THE MÉLINE TARIFF: FRENCH AGRICULTURE AND NATIONALIST ECONOMIC POLICY

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FOREWORD

HISTORICAL method and historical evidence are essential to all the social studies. Ricardian classical economics, resting on excessive faith in rational investigation, seems, on the surface, to be one of the few significant exceptions to this general statement. Most of the data employed in the social studies are historical in nature, records of the past, tested by the historian's canons of reliability. It is small wonder, then, that history, which pervades its fellow disciplines, should attempt to encompass them all, to synthesize the story of the development of society. Synthetic history, which has alternated between professional scorn and favor, is of two principal types. One constitutes an attempt to treat, historically, all the categories of the complex of society. The other does this and more, for it endeavors to apply to these categories the methods and techniques of the other social studies. The first runs the risk of failing to penetrate the surface of events, of relying for understanding on mere juxtaposition of the different subjects or categories. The second may bog down in a mass of details, in the welter of different types of data yielded by the different methods.

Both kinds of synthetic history have dealt, in the main, with broad subjects and relatively long periods of time, for breadth and generalization have seemed to be in their very nature. But successful achievement on this plane of great complexity would require a clear, well-developed philosophy or canon of history, and there has been general reluctance to return to this type of thought. Despite their great influence, Hegel, Marx and their fellows have discouraged philosophical analysis among scholarly historians. Recent efforts, like that of Spengler, to write general, philosophical history, have merely tended to confirm the seeming wisdom of ignoring the philosophy of history.

The development of true synthetic history, societal in scope and analytical in character, must therefore be a slow and difficult process. One step in this direction, however, might well

be the writing of synthetic histories of limited, particular subjects, and the present brief study represents such an effort.

The Méline Tariff is one of the major pieces of economic legislation of the nineteenth century. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that it was part of the fundamental economic law of the Third Republic, and the life preserver of French agriculture. It may be examined and tested as a tariff law, its incidence and effectiveness studied. It may be analyzed from the standpoint of theoretical economics. It may be looked upon as the culmination of a long protectionist campaign. It may be viewed in the light of French political history, or as one phase of the development of French commercial policy. While any one of these approaches would be legitimate, synthesis requires that all be undertaken, and, it must be confessed, more besides. It cannot be claimed that all these facets of the subject have received equal treatment in this book, or that they have been fully explored. To have done so would have been to exceed the practical limitations imposed upon this work.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Méline Tariff is its enactment of agricultural protection, which brings it under the heading of nationalist economic policy as distinct from mercantilism or simple protectionism, and this study has been restricted to the agricultural side of the trends and institutions from which the Tariff of 1892 arose. In considering agricultural protection against the background of French agricultural history and developments under the Third Republic, it may be possible, at the same time, to shed some light on French society from the focal point of agrarian protection.

Agriculture, in France, did not fall before rising industrialization to the extent that it did in England. While France accepted the new techniques and institutions of industry, and even played a significant rôle in developing them, she did not permit agriculture to be eclipsed, or to suffer revolutionary change. For the first three quarters of the nineteenth century there was no fundamental change in the methods, crops, institutions or general economic situation of French agriculture. During part

of this period, from the Restoration to the Second Empire, agriculture benefited from tariff protection which resulted from an alliance with industry. The liberal policy of Napoleon III swept away many agricultural duties, and lowered others. Agriculture remained unruffled, however, for the long period of stability did not close until the early years of the Third Republic.

In the late 1870's and in the decade of the 1880's, during what has been called the "Great Depression," agricultural prices and incomes fell as world communications improved and new, fertile lands overseas began effective competition with old world production. French agriculture attempted a twofold solution of the problems which thus shattered its tranquility. On the one hand it turned toward association, in the Social Catholic sense; on the other hand toward protection, justified on grounds of nationalist economic theory. As before, the success of agricultural protection depended on an alliance with industry, and this was arranged before the legislative elections of 1889. But the agrarian leaders were for the most part recruited from the royalist opposition to the Third Republic. They were among the Boulangist coalition which went down in defeat. For agricultural protectionism to succeed, therefore, it had to be divorced from the constitutional question, the leadership had to be given to republican statesman, compromises had to be effected.

The Méline Tariff was the compromise that resulted from this situation. It went far toward satisfying the demands of the agrarian leaders, although it failed to meet them completely. The succeeding years saw the enactment of further protectionist measures. Considering its objectives, this structure of nationalist economic policy, built on the foundation of the Tariff of 1892, was generally successful. It was designed to save French agriculture from the fate that had befallen English agriculture, to increase French production so that food prices would not rise unduly. French agriculture was saved: and while the cost of living may have risen, burdening the French people, their

sacrifice was not excessive on the scale of nationalist economics, for an essential part of the economy was preserved, diversification maintained, independence safeguarded, and the peasantry kept as a sturdy social group.

This, in brief, is the story to be told in the pages that follow. The first chapter treats of the historical background of French agricultural conditions and institutions, organizations and tariffs. The second deals with the depression that engulfed French agriculture in the 1880's. The third and fourth are concerned, respectively, with agricultural association and nationalist economic thought, the fifth with the union of these factors in the drive for the Méline Tariff, and the sixth with the elaboration of the law itself. The last chapter, carrying the story to 1910, attempts to evaluate the Méline Tariff in the light of its sponsors' intentions. It might seem regrettable not to have continued to the present, but the War of 1914-1918 and its aftermath so changed the situation as to destroy the continuity of the categories used: 1910, the date of the first major tariff revision after that of 1892, seemed an appropriate point at which to close.

My greatest hope is that this work may, in some small way, contribute to a better understanding of some of the problems that have faced and will continue to face the people of France.

I wish to express my gratitude to the scholars and friends who have been of aid and inspiration to me: to Professor Carlton J. H. Hayes, whose seminar introduced me to the problems of historical scholarship; to Professor Shepard B. Clough, who suggested and guided the preparation of this study, and Professor Charles W. Cole, under whom it was completed; to Professor Harold Barger, whose painstaking criticism was of inestimable value, especially with respect to the economic materials; to Professor Jacques Barzun, for his careful reading of the manuscript and his many helpful suggestions, and to Mr. Donald W. O'Connell, for his advice and assistance on the economic aspects of the work. I also wish to thank

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN NOTES

AC.....*L'Association catholique*

BSAF.....*Bulletin de la Société des agriculteurs de France*

CRSAF.....*Comptes rendus des travaux de la Société des agriculteurs de France*

DR.....*La Démocratie rurale*

JAP.....*Journal d'Agriculture pratique*

JEC.....*Journal des économistes*

TN.....*Le Travail National*

JO.....*Journal officiel de la République française*

CD.....*Chambre des Députés: Débats parlementaires*

CDP....*Chambre des Députés: Documents parlementaires*

SD.....*Sénat: Débats parlementaires*

SDP....*Sénat: Documents parlementaires*