hindsight, it is clear that clericalism performed a dual function. It expressed a rejection of political neologism; a closing of ranks in defence of all that was local and familiar. But it subtly extended the customary range of apprehensions at election times as well. Paradoxically, therefore, enlistment in the cause of religious reaction became the prelude to emancipation, for it sharpened peasant awareness of the national entity and helped to bring to term a certain highly localised conception of politics.

Our study thus ends with rural society on the threshold of a major transformation. By 1886 the demographic cycle which had commenced towards the middle of the eighteenth century was exhausted. A few villages on the most inaccessible plateaux of the Haute-Loire and the Lozère continued to

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information

register a net population increase, but haemorrhaging outmigration was already punching great holes in the biological fabric of the region. Having pressed hard against Malthusian restraints for nearly a generation, peasant polyculture won a valuable reprieve. But soon the countryside began to empty and the vitality of an entire agrarian civilisation suffered in consequence. The short-term repercussions of the changing conjuncture should not be overstated, but the trend was unmistakable. By the end of the 1880s, the rural society of the southern Massif Central had passed its apogee. So too in the political domain: railway construction and the siren pressures of national economic integration made the 1880s a make-or-break decade. More potent than either, however, was the furious republican campaign to bring the rural community to heel. Jules Ferry's education laws carried the state's cultural offensive to every peasant's doorstep and rival philosophies were systematically excluded from the class room. The battle for the political loyalties of a rising generation of peasant voters had been won, or so it seemed. The parliamentary come-back of anti-republican forces in the ballot of 1885 produced a rude shock, therefore, and the Opportunists vented their frustrations by releasing a veritable paroxysm of interventionism upon the countryside. In these conditions the outcome could not long remain in doubt. Within a decade the peasantry had learned the lesson of tactical compliance and clericalism ceased to pose a threat to the established political order.

Such, in brief, is the subject-matter of the present book and the reader will find it organised in the following manner. Chapters one, two and three set the scene and treat in turn the regional context, the rural economy and the complex of relationships determining social status in the countryside. Particular emphasis is laid upon settlement patterns, upon the extent of *petite propriété* and upon the structure of the peasant household for these are important building blocks in our argument regarding the process of opinion formation. Chapter four is crucial. It seeks to vindicate the concept of the rural community as a tool for historical analysis and puts forward the idea that a locally rich culture of catholicism provided the principal medium for community expression. Chapter five sets the analysis in the temporal context of the late *ancien régime* and explores the accretions of tradition and prejudice that conditioned the political reflexes of the peasantry after 1789. Atavistic allegiances and bitter memories of seigneurialism and the fiscal aggression of the old monarchy were handed down from one generation to the next irrespective of the surface flux of events which suggests that an enquiry into the new political order ought first to begin with the old. Chapter six provides a corrective to this emphasis on continuity and examines the inception of new political traditions in the countryside under several thematic headings. The invention of electoral democracy is instanced as probably the single greatest achievement of the revolutionary epoch, and the adaptation of its cumbersome mechanisms to a rural environment forms the subject-matter

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information

of chapter seven. Not the least institution to be affected by that process of adaptation was the catholic church. The democratic franchise maximised the mobilising potential of rural catholicism and the introduction of universal manhood suffrage in 1848 facilitated the emergence of the church as the first great electoral organisation of the modern age. With an important shift in popular political attitudes impending, chapter eight breaks off from the narrative to take stock of the argument thus far. It proposes a broad classification of the observed sources of political commitment in the countryside and makes use of case studies to suggest ways in which endogenous and exogenous factors interacted. Chapter nine is devoted to the watershed decade of the 1880s in which the stealthy process of political modernisation reached a dramatic and definitive climax. Once the republicans had won control of the parliamentary institutions of the Republic the assault on the bastions of elite power in the countryside became a logical next step. Just how 'modern' was the popular political awareness that emerged from the tussles of the 1880s is discussed in chapter ten. The answer, for what it is worth, is then employed to underpin a number of general observations about the process of peasant politicisation in the course of the nineteenth century.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information

1

The regional context

The roof of France

The plateau of central France culminates in a series of table-lands and escarpments which are mostly located along its southern and south-eastern flanks (see maps 1 and 2). Travellers were wont to describe this region as the 'roof of France'. The description is apt for the torrents of the southern massifs drain into the Loire, the Garonne and the Rhône river basins. Hundreds of mountain streams splash their way down the steep slopes of the Cévennes. Some of them feed the Allier and Loire rivers which curve northwards for hundreds of kilometres before debouching into the Atlantic; others fuel the Lot and the Tarn to join the Garonne; the remainder combine to form the Hérault, Gard and Ardèche rivers which flow swiftly and unpredictably towards the Mediterranean. Not for nothing were the departments of the southern Massif Central named after their rivers. As physical barriers they were obstacles which could not be ignored. As fissured oases of fertility the role they played was no less crucial. The exception was the department of the Lozère – the veritable roof of France. Named after the highest peak of the southern Cévennes (Mont Lozère, 1699 metres), its highland water-courses discharge their contents in all directions and receive nothing in return. The majority of the communes of the Lozère are situated above the 800 metre contour which makes it the most upland department in France.

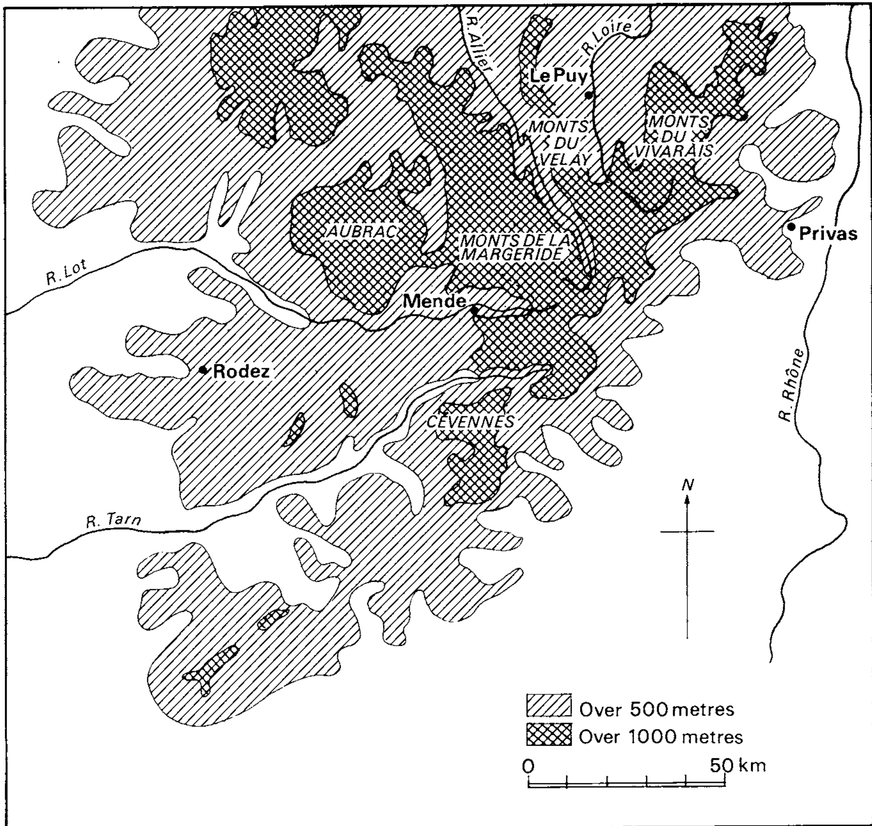
Mean altitudes are lower in the Aveyron, the Ardèche and the Haute-Loire, but the broad characteristics of the relief are similar. Five types of terrain can be readily identified. The table-lands known as the Grands Causses (to distinguish them from their lesser neighbours in the Quercy) span the frontier between the Aveyron and the Lozère. These slabs of eroded limestone were high, dry and largely uninhabited in the eighteenth century. River valleys provided a more sheltered environment. The rich alluvium of the lower reaches of the Lot and Tarn, and of the Loire around Le Puy, had enabled a prosperous agriculture to develop. More commonly, however, the rivers of the region flowed in steep-sided gorges which made them unsuitable either for settlement or communication. The Jonte and the upper reaches of

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information

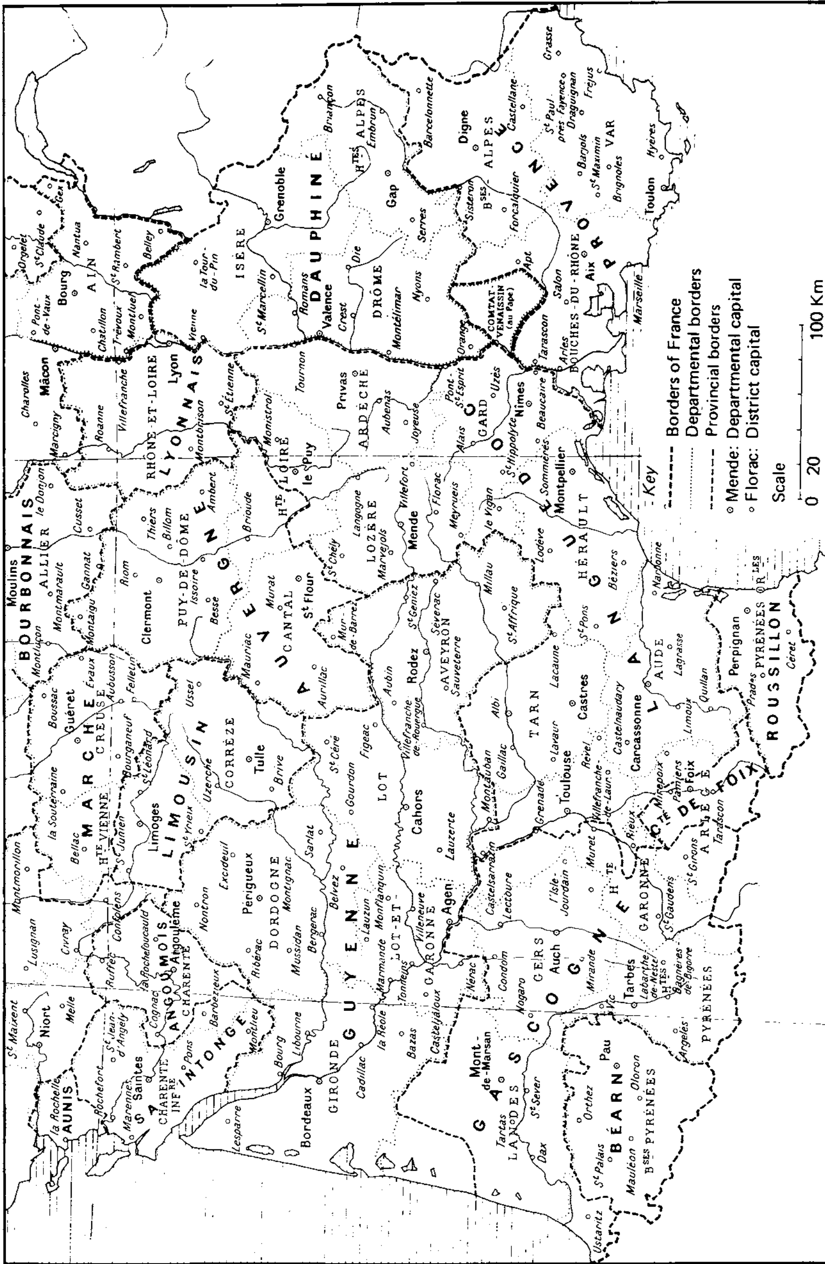
the Tarn had etched canyons in the limestone that were 500 metres deep in places while the gorges of the Allier made the north-eastern Lozère a virtual cul-de-sac. Volcanic action contributed a third trait to the landscape. The Aubrac, Meygal, Mézenc and Coiron massifs lacked the contoured symmetry of the Puys, but formed well-defined lava fields nevertheless. These volcanic summits (Mont Mézenc culminated at 1751 metres) provided rich grazing for summer flocks. The basalt soils of the lower slopes proved an excellent medium for rye cultivation and were called *planèzes*. In marked contrast were the impoverished crystalline soils which made up the greater part of the terrain of the Massif Central. Granite ramparts such as the Margeride which ran for sixty kilometres between Pinols (Haute-Loire) and Mende (Lozère) were impressive physical barriers, but offered a mediocre context for settlement and agriculture. The schist areas were even less inviting. Unrewarding to work because of high acidity, the land surface was pitted and dissected by



Map 1 The southern Massif Central

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
0521522587 - Politics and Rural Society: The Southern Massif Central c. 1750-1880
P. M. Jones
Excerpt
More information



Map 2 The administrative geography of southern France in 1790

© Cambridge University Press