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Vie Chère" Riots of 1911: Traditional Protests in Modern Garb

In the early evening hours of a warm September night some two thousand women gathered in front of a French dairy farm to the rallying cry, "We must have butter at 30 *sous*, or it will be revolution!"¹ One might well guess that the date of this demonstration was 1789, or perhaps the tumultuous years of social protest and food riots that heralded the coming of the Second Republic and then the Second Empire. But the date is 1911 and the place is the small town of Somain located in the department of the Nord.

This incident in Somain, occurring on the first of September, fell almost precisely in the middle of a series of riots and protests that were directed against the rising cost of living. The protests, both planned and spontaneous, some peaceful and some quite violent, spanned little more than a month and occurred primarily in the northern and northeastern departments of France. The early, spontaneous demonstrations took the form of food riots. Reacting against the high price of food, particularly dairy products, eggs, meat, and some vegetables, groups of women marched to the markets, demanded lower prices, and customarily dumped carts of butter and eggs if their demands were not met. In many cases the merchants did lower their prices. As the movement grew, however, so did resistance to it, from shopkeepers, farmers, and the French government. Meetings were called by local *syndicats* and *Boones du travail* to coordinate further protests. Angry crowds often moved from these meetings to attack and pillage grocery stores and butcher shops. In some towns these violent actions escalated into full-fledged riots, with crowds of men and women, numbering in the thousands, battling in the streets against soldiers and police. A significant number of arrests and convictions followed in the wake of the most serious confrontations.

The traditional food riot as a form of social protest has attracted considerable attention from scholars over the past quarter century. In his most recent book, Roger Price discusses in detail the nature and incidence of food riots in the 1840s and 1850s, after which time the food riot effectively disappeared as a form of social protest in the view of most historians.² Price identifies four major types of food-related protests, characteristic not only of the 19th-century disorders, but of the Old Regime food riots as well: 1) those occurring in the marketplace, aimed at securing a fair price; 2) those occurring in town over bread prices, often threatening bakers; 3) those occurring on roads, aimed at preventing the export of food stuffs, generally grain; 4) those occurring at granaries or farmyards, aimed at forcing farmers to release stocks in storage.³ Each type of protest outlined here occurred in 1911. Market disruptions were widespread, the most characteristic aspect of the "vie chere" movement. Although dairy prices, not bread, were the principal issue, the most tragic episode of the entire movement came with the attack on a baker in Billy-Montigny. The issue of exports and speculation was a constant theme of the protesters, and road blockages did occur. Finally, when farmers declined to bring their produce to market, women occasionally took their protests to the farms.

The question then becomes, why did such a traditional form of protest sweep across northern and western France in the modern political setting of 1911? Historians have made two kinds of argument in explaining the supposed disappearance of the food riot in France after the 1850s, one stressing the emergence of an efficient national market and the other stressing the emergence of a centralized nation-state. Roger Price, taking the first position, prefers the term "subsistence crisis" and argues that the completion of a national railroad system by the late 1850s created a truly national grain market, facilitating transport of grain and thereby eliminating the dramatic price fluctuations that had encouraged speculation, and subsequently protest, in the past.⁴

Charles and Louis Tilly have each, separately, emphasized the evolving nature of the French nation-state in explaining the demise of the food riot as a form of protest.⁵ They stress, quite properly I think, the political aspect of food riots, which at least in part should be understood as expressions of resistance to the growing power of the centralized state in 18th and 19th-century France. By the late 1850s, the Tillys argue, state power was firmly established, and most people turned to more "modern" forms of protest, such as strikes or demonstrations, in an effort to influence the state or gain political power for themselves.

It is sensible perhaps to expect that men would turn away from traditional forms of protest and adopt new tactics and strategies in their quest for political power. The Revolution, after all, had established the legitimacy of popular political participation, even if it remained elusive for most men until late in the 19th century. But women, who had always been the initiators and main actors in food riots, were no more a part of the national political system in 1911 than they had been in 1775 or in the 1850s. As both Price and Charles Tilly have observed, food riots were the political expression of powerless people.⁶ Should we be so surprised, then, to find women rioting against runaway food prices in 1911?

Price is persuasive in his argument that the formation of a national grain market effectively ended the traditional subsistence crises of the past. It was not grain prices that moved women to protest in 1911. Price also notes, however, that the railroad did not dramatically alter the marketing of butter, eggs, and cheese. The market for these products remained essentially local, and this contributed to the price increase that so frustrated housewives and moved them to protest. As for meat, the nature of the national marketing pattern may have contributed to the crisis. Nearly 50% of the beef annually slaughtered in France moved in and out of la Villette in Paris, thereby spreading hoof and mouth disease in the late summer of 1911.⁷ The "vie chere" movement may not then have been a true subsistence crisis - though dairy products had certainly become a staple in the French diet- but the form the protests took was essentially traditional.

I would argue then that the "vie chere" protests were, in fact, very much like the traditional food riots of the Old Regime. Before turning to the riots themselves, however, let us briefly examine the reasons for the price increases that triggered the wave of protests.

Causes of the Price Rise

1910 was a particularly bad year for grain and cereal crops. The spring and summer were unusually wet, with the rain flooding some fields and the lack of sun stunting the harvestable crops. Cunisset-Carnot, a provincial correspondent for *Le Temps*, noted in a retrospective article that rain fell on twenty-six of thirty days in May 1910. The rain had continued throughout the summer months and the crops suffered terribly, with the wheat harvest falling some 25% below French consumption needs. Prices were high for both grain and meat, as well as potatoes, which are adversely affected by excessive moisture. 1911, however, promised a better harvest. Cunisset-Carnot commented that, "our present spring - at least up to the middle of May, at which time I am writing these lines - is one of the most charming that we have seen in a long while." He went on to exult that, "a union of competent agriculturalists who were charged with directing the weather to their best interests would not arrange things better than they actually are this year." All crops were reported to be at their expected stage of growth.⁸

But the summer months again brought disaster, this time in two forms. First, in contrast to 1910, there was almost no rain in the summer of 1911. The lack of rain was first noted by Cunisset-Carnot on 4 July, when he remarked that the dry weather had been hurting the trout streams.⁹ Over the next month the press gave scant attention to the lack of rain, with the general sentiment seeming to be that all would be well so long as the drought did not persist.

But the drought did continue and it extended throughout most of France. On 1 August *Le Temps* reported that some *arrondissements* of Paris had been without water for a few days. Special measures were enacted and water service was curtailed for one week.¹⁰ On 19 August it was reported that Saint-Etienne had only enough reserve water to last one month. Auxerre had run out of water the day before. On the twenty-first of August the Bishop of Sees, in Alençon, ordered priests to pray for rain.¹¹ On that same day in Lille there were but sixty centimeters of water in the principal reservoir. The municipality had pleaded with the populace to curtail consumption but to no avail. As a result, numerous factories were forced to close down, leaving thousands of workers temporarily without work. Two weeks later a Lille dairyman would be dumped in the canal during a protest. Happily he did not drown, as the water was only one meter deep.¹²

The drought had only a modest impact on grain crops. The wheat harvest was an average yield, but it was a disappointment that the anticipated bumper crop, which would have replenished depleted reserve stocks, did not develop. Other crops definitely suffered from the lack of rain. The potato crop was again a poor one, as was the sugarbeet harvest. The price of sugar soared. Most vegetables and fruits suffered as well.¹³

But the drought was perhaps most damaging in its effect upon forage crops. The first cutting of hay, to be stored for the winter, came in June. It was a normal harvest. The drought, however, meant that the second growth, upon which sheep and cattle usually grazed during the summer, was markedly deficient. Farmers were forced to tap the winter supply to feed their stock, thereby

increasing costs.¹⁴ But this was only the first blow that would cripple the French cattle industry that summer.

The second disaster to strike French agriculture harshened the impact of this fodder shortage. Cattle throughout France were struck with hoof and mouth disease. Any area where the disease broke out was immediately placed under quarantine, with traffic of cattle into, out of, or through the area expressly forbidden. And hoof and mouth broke out all over France.

The Minister of Agriculture, Maurice Pams, must bear much of the responsibility for the spread of the disease. At the first signs of hoof and mouth he had ordered that healthy cattle be allowed into the La Villette cattle market in Paris (the largest stockyards in France) only on condition that they be immediately slaughtered. This had forced prices down a bit. Wholesalers complained and the condition was relaxed. Cattle continued arriving in La Villette and were kept in stockyards. Some of them inevitably had hoof and mouth. As live cattle were subsequently shipped from La Villette to provincial slaughterhouses, the disease was quickly spread.¹⁵

Le *Temps* first noted the appearance of hoof and mouth in the departments of Calvados and the Seine-Inferieure on 26 July. Two weeks later it was reported to have hit over 100 *communes* in the department of the Oise. It soon spread to the Saone-et-Loire, the Seine, departments in the east on the Swiss border, and even some along the Spanish border. On 12 August the Ministry of Agriculture ordered that no animals of the species "bovine, ovine, caprine, ou porcine" be sent from the Seine to the Nord, the Meurthe-et-Moselle, the Somme, the Pas-de-Calais, the Meuse, the Marne, or the Ardennes without a special veterinary inspection.¹⁶ With the exceptions of the Meuse and the Meurthe-et-Moselle, it was these departments that would be most disrupted by protests and riots. Making more onerous the interdiction of the transport of cattle to these areas was the fact that the transport of forage crops, also potentially contaminated, was equally forbidden. Thus, not only was there less available cattle for slaughter, but there was less feed for the local stock that was healthy. If we examine the price of hay for the two years 1910 and 1911 we see that the average national price fell by thirty-two *centimes* per quintal in the latter year. Two thirds of the departments reporting in both years reported a lower average hay price in 1911. But in the Nord, where protests were first to break out, the price of hay in 1911 was 1 *franc* 16 *centimes* higher than it had been in 1910. Prices in the Pas-de-Calais and the Aisne, racked by serious protests in August and September, were also higher in 1911. The trend in meat prices seems to parallel that of forage crop prices for the two years.¹⁷ While this factor alone will not explain why protests occurred where they did - forage crop and meat prices rose as well in some departments where there were no protests - it was clearly an important element.

Hoof always (and they happen milk), lethargic appetite, weight. Dairy produce recovery. Recovery ailing generally Thus, long-term of the term hardship. prices rose, prices milk, butter, Hoof and mouth is not always fatal (and it has little effect on humans if they happen to drink contaminated milk), but an afflicted animal becomes lethargic and loses its appetite, and of course considerable weight. Dairy cows produce much less milk even after recovery. Recovery is

slow and calves born to ailing cows generally will not survive. Thus, in 1911 there were long-term effects of the disease as well as short-term hardship. But the immediate result was that meat prices rose, as did the prices of milk, butter, and cheese.

Rain one year, drought and hoof and mouth the next, these were the immediate reasons for the sharp increase in agricultural prices that occurred in 1910 and 1911. And the promising spring of 1911 made the high prices of the late summer even more difficult to tolerate.

The Riots and Protests

The first popular protest came in the middle of August 1911. It occurred near Maubeuge in the department of the Nord. In the small town of Ferriere-Ia-Grande housewives went to the market and demanded that prices for bread, meat, butter, and eggs be lowered. Merchants met their demands. The next day women met the trains carrying merchants and produce from the countryside and again demanded a low price for their purchases. There was, as before, no violence. On the 17th of August, however, the merchants in the neighboring industrial town of Sars-Poteries refused to lower their prices and protesting women dumped and pillaged their goods. On 18 August some five hundred women from Hautmont joined the housewives of Ferriere in their protest. They formed a directing committee with a Mme. Lacroix as its president. Thus did the movement begin to grow.¹⁸

It was a special correspondent to *Le Figaro*, by the name of Gignoux, whose early cables from Maubeuge best evoke the tenor of the protests.¹⁹ He described them as "more than a strike, and however, not quite a crusade, because these female knights of small households are forced to maintain a too bitter sense of reality!" And the reality was that life was growing more expensive. Gignoux wrote that on the 25th of August the scene in the town had been like a "jacquerie." A merchant had indiscreetly sold some butter to a neighbor and a crowd attacked his house, breaking his windows. The women requisitioned his butter and sold it at a price that the crowd deemed fair. The agitation escalated from that point onward. Gignoux listed eight other towns in which similar events occurred. On Saturday the 26th, however, the situation was quite different. The market remained quiet because the butter and egg merchants did not appear. But a small group of women protested nonetheless perhaps the directing committee previously noted. Entering the market as an orderly procession, twelve women marched in columns of six. The two leaders sporting red scarves, and the rest wearing red ribbons, they did not move silently but rather sang as they marched. And the song that they sang was "l'Internationale du beurre; recently written to the tune of "l'Internationale" by a fitter named Boulinguez. In the next month it would become widely known as the theme song of the "vie chere" protests. The three verses and refrain ran as follows:

Debout chaque mere de famille!

Debout, et soyons tous unis:

Marchons pour braver la misere

Que les fermiers viennent mettre dans le pays.

Si un jour nous avons la victoire,

Nous montrerons a nos maris

Que toutes les femmes ont defendu

Pour la vie de leurs pauvres petits.

En avant camarades

Les amis, tous debout!

Sans peur ni tapage

Nous voulons l'beurre a quinze sous! (bis)

Demain au marche des grandes villes,

Toutes, femmes, nous nous reunirons,

Pour protester avec furie

Sur le prix du beurre en cette saison.

Nous avons assez de souffrance,

Sans augmenter le beurre et le lait.

Car demain toutes les femmes de France

Nous le ferons vendre au rabais.

Aujourd'hui, la vie est tres chere;

En augmentant toutes les denrees,

Nous sommes assez dans la misere

Sachez que cela ne peut durer.

Allez, monsieurs, diminuez vos produits.

Pour le Peuple, pour l'Humanite!

Et vous aurez tous bien agi

Pour satisfaire les ouvriers.²⁰

The women sang this song as they toured Maubeuge on that Saturday morning. They came and went without serious incident as an uneasy calm hung over the town for the next several days.

Elsewhere, however, activity continued apace. The early protests were more often peaceful than violent as merchants seemed willing to lower their prices in response to these early demonstrations. On 22 August in Nuits-Saint-Georges, a town better known for its wine than its consumer militancy, some 600 people gathered in front of the city hall to protest recently increased milk prices. Those in attendance voted to boycott milk until the customary price of 20 *centimes* per liter had been restored. Three days later the milk boycott ended in success for the consumer. Similar milk strikes occurred simultaneously at Blanzky-les-Mines in the Saone-et-Loire, and Neuville-en-Ferrain in the Nord.

The timing of these milk boycotts makes it quite apparent that the disruptions in the Nord did not inspire those that occurred in the East, and that the women of the Cote-d'Or and the Saone-et-Loire acted spontaneously in their protest of rising dairy prices. There is no evidence in the press that the early demonstrations were anything but spontaneous, nor has it been alleged that there existed any systematic plan or organization behind these early disturbances.²¹ But it does seem reasonable to assert that the wave of protests that followed in each respective area was greatly encouraged by the initial success that the women enjoyed in gaining lower prices.

The disruptions spread quickly in the North of France. In the department of the Nord, the Avesnes market was the scene of a demonstration on 24 August. On that same day some 800 demonstrators marched through the town of Berlaimont, somewhat to the north of Avesnes and just south of Maubeuge. Police arrested two women when they threw themselves upon the gendarmes, but the angry crowd secured their release. The next day protests continued in numerous markets in the Nord, and on the 26th of August spread eastward to the Ardennes where in Vrigne-aux-Bois, a small town near Charleville, housewives met dairymen as they arrived in the morning. Prices were lowered on several food products. Back in the Nord, relatively peaceful market demonstrations in Quesnoy, SaintAmand, Denain, and Valenciennes again brought price reductions. In Verviers, however, a rise in the price of butter brought some serious scuffles between merchants and consumers. The threatened farmers were granted police protection. But the protesters emerged victorious once again - the price of butter was lowered 20 *centimes* per pound.

27 August was rather calm, though *Le Temps* did report the first customer strikes and violence to occur in the Aisne. Saint-Quentin would develop into the volatile center of protest in that department. Renewed violence on all fronts marked 28 August, with incidents most prominent in the Pas-de-Calais. In Henin-Lietard some 2000 women marched through town. The president of the group spoke with the mayor, who promised action toward lowering prices. In Rouvroy housewives boycotted and sabotaged butter and eggs, while in Dourges, near Lens, demonstrators surrounded a farm that sold milk and eggs. The farmer defended his property armed with a pitchfork, though the confrontation resulted in only one slight injury. Also noteworthy was a decision taken in the Nord, by the butchers of Valenciennes, Denain, Brunay, and Anzin to close their shops until cultivators lowered their wholesale prices. In the next three weeks this action would be adopted by retail butchers in several departments, as they moved to

show their sympathy for the consumer protests and demonstrate that they were not responsible for high food costs.

29 August was a threshold of sorts. Not only did it see the first serious injury and an escalation in violence in a town in the Pas-de-Calais, but it also witnessed three arrests in Hautmont that triggered a huge wave of protest in the Maubeuge area. In addition, violence erupted in the Lens market, in the Pas-de-Calais; and in the Nord a crowd of 3000 met in Caudry to vote on acceptable price levels and afterward went on to pillage the market.

Billy-Montigny is the town where serious violence first erupted on 29 August. During the day crowds visited bakers demanding that they sell their bread at lower prices. That evening the crowd regrouped and blocked the wagon of a Mr. Wils, a baker and municipal councillor. Several women grabbed the bridle of the horse. Wils gave several blows with his whip to drive off the women and then, after being threatened and struck in the head by a rock, he pulled his revolver from his pocket and fired. Dieudonne Humbert, a young man of twenty-six, was shot in the back and through one lung while attempting to stop Wils from firing. An article in the next day's *Le Temps* vividly described the events that followed:

The crowd, height its anger, threw itself upon the baker and attacked violently. Projectiles flew from all parts. The gendarmes needed an extraordinary energy courage prevent most grave injury, as the men and women rushed upon the house where the baker sought refuge. Had they gotten in, have been killed and the house burned.²²

As it was, Wils' horse was scared off and his wagon broken and burned. The crowd remained heckling in front of the house for some time and several gendarmes were injured. Reinforcements from Lens finally arrived to help clear the street. Humbert, the wounded man, died the next day. Wils, who suffered a fractured skull, died in a prison hospital some three weeks later, still awaiting trial. The night following the incident nearly 8,000 marched in Billy-Montigny and Sallaumines to continue the protest.

The events in Hautmont, though certainly less dramatic, had far graver consequences. The morning of the 29th a crowd of women and men disrupted the market, dumping on the ground the butter of those women whom they felt had paid an excessive price. In the melee a lieutenant of the gendarmerie was bitten on the arm. The police finally arrested three women and one man and took them to Avesnes. After a speedy trial, the *Tribunal Correctionnel* sentenced the three women to prison terms of four, two and two months apiece. This harsh treatment only served to escalate the protests. The *Confederation Generale du Travail*, which to this point had played no significant role, posted a placard recalling the *joumees* of 1793 and calling for a two-day general strike in the Nord to begin on Thursday, 1 September. Georges Yvetot, a leader of the C.G.T., began a propaganda tour in Hautmont on 31 August, calling for a work stoppage and continued protest of high prices. The response of the workers, predominantly metallurgists, was initially lukewarm. *illuminate* suggested that a work stoppage would only be a further hardship for these working families who were already on tight budgets. This argument seems reasonable on paper. But early on 1 September some 12,000 metallurgists voted a 48-hour work stoppage in order to

accompany Yvetot on his tour. The next day nearly 5,000 striking workers from Maubeuge forced all factories in Hautmont close. All factories were similarly closed in Maubeuge. The focus of protest was clearly the arrest and conviction of the three Hautmont women. On 2 September a court of appeals reduced their sentences 2 months, 15 days, and probation respectively.

The court's action did not quell the protests, however. That very day, from 4,000 to 6,000 men and women, including a number of striking metallurgists, gathered to march from Sous-le-Bois to Maubeuge. Gendarmes met the crowd before they had even left the small suburb. A false cry of "police arrest" triggered a crowd assault upon the officers. Bricks and rocks were the weapons of the demonstrators. There were injuries among both the crowd and the gendarmes, as the battle swayed back and forth. If the gendarmes gained ground the crowd would regroup for a counterattack, and vice versa. Oddly, two squadrons of troops looked on without taking action, apparently because their commander had been given no orders to act. Finally the mayor appeared and promised the people that the gendarmes would leave. They did - as far as Maubeuge. Trouble continued that night in both Maubeuge and Sous-le-Bois. There had been some arrests during the day and evening and at 9:00 p.m. a crowd of 1,500 decided to rescue their comrades from the Maubeuge prison. Finding their way barred they settled for attacking an electric company building. In Sous-le-Bois barricades blocked the streets throughout the night.

The next day authorities adopted severe security measures. The government had transferred troops from at least a dozen other departments to the Maubeuge area, from as far away as Brest and Poitier. By 3 September there were 9,000 soldiers stationed in the vicinity.²³ The population of Maubeuge at this time was approximately 20,000 people. The mayor of Maubeuge forbade all demonstrations and meetings, and to ensure that protesters would not bring trouble in from Sous-le-Bois or Hautmont, he ordered that all drawbridges leading into Maubeuge be raised. This emergency measure had not been taken since 1815. Only two heavily guarded gates remained open. The bridges remained drawn for several days as calm returned to the area.

A pattern similar to that in Maubeuge characterized the protests in other areas of France. In every instance the movement began with a disruption of the local market by women who demanded lower prices. In many small towns the protests never advanced beyond these occasionally violent market disruptions, and required no more than the local police force, or a drop in prices, to restore order. But in a number of larger towns the protest escalated into large demonstrations and full-scale riots which, as in Maubeuge, came to an end only after troops arrived on the scene and arrests had been made. We can here mention briefly some of the towns where trouble became most serious.²⁴

Almost simultaneously with the incidents in Maubeuge, significant protests developed in Saint-Quentin. Beginning with an invasion of the covered market on 30 August, which quickly turned to violence, the demonstrations here soon flared out of control. Three days and nights of protests and rioting resulted in the official declaration of a state of siege. Thousands of workers walked

off their jobs and crowds roamed the streets past midnight. Some fifty stores were sacked, nearly that number of arrests were made, and injuries numbered over two hundred. All stores and cafes in the town were eventually closed. Though calm was restored on 3 September, workers did not resume work until the fifth because troops occupied the factories. A butchers' sympathy strike extended yet another week.

In the department of the Ardennes, the Charleville/Mezieres urban center experienced the most violent demonstrations. As already noted, the earliest protest in this area came in Vrigne-aux-bois on 26 August. The region remained quiet for a week following that, but on 4 September women disrupted the Charleville market. In the next few days violence spread throughout the industrial part of the Meuse valley. The 9 September arrival of two C.G.T. delegates, Dumoulin and Sauvage, and the official prohibition of a march planned to protest food prices spurred the outbreak of violence in Charleville and Mezieres.²⁵ Crowds of up to 5,000 demonstrated and rioted in the two towns for several days. Protests were punctuated by occasional clashes between troops and demonstrators as work stopped and stores closed. Government troops and the 12 September announcement of lower meat and dairy prices in Mezieres calmed the situation somewhat. But the arrests of Dumoulin and Sauvage, on charges of inciting the sabotage of railways, provoked a final wave of extremely violent protests in this region on 13-14 September. Heavy security measures finally restored order on the fifteenth.

Accounts of protests in other towns read much like these. In the Nord, Roubaix and Denain were the scenes of notable protests and violence. In the former, barricades went up in the streets as crowds battled police and soldiers. Denain saw a 24-hour miners' work stoppage and the resignation of the socialist mayor and two municipal councillors in protest of troop brutality. In the Oise, Creil was the focal point of protest against food prices. *L'Humanite* insisted that it was the arrival of troops that instigated the two days of violence in that town. Further south, Saint-Etienne, Chalon-sur-Saone, and le Creusot were the centers of protest in the Loire and the Saone-et-Loire respectively.

In the West, Brest, Cherbourg, and Lorient were the most important towns reported to have joined the movement in protest against food prices. Protests here began independently of those in the North, though the pattern of protest was again much the same. Women demanded lower prices in the markets and when demands were refused food riots followed. There were not as many incidents reported in the West as in the North or the Center of France. Though similar security measures were taken in this area - troops were called out in Brest and Lorient - protests did not often escalate into confrontations between troops and demonstrators. In Lorient, after one or two disruptions of the market, merchants stayed away until security was improved. In Brest the protests against food costs were swallowed up by antimilitary protests directed against Marine Minister Delcasse's 9 September christening of a new naval vessel, the Jean-Bart. In sum, protests in the West never attained the proportions nor the feverish pitch of those in the North.

The clear pattern that emerges, then, is one in which protests began as peaceful demands for lower prices, resulting in food riots in those instances where merchants refused to meet the demands. In large towns a market disruption was often followed by more organized demonstrations and in some cases serious rioting and violence. But to suggest that the protests moved from small towns to large would be misleading. For even as violence flared in towns like Creil and Saint-Quentin, more subdued market disruptions continued in smaller towns. The protests and riots in small villages never reached the proportion of those in large towns because of the obvious factor of size. Their goals, however, were the same.

How did the French government respond to these market disturbances and food riots? Local authorities were initially quite flexible in dealing with the protesters, who were, of course, primarily women in the early market disruptions. Many of the socialist municipal councils of the North in fact supported the early protests and some negotiated price reductions. Some local officials actively supported the protesters. When the French League for the Defense of the Rights of Man and Citizen protested the September arrest of Theophile Sauvage on procedural grounds, the *procureur-general* of Nancy replied that he could scarcely have asked the mayor of Montherme to sign the indictment, as required by regulations, since the mayor had been one of the leaders of the demonstration!²⁶ On a more positive note, the commissioner of police in Harnes, a town in Pasde-Calais, attributed the absence of trouble in his town to the early intervention of the mayor, M. Bailliez, who had successfully negotiated price agreements between housewives and shopkeepers when protests first broke out.²⁷ Early in September the prefect of Pas-de-Calais, Felix Trepont, met with mayors of the coalmining basin to discuss the consumer protest and forward recommendations to the government in Paris.²⁸

The minister of the Interior, Joseph Caillaux, took a stern, even provocational, attitude toward the protests. In a circular to departmental prefects dated 2 September, Caillaux called for serious examination of legitimate protests, but demanded rigorous application of the law against violent protesters, particularly those associated with "revolutionary associations."²⁹ In a press release of that same date, however, Caillaux stressed the involvement of C.G.T agitators in recent protests in the North and concluded that, "the movement is growing with a character more revolutionary than economic."³⁰ Caillaux reiterated that view in another circular to prefects, dated 15 September, in which he reported government efforts to facilitate the import of colonial cattle and to reduce transport costs, but again called for particular diligence in the prosecution of revolutionary agitators.³¹

These statements and circulars from Caillaux had two discernible results. First, they did produce the arrest of several C.G.T and syndicalist leaders, including Dumoulin, Broutchoux, Jouhoux, Sauvage, and Jules Roullier, general secretary of the *Fédération des syndicats* of Finistère. They were generally charged with incitement under the so-called "scoundrel" laws of 1893-94, and received prison sentences ranging from six months to three years. The second result was a flurry of reports from the departments to Paris. Some, as with a series of letters from the prefect of the Nord to Caillaux, explicitly denied that the origins of the protest were political rather than

economic. Most of these reports detailed the problems of drought and hoof-and-mouth disease that had created the crisis, in addition to describing the market disturbances. Those that did report C.G.T sponsored meetings generally stressed the restrained tone of the speakers and the relative lack of enthusiasm of the women for the organized campaigns of protest and boycott that those speakers proposed.

Le Progrès du Finistère made precisely this point in its issue of 23 September. The previous day the C.G.T. had sponsored a meeting in Quimper to protest the cost of food. Jules Roullier addressed the gathering, but "since he spoke more of politics than social economy those in attendance, especially the housewives, quickly grew bored and filed out of the meeting hall in small groups."³²

Le Temps and *Le Figaro* frequently editorialized that the C.G.T. was responsible for much of the trouble in the north. This is countered, however, by equally frequent articles in *l'Humanite* that maintained the spontaneity of the protests. Louis Dubreuilh, writing for *l'Humanite*, compared the movement to a "trail of powder" spreading across the countryside.³³ As counterpoint to *Le Temps'* anonymous report of agitators causing all the trouble, we have a letter to *l'Humanite*, from Georges Delory, socialist deputy from the Nord, again insisting upon the spontaneity of the protests.³⁴

For the C.G.T. to have organized the protests would have indeed run counter to revolutionary syndicalist doctrine. As Peter Stearns has observed, that doctrine encouraged a faith in the efficacy of the sudden walkout, and the C.G.T.s decentralized union structure and radical leaders did little to control spontaneity.³⁵ The strikes that sprouted in support of the "vie chère" protests were spontaneous walkouts which, though encouraged by C.G.T. leaders, grew from a popular sentiment favoring that action. Although the C.G.T., the *Bourses du Travail*, and other syndicalist organizations did make an effort to assume leadership of this movement, the evidence suggests that they were largely unsuccessful. By the third week of September the food riots had nearly disappeared, and the meetings called by the C.G.T. and other organizations failed to sustain the spontaneous movements that had flared to life in late August.³⁶

That the C.G.T. was unable to build upon and extend the protest movement should hardly be surprising, given the campaign of repression directed against syndicalist leaders between 1906 and 1910 under the Clemenceau and Briand governments. The miners' strike of 1906, the construction workers' strike of 1908, and the railway strike of 1910 had all flared into violence, and had all been met by government force. By 1911 the syndicalist movement was divided and dispirited, capable perhaps of rallying behind the banner of consumer protest, inspired by the bravery of the women in the markets, but unable to organize the wave of protests into something more enduring.³⁷

By early October nearly 400 people had been arrested during incidents relating to "vie chère" protests. The Paris press reported the trials of only some 175 of those arrested.³⁸ Of those

brought to trial, four were acquitted and three minors were remanded to their parents. The remainder were convicted and sentenced to prison. Though press reports seldom included occupations of those brought to trial, in instances where they did those convicted were almost universally of working-class status. Prison terms for common protesters ranged from two days to thirteen months. Women generally received lighter sentences, but some were sentenced to as much as three and four months in jail. The majority of male protesters were sentenced one to six months in prison. A dozen of those accused, mostly Belgian, were deported from the country. Charges were seldom detailed in the press, but they included such offences as theft, pillaging, rioting, assault, and numerous cases of "outrages" committed against soldiers or police.

Evidence from the *arrondissement* of Avesnes in the Nord supports the general characterization just offered. Departmental archives yielded records for individuals brought to trial in Avesnes. All were identified as housewives, workers, or small shopkeepers. Only eight were women, though each of them received either a prison sentence or fine (suspended in one case). Of the 31 men tried, only ten were acquitted, with eight of these having been charged with blocking access to the workplace. Prison terms ranged from eight days to eight months.³⁹

The government did respond in a more positive way as well to the crisis that had triggered the "vie chere" protests. On 7 September the Council of Ministers ordered measures facilitating the import of colonial cattle, revising certain import tariffs, subsidizing refrigerated storage facilities, and encouraging the reduction of transport costs. In early 1912 a special commission issued a report to the Minister of Agriculture, Maurice Pams, calling for the reconstruction reorganization of the slaughterhouses at La Villette. The commission stressed that such a project was long overdue, observing that a conspiracy setting out to spread contagious disease as widely as possible in the herds of France could scarcely have conceived a more effective plan than that currently functioning at La Villette.⁴⁰

Let us finally return to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper. First the question of timing - why did the riots occur when they did? As usual there are several factors involved. Jeanne Singer-Kerel has compiled Paris cost of living indexes for the years 1840 to 1954. While Paris prices obviously cannot be transplanted wholesale to the provinces, the trends that Kerel's tables reflect should be fairly representative for France as a whole. Her figures show that the cost of living rose more sharply in 1911 than in any other single year in the previous two decades and that food costs in particular rose considerably in that year. Among various food items, meat suffered the greatest inflation.⁴¹

Not only was 1911 a bad year, but it was the second of two particularly bad years for agricultural production. The similarity of this situation with that of 1789 escaped neither the press nor the C.G.T. The first protests were directed against increases in the price of dairy products, specifically milk. The price of milk had reportedly been stable for some time and its increase was apparently seen by some as the last straw in the never ending inflation. Add to this the fact that the protests came in late summer, a time when one would customarily expect dairy and meat

prices to be dropping a bit. That meat and dairy prices were the focus of protest is also significant. This would not have been so fifty years earlier, but Maurice Halbwachs has shown that by 1911 meat accounted for some 20-25% of the working class food budget. Roger Price has also recently noted a dramatic increase in milk consumption in the last decades of the 19th century.⁴²

Consumers appreciated the consequences of drought and disease, but many felt that speculators were taking advantage of the crisis to drive prices even higher. It is noteworthy that in some towns markets were finally closed to retailers until housewives had had an opportunity to buy at wholesale prices. In virtually every area where food riots occurred, newspapers and protesters alike blamed the excessive prices on speculators and sales to foreign buyers. This sentiment was expressed very clearly by a woman interviewed by *Le Réveil du Nord* in late August. As she told the reporter, “if we have decided to prevent the sale of butter, milk, and eggs, it is because we know that the prices at which they are being sold are the result of speculation ... For ourselves, we no longer want to be exploited for the profit of those who supply foreign markets.”⁴³

These words might just as easily have been spoken in the 18th century as in 1911. Indeed, the “vie chère” protests are strikingly reminiscent of the 1775 Flour War that George Rude has described.⁴⁴ The salient feature of both instances was the popular setting of prices by the crowd and the subsequent sacking and pillaging if the prices were not accepted by the merchants. In both cases the riots were of relatively short duration - three weeks in 1775, five weeks in 1911 - coming to an end without a true resolution to the problem of high prices. In 1911, as in 1775, women played the leading role in the market disturbances, and in both cases the market riots escalated and spread. Government authorities viewed both movements as inherently political, and in each case alleged that agitators had provoked the protests.

I am in disagreement here with Louise Tilly, who in a recent article has stressed the differences between the “vie chère” movement and the food riots of the 18th and early 19th centuries. Tilly notes in particular the role of the C.G.T., and the steering committee formed by women in Ferrière-la-Grande (noted above). But as we have seen, the C.G.T. never succeeded in gaining control of the protest movement, or even of sustaining it. And the existence of a steering committee in one small town scarcely constitutes bureaucratic organization as opposed to the spontaneity of the traditional food riots.⁴⁵

Clearly housewives in the 20th century experienced frustration in the face of escalating prices just as much as their counterparts in the Old Regime. And they clearly had just as little control over the more “modern” national market as the women of the 18th century had over regional markets. Perhaps we need to focus more on the psychological aspects of this issue. Here I am echoing Price, who has written that “to an important extent popular mentality fossilized the past, exhibiting a kind of functional lag in relation to the socio-economic structures of the present.”⁴⁶ Price makes this argument in regard to the food riots of the 1850s, but I would argue that it is relevant to 1911 as well. The response of the crowd at market to scarcity and high prices was

largely instinctive, with its roots in collective memory. Food riots, in the short term, had resulted in lower prices in the past, just as they did in 1911.

Temma Kaplan has suggested another psychological approach to understanding women's collective action. Kaplan proposes that women have a unique consciousness: "Female consciousness centers upon the rights of gender, on social concerns, on survival." Women's movements, therefore, focus on consumer issues, among others, and typically emerge not out of the formal organizations characteristic of male-dominated politics and workplace protests, but rather out of the informal networks of neighborhood and market.⁴⁷ From this perspective, too, it is not surprising to see French women resorting to traditional forms of protest in 1911. They were, after all, defending their traditional role, that of providing food for their families, especially their children. It is interesting to note that in the Aude, in southern France, where many women were employed in the rural economy, the response to the 1911 price increase was a demand for higher wages rather than market disturbances. In the mining towns of the north, by contrast, where the "vie chère" movement exploded, women were more typically housewives.⁴⁸

France was not the only developed country to experience food riots in the early 20th century. Food riots flared up in West Cumberland, England, in 1916-17, and occurred in New York City in 1917 as well.⁴⁹ Rather than expecting food riots to disappear as a form of social protest with the emergence of the centralized state or the development of a national market, we should perhaps link their disappearance to the integration of women, their principal actors, into the workplace and the political system.

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1. *Le Temps*, 1 September 1911.

2. Roger Price, *The Modernization of Rural France*. See Chapter 5, "Subsistence Crises popular protest:" for a masterful description and analysis of market disturbances century.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-204.

5. Charles Tilly, "How Protest Modernized in France:" Aydelotte al, eds., of *Quantitative Research in History* (London, 1972), pp. 192-255; Charles Tilly, Supply

and Public Order in Modern Europe:' In Charles Tilly, ed., *formation of in Europe* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 380-455; Louise Tilly, political

conflict in France:' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* v. II, no. I (Summer, 1971): 23-57.

6. Price, p. 148; and Tilly, "Food Supply and Public Order Modern France:' pp. 385-387.

7. Price, pp. 295-297.

8. *Le Temps*, 23 May and 14 September

9. *Ibid.*, 4 July 1911.

10. *Ibid.*, 1-3 August, 7 August 1911.

11. The 18 August 1911 issue of the *COURTier du Pas-de-Calais* similarly reported priests in that diocese had been asked to pray for rain.

12. *Ibid.*, 6 September 1911.

13. *Ibid.*, 15 August 1911. See A.D. Pas-de-Calais, IZ175 petitions sugarbeet farmers in Saily Labourse and Labourse to subprefect requesting emergency government relief. The wet summer sugarbeet harvest.

14. *Ibid.*, 7 September 1911.

15. George Boudois, "La Cherte de la Viande:' *Revue* 54, (October 1911): 343. The blame which Boudois lays upon the Villette spreading and mouth is supported by a 23 August *l'Humanite*, which reports *conseil general* had protested to the government against unsanitary Villette cattle market.

16. *Le Temps*, 12 August 1911.

17. *Annuaire Statistique de la France*, v. 31, 1911, 156-159; 32, 1912, 140-143.

18. Emile Watelet, *Les Recents troubles du Nord de fa France au poine de vue historique et eronomique*. (Paris, 1912), 11-12. Paris newspapers did not report these earliest incidents and so I rely upon Watelet for my information.

In the rest of this section, unless otherwise noted, I have relied upon three newspapers: *Le Temps*, *L'Humanite*, and *Le Figaro*. *Le Temps* and *L'Humanite* made comparable detailed and complete reports. *Le Figaro* was less informative but did include some reports the other two missed.

19. *Le Figaro*, 27 August 1911.

20. *Ibid.*, 27 August Jean-Marie Flonneau has made the following quite interesting observation about the role of women in the early demonstrations. "Actually, at the start of these troubles, the syndicalist movement was surprised by these spontaneous demonstrations of housewives. *La Bataille syndicaliste* August stated: 'The movement is curious' and George Yvetot wrote 'Bravo to the women? The C.G.T. rejoiced that women had finally intervened in the worker struggle. It believed to be quite new the preponderant part taken by women in the struggle against cost living, not realizing that the role of the women was limited to their traditional action troubles of the Old Regime and the nineteenth century." Jean-Marie Flonneau, "Crise de vie chere et mouvement syndical 1910-1914:' *Le Moul Jement Social*, no. 72 (July-September 1970): 62. (translation mine)

21. Jean-Marie Flonneau, Flonneau reached a similar conclusion, discerning three autonomous movements - one in the North, one in the East, or Center of France, and a third in the West. This last movement, centered in Brest and Lorient, will be mentioned below, but did not erupt until the few days August. unlikely that news from the Nord had yet arrived in Brest, or made much notice.

22. *Le Temps*, August 23. A.D. Nord, MI59-29'; Watelet, p. The headline of the 4 September issue of *Le Rel Jeil du Nord* read, "Formidable envoi de troupe it Maubeuge?"

24. See map I, departments protests were widespread and cities where trouble ample documentation of the "vie chere" protests in the departmental archives Finistere, Nord, and the Pas-de-Calais, including reports from police commissioners sub-prefects to prefects, and from the prefects the Minister of the Interior. See A.D. Finistere, IM159; A.D. Nord, MI59-29'; and A.D. Pas-de-Calais, M2138 and IZ175. See A.N., p I 7025 press clippings reporting the protests.

25. *Le Temps*, 12 September 1911. *L'Humanite* reverses this account in suggesting that the march was prohibited, and last minute allowed upon assurances that order would be maintained.

26. A.N., BBI8 2470 (piece 1775-AII). Sauvage was arrested on 13 September 1911 and charged trespassing. By appealed Sauvage had already served his six weeks sentence.

27. A.D. Pas-de-Calais, IZ816.

28. A.D. Pas-de-Calais, M2138.

29. A.D. Finistere, IM159.

30. *L'Humanite*, 2 September 1911.

31. A.D. Pas-de-Calais, M2138.

32. *Progres du Finistere*, September 1911.

33. *L'Humanite*, I September 1911.

34. *Ibid.*, September

35. Peter Stearns, *Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labor* (New Brunswick, 1971), p. 29.

36. See A.D. Nord, MI59-29^a for several late August letters from the Prefect L. Vincent, the Minister of suggest interpreted the protests as revolutionary agitators September Finistere, IMI59 for reports there, AD. Pas-de-Calais, IZ816. Unfortunately, prefectural reports period might normally Archives Nationales have been destroyed. departmental only one local report that strongly supported Caillaux's allegation that political agitation was chiefly responsible for the serious demonstrations, a report from the police commissioner of Lens in Pas-de-Calais.
37. See A. Fryar Calhoun, "State Security France, 1898-1914; paper delivered to the Western Society for French History (Denver, 1975); A Fryar Calhoun, *of French Government and Revolutionary Labor, 1893-1914* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton, 1973).
38. Newspapers occasionally reported several" demonstrators. added my totals, arbitrary probably figure. were contradictions among three papers regarding arrests consistently took the figure reported by *Temps*. reports very surprised figures On only one or two occasions made "several" protestors. no mention reports ignore guess of the persons reported nor to have come Presumably reporting oversight. hopes they suffer the prisoners Saint-Quentin 43 days arrest ever being charged brought to *l'Humanite*'s charge arrests (see *l'Humanite*, 30 October, story.) Equally unfortunate was the case "Belgian:' Fobert, deported for his role vie protest. reality had Belgium foreigner. deported made equally difficult plight finally brought attention Chamber, compensation prefects were instructed quite nationality deporting suspects future. (*Journal Officiel, Debats Parlementaires, Chambre des Deputes*, February 1912,229-23 1.)
39. Nord, MI59-29'.
40. AN., Fil 7024 and *Fil* 7622.
41. Jeanne Singer-Kerel, *Le cout de la Vie a Paris de a pp. 452-455*.
42. Maurice Halbwachs, *Vie*, (Paris, 1913), p 363; Roger Price, *The Modernization of Rural France* (New York, 1983), p. 305. Milk consumption in Paris had risen from 110 million liters in 1854, to 280 million liters in 1890, and 410 million liters by 1914.
43. *Le Reveil du Nord*, 21 August 1911.
44. George Rude, *La populaire 1775 li region parisienne:' Annales Hiscoriques La française*, 28, (April-June 1956): 136-179; "La taxation populaire 1775 Picardie, Normandie, Ie Beauvaisis; *Hiscoriques fran~aise*, 33, Ouly-September 1961): 305-326
45. Louise A. Tilly, "Paths of Proletarianization: Organization of Production, Sexual Division of Labor, and Women's Collective Action;" *Signs*, 7, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 400-417.
46. Price, p. 128.
47. Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness Barcelona, 1910-1918;" *Signs*, v. 7, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 545-566. See also Mary P. Ryan, "The Power Women's Networks; Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan, Judith Walkowitz, eds., *Sex and Class in Women's History* (London, 1983), pp. 167-186.
48. See Laura L. Frader, "Women's Collective Revolutionary Syndicalism Aude, 1900-1914; paper to Society Studies, Angeles meeting, March 1985. See also Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York, 1978), pp. 84-88 for information regarding occupation patterns in the north.
49. See Anthony James Coles, Economy Twentieth-Century Food Riots;' *The Journal of British Studies*, XVIII, no. I (Fall 1978); 157-176; and William Freiburger, "War Prosperity and Hunger: 1917," *Labor History*, v. 25, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 217-239.

