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0521526906 - The Imperfect Peasant Economy: The Loire Country, 1800-1914

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pour Micheline
tibi semper idem

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Frontmatter

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La liberté est application, effort perpétuel, contrôle
rigoureux de soi, sacrifice éventuel . . . elle est invitation à
vivre courageusement et, à l'occasion, héroïquement.

Georges Lefebvre, *Quatre-vingt-neuf*

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0521526906 - The Imperfect Peasant Economy: The Loire Country, 1800-1914

Gregor Dallas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

List of figures and tables	<i>page</i> ix
Preface	xii

Part I. Introduction

1	Aims and scope	3
2	The Loire Country: the land and its settlements	9
	1. Physical geography	9
	2. Human geography: trade and the towns	14
	3. Human geography: the countryside	16
3	“The theory of peasant economy”	24
	1. The theory of peasant economy	27
	2. Imperfections in the peasant economy	37

Part II. Space

4	Relative space: town and country	43
	1. Riverside cities	45
	2. The communications network	60
	3. Markets and fairs	68
	4. Several Nantes; one Orléans	71
5	The connectors	73
	1. Connectors on the land	74
	2. Connectors in spirit	83
6	The rural economy in toto	94
	1. The means	95
	2. The effort	114
	3. The imperfect peasant economy	130

Part III. Time

7	Peasant family and peasant population	137
	1. Microdemography: the developmental cycle	139
	2. Macrodemography: population movements	180

Cambridge University Press

0521526906 - The Imperfect Peasant Economy: The Loire Country, 1800-1914

Gregor Dallas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii	Contents	
8	Peasant properties	197
	1. A property census	198
	2. Property movements	201
	3. The property cycle	225
9	Crisis and stability: the rural economy through time	240
	1. Intensification, ca. 1800-1860	241
	2. Extension, ca. 1860-1914	259
	Conclusion: <i>Plus ça change</i> . . .	280
	Notes	288
	Bibliography	327
	Index	341

Figures and tables

Figures

2.1	The geology of the Loire Country	<i>page</i> 11
2.2	The Orléanais in the mid-nineteenth century	19
2.3	The Nantais in the mid-nineteenth century	21
3.1	Factors in the peasant economy	34
4.1	Nantes in the mid-nineteenth century	47
4.2	Orléans in the mid-nineteenth century	55
5.1	Percentages of properties over 50 hectares by residence	80
6.1	Vines, percentage area, 1862	102
6.2	Cereals, percentage area, 1862	103
6.3	Cattle per household, 1862	104
7.1	Age distribution of children living with their mothers, 1836–1911	158
7.2	Age distribution of related household members outside the conjugal family unit, 1836–1911	160
7.3	Age distribution of nonrelated household members outside the conjugal family unit, 1836–1911	161
7.4	Occupational distribution of household members outside the conjugal family unit, 1836–1911	165
7.5	Total number of children on age of head of household, 1836–1913	175
7.6	Standardized parabolic regression lines in both regions, 1836–1911	176
7.7	A path analysis of the developmental cycle in both regions, 1836–1911	177
7.8	Births, deaths, marriages, and migrations in the Orléanais and the Nantais, 1807–1906	182
7.9	Births, deaths, marriages, and migrations, in Orléans and Nantes, 1807–1906	183
7.10	Births, deaths, marriages, and migrations, in the Beauce, the Sologne, the Forêt d'Orléans, and the Orléanais Valley, 1807–1906	184
7.11	Births, deaths, marriages, and migrations in the Nantais Plateau, Retz-Vendée, Sèvre-et-Maine, and the Nantais Valley, 1807–1906	185
7.12	Net migrations for the period 1881–1911 in the Orléanais and the Nantais	195
8.1	Percentage change in total properties recorded in the first and second cadastres, 1821/44–1913	203
8.2	Area distribution of properties (agricultural land only), first and second cadastres, 1821/44–1913	208
8.3	Proximities of propertyholders' residence, first and second cadastres, 1821/44–1913	212

Cambridge University Press

0521526906 - The Imperfect Peasant Economy: The Loire Country, 1800-1914

Gregor Dallas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x	Figures and tables	
8.4	Urban residences of propertyholders, first and second cadastres, 1821/44–1913	213
8.5	Annual distributions of number of properties and property transactions, in the Orléanais and the Nantais in 1840–1913	214
8.6	Annual distributions of number of properties and property transactions, in the Beauce, the Sologne, the Forêt d'Orléans, and the Orléanais Valley, 1840–1913	215
8.7	Annual distributions of number of properties, property transactions, in the Nantais Plateau, Retz–Vendée, Sèvre-et-Maine, and the Nantais Valley, 1840–1913	216
8.8	Property area index and kin area index by property cycle units in the Orléanais and the Nantais	233
8.9	Property area index and kin area index by property cycle units in the Beauce, the Sologne, the Forêt d'Orléans, and the Orléanais Valley	234
8.10	Property area index and kin area index by property cycle units in the Nantais Plateau, Retz–Vendée, Sèvre-et-Maine, and the Nantais Valley	235
9.1	Change in cultivated area in Loiret and Loire-Inférieure, 1852–1913	262
9.2	Change in agricultural production in Loiret and Loire-Inférieure, 1852–1913	263
9.3	Change in quantity of livestock in Loiret and Loire-Inférieure, 1852–1913	264
Tables		
4.1	Average number of inhabitants per square kilometer by subregion, 1801, 1851, 1911	44
4.2	Total metric tonnage of combined imports and exports in the major ports of France, 1833 and 1875	48
4.3	Breakdown of workers by industry in Nantes, ca. 1847	51
4.4	Breakdown of workers by industry in Orléans, ca. 1847	57
4.5	Kilometers of rail, Loiret and Loire-Inférieure, 1879–1912	67
5.1	Professions of the owners of over 50 hectares of land	82
5.2	Primary school attendance in the Orléanais and the Nantais, 1884	93
6.1	Cultivated land, percentage area, 1862	98
6.2	Livestock per square kilometer and per household, 1862	100
6.3	Pearson correlation analysis of cultivated land (percentage area of canton) and livestock (per household), 1862	111
6.4	Occupational distribution of the active population in the Nantais and the Orléanais, 1851	115
6.5	Occupational distribution as percentages of the total population active in agriculture, Nantais and Orléanais, 1851	116
6.6	Comparison of the total number of propertyholders in the 1851 census and the first cadastre	124
6.7	Daily diet of average adult cultivator in the Orléanais (O) and the Nantais (N), 1862	133
7.1	Mean household size (MHS), 1836–1911	146
7.2	Frequency distributions of children and household members outside the conjugal family unit (CFU), 1836–1911	148

Cambridge University Press

0521526906 - The Imperfect Peasant Economy: The Loire Country, 1800-1914

Gregor Dallas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

	Figures and tables	xi
7.3	Birthplace and urban origins of spouses in percentages, 1906 and 1911 combined	150
7.4	Age differences between spouses (years husband older than wife), 1836-1911	151
7.5	Age-specific fertility rates, 1831-1910	154
7.6	Means and standard deviations of variables used in analysis of developmental cycle, Orléanais (O) and Nantais (N), 1836-1911	169
7.7	Total number of children, kin, and servants by age of head of household, 1836-1911	170
7.8	Analysis of covariance of the number of children adjusted for factors and covariates, both regions, 1836-1911	172
7.9	Population growth of Orléans and Nantes, 1831-1911	192
8.1	Statistical description of area distribution	206
8.2	Area distribution of properties by subregion	210
8.3	Area distribution of properties by decade in property-years, 1840-1913	218
8.4	Length of property lives	229
8.5	Relationship of property transactors per 1,000 transactions by decade and by subregion, 1840-1913	230
8.6	Area growth probabilities, Orléanais (O) and Nantais (N)	237
9.1	Approximate number of residents disarmed in the Nantais, June-July 1832	260

Cambridge University Press

0521526906 - The Imperfect Peasant Economy: The Loire Country, 1800-1914

Gregor Dallas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

Rural France has its commentators, its sociologists, its historians. The purpose of this book is not simply to add new details to an already respectable body of literature – though there is value to that – but to explain, theoretically and through the use of historical documents, how and why a certain rural form of household economy managed to maintain itself in France right through the nineteenth century. The imperfect peasant economy depicted in the following pages is one in which the principal motive for production and consumption of goods is not to take maximum advantage of the market, in the way most economists would define that advantage, but to achieve a balance between effort and need that will assure the preservation of the family smallholder.

Man is a conservative animal. The smallholder system in France was a system that worked, and had worked for centuries. It had already demonstrated its tremendous adaptive capacities during the crisis years of the late Middle Ages as well as during the difficult years of the seventeenth century. This book traces the means by which family smallholders again adapted themselves to the novel situation that arose in the century of the railway.

In addition to analyzing this process of self-preservation, we shall look at how such a real economy of smallholders – an imperfect peasant economy, described here with the help of historical documents – can be contrasted with the more abstract models of peasant economies that anthropologists and sociologists have drawn up in recent years. This was not by any stretch of the imagination a subsistence economy – the market did play a critical role in household decision making – and rural families did at times employ outside labor. But the imperfect peasant economy did establish a set of priorities that has deluded many market economists, and those of a like mind, into thinking that France was something of an anomaly, that its population showed signs of irrationality and backwardness. From the perspective of the household we not only see the most essential factors at work in France's rural economy but we have a refreshing new view of French urban and industrial growth in the nineteenth century. Economic development becomes less mechanical and more subject to the family-oriented values of the local population. Thus, Nantes' industrial advantage over Orléans had a great deal to do with the contrasting patterns of interdependence that one finds between the two cities and their hinterlands.

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0521526906 - The Imperfect Peasant Economy: The Loire Country, 1800-1914

Gregor Dallas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Of course, we cannot limit ourselves to economics. The rural household was more than just a provider of goods and services. Chapter 7 outlines its more biological functions. I have also endeavored to show how attitudes that helped shape the economy of the two regions studied here influenced other areas of social life. For instance, the regional contrast in religion and politics is linked, I believe, to the different local levels of economic intensity of production and to the corresponding differences in the breadth of choice and opportunity that they presented to the population. In this sense, the drive for a balance between effort and need can be viewed as a process involving the full range of social action – mental as well as material.

Such a large task has required the assistance of others. More people have helped and encouraged me in the preparation of this book – from the initial ideas, through the research and data gathering, to the final draft – than I can acknowledge by name or even hope to repay.

Because so much of the book is based on materials collected *sur le terrain* in France, my debt to French archivists and librarians is enormous. The staff of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Archives Nationales gave a great deal of assistance in searching out some of the more intractable sources on nineteenth-century agriculture and proved to me how ill-founded these institutions' reputation of "facelessness" is. The director and staff of the Archives du Loiret helped me track down alternatives to the materials destroyed in the fire of 1940, and the staff of the Archives de la Loire-Atlantique were cheerfully patient with the herculean task of making so many hefty documents available to me. I am especially grateful to Mlle. M. Illaire, conservateur-adjoint, for her assistance in the location of many yet unclassified documents. The Services du Cadastre at Orléans and at Nantes extended me their hospitality during the many months that I labored on the *matrices cadastrales*. And my visits to several of the village archives of Loiret and Loire-Atlantique provided me not only with documents but also with pleasant memories for which I am most grateful.

I have accumulated many debts in preparing the statistics published here. The greatest of these is to Rudolph Bell of the Department of History, Rutgers University, who calmed my first fears of the computer and introduced me to many of the quantitative techniques employed in this book. The transcription of data from microfilm to standard forms was an enormous task that I could never have completed without the assistance of M. and Mme. A. Derreumeux and Alexandra Mamentov. Figures 2.1 and 3.1 were drawn by Maureen Dunphy. Figures 2.2, 2.3, 4.1, and 4.2 are reproduced with the permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The remaining illustrations have been drawn by Charlotte Carlson. Although all computer programs and calculations were done by

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0521526906 - The Imperfect Peasant Economy: The Loire Country, 1800-1914

Gregor Dallas

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv Preface

myself, I owe a great deal to the technical and professional assistance I received from the personnel at the Rutgers computer center.

The members of my dissertation committee were helpful, and the work has benefited from their critical reading. Traian Stoianovich and Mary Hartman gave me much useful advice at various stages of the project. The help that I have had from Michael Curtis has gone well beyond what his duties as an “outside reader” called for; my debt to him is very great. And I have been singularly fortunate in having Peter Stearns as a director; his detailed running commentaries and editorial suggestions have made this a better book.

This book has gone through several drafts. None of them would have been presentable without the diligent typing, often over the midnight oil, of Eleanor White, Barbara Bunting, and Isabelle Reymond.

Finally, I thank Walter Lippincott and the two anonymous readers of Cambridge University Press for giving me much food for thought in the preparation of this last draft.

None of these people can be faulted for any errors that may appear in the statistics or in the text; for that I accept full responsibility.

G.D.

Princeton, New Jersey

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