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**INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF
AGRARIAN AFFAIRS**

Vol. I, No. 4, May 1952

**The Consolidation of
Farms in Six Countries
of Western Europe**



Price 5s. 0d. net

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
LONDON: GEOFFREY CUMBERLEGE

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REGROUPING OF FARM HOLDINGS IN FRANCE

WHETHER it likes it or not, French agriculture now has to produce for the outside consumer and not solely for a heavily protected home market. Prominent among the factors which raise the costs of production of farm commodities, and thus increase the difficulties of this readjustment to present international conditions, is the scattering of the fields. Farm productivity depends on numerous things, but there is little hope of bringing it up to better standards if farmers have to waste hours on the roads going from farm to field and from strip to strip, and if they spend almost as much time turning the plough at the end of the furrow as actually ploughing. Not only is the problem of regrouping holdings important for reducing costs, it has a significant bearing on the direction and speed of the evolution of the whole agrarian structure.

The problem of 'parcellement'¹ is not new in France and several causes combine to explain the present situation which is the result of historical developments. A century ago, the pressure of population on the land was such that the number of 'farms' was, statistically, probably more than double the present number. When a farm—usually a small holding—disappeared, its fields were not always taken over by the owners of the neighbouring strips, and the present holdings are thus the result of a haphazard development. This is not only due to the pressure of population, but rather to pressure of population combined with the craving of the peasants to own the land. In France, the two phenomena are closely linked.

This is especially true, of course, in the 'open-field' areas where farm buildings are grouped in compact villages. Those regions are, by many standards, the best agricultural areas in the country, extending mainly to the north-east of a line running from Le Havre to Geneva. Farming there used to be conducted under the three-field system with compulsory crop rotations and strict community rules. Each farm consisted typically of three fields or three groups of fields, one in each of the three sectors of the village's

¹ The word 'parcellement' applies to the division of holdings into scattered parcels while 'morcellement' refers to the division of land into holdings. The latter word is, however, erroneously and frequently used in both senses.

land area. It was in those regions that scattering was at its worst.

Lastly, among the main causes of *parcellement* must be mentioned the abolition of primogeniture (1790) later confirmed by the 'code civil'. Combined with pressure of population on the land, this caused the division of fields into narrow strips.

The situation can be summed up with a few figures. The agricultural census of 1929, and later the Monnet Plan, estimated that the area where excessive *parcellement* prevailed amounted to 10 million hectares, roughly one-third of the farm land, or one-half of the tilled (arable) area. The average size of land parcels as measured on the cadastral (ownership) maps was about 0.35 hectare. However, since there may be a cadastral boundary even where there is no change in ownership, it is estimated that the average size of the continuous pieces of land belonging to a single owner is about double that figure.

M. Lamartine Yates, in his well-known survey of pre-war agriculture in western Europe, called this situation the major curse of French agriculture. Very significant improvements are taking place, however, and this paper will first attempt to describe the various methods which have been and are being used to improve the layout of farms. Some estimates of the results achieved will be given and, later, an attempt will be made to appraise the present and future problems of the programme for regrouping the holdings. This estimate does not represent any official view on the matter.¹

The main method of improvement of the layout of farms with scattered fields is a formal regrouping operation, called 'remembrement' by which all agricultural land in a given area is re-allocated among the various owners in a more convenient pattern and on some equitable basis. The main concern here is with this operation. There are, however, other processes and institutional arrangements which have a bearing on farm layout. They will first be examined briefly.

Various steps have been taken to prevent the subdivision of farms. The principle of equal division of the inheritance among heirs has been partly abolished in the case of family farms. The heir living on the farm is given the right to inherit it in whole, provided it is not too large and provided the shares of the other heirs are paid off within

¹ No bibliography can be included here but mention must be made of the recent book by J. M. Schmerber, *La Réorganisation foncière en France, le remembrement rural*. (Thesis Strasbourg) Coueslant, Cahors (France), 1949, upon which this paper draws freely.

a given—and fairly long—period of time. The laws governing this procedure are significant and are being used more and more, though they apply only to small holdings.

In present circumstances, the most common evolution is concentration rather than division of farms. Through that process, the layout of farms has been significantly improved in the better agricultural areas around and north of Paris. Statistical data on this evolution are not available in fully adequate form, because they are tabulated by administrative divisions while concentration follows very different patterns according to whether it is on the fertile loamy plateaux or on the poorer slopes and valleys. However, the effect of intensive concentration, which has been going on for many decades, can clearly be seen by comparing old cadastral maps with the present layout. In a few communes, concentration has even reached the point where the whole area is farmed by one operator. That settles the problem of *parcellement*, though it is true that this practical concentration often hides the fact that the actual ownership is still very much divided. Farmers in those areas commonly rent land from several owners, and they have acquired such strength and permanency that they can dispose of boundary stones and plough through ownership lines. Formal *remembrement*, which may appear useful there when ownership maps are under review, would, in fact, be a formality of little agricultural significance.

Another method of improvement consists of exchanging parcels of land. They can be either formal exchanges of full property in the land or merely agreements to switch over its use. The latter are usually made by the tenants, as the new (1946) tenancy laws give them the right to engage in exchanges of that kind (after obtaining the approval of the owner or of the tenancy courts). Formal exchanges have been exempted from the real estate transfer taxes, which in France are heavy, and have been rather widespread. Although no recent estimate is available, 448,000 hectares were transferred between 1919 to 1929. Such exchanges are very useful. They pave the way for eventual *remembrement* operations, besides helping the farmer who has a field or two in a neighbouring commune, a situation which *remembrement* operations themselves often fail to meet, as they are carried out usually on a commune basis.

These exchanges, however, are insufficient, as they are only bilateral. Only with complete multilateral re-allocation of land can effective improvements be obtained. This is the aim of *remembrement*

proper. In addition to being complete, it has the advantage of including schemes for re-locating and improving farm lanes and ditches, improvements which mere exchanges cannot effect.

Remembrement requires either unanimity—which is practically impossible to obtain—or compulsion. When the first significant steps were taken to further *remembrement* (Chauveau Act, 27 November 1918), the compulsion was that of the majority over the minority. A regrouping plan had to follow certain rules so that, with minor exceptions, each owner ended up with the same area or productive capacity as he had put into the pool, and once the plan was made, it became binding if two-thirds of the owners, covering one-half of the area, or half the owners, covering two-thirds of the area, voted in favour of it, or failed to vote. It is significant that this law met with strong opposition from the defenders of property.

The Act met with little success, even though it was improved by an executive law (*décret-loi*) of 30 December 1935 which emphasized equality of productive capacity instead of equality of area as the basis for regrouping, and which also solved other minor difficulties. Estimates do not agree too well, but it seems that, in the course of twenty-two years, less than 300,000 hectares were regrouped under these two laws. The main cause of the failure does not seem to have been inadequacies of the law so much as reluctance on the part of owners to give up their little strips of land. They and their forefathers had been tilling them year after year, and all their toil had imparted special virtues to the land which could not be gambled with. Nor should the farmers be criticized too harshly for their conservative attitude. The farm groups and official advisory services failed to make the aggressive extension efforts which would have been needed to break the routine of the peasants.

Another law, dated 4 March 1919, applied only to war-damaged areas. It embodied a different type of compulsion. Instead of the majority decision being binding on the minority, the compelling power was that of the state acting through a designated communal board. This law applied in areas where boundaries of fields were no longer apparent, and was quite effective. Under it, nearly 600,000 hectares were regrouped. Psychologically, however, the problem was simpler in those areas, because the fields were all more or less abandoned and weedy, so that farmers, in a way, were starting from scratch.

The present *remembrement* (9 March 1941) extends this principle of state compulsion to all cases. The prefect (the administrative

representative of the government in each of the ninety *departments* which form the country) is empowered to designate a communal board of nine persons to study and carry out the regrouping. The board is presided over by a judge and is composed of four civil servants, the mayor, and three owner-operator farmers. If the board consider that *remembrement* is justified—which is always the case at present, as we shall see—they hire an authorized surveyor and approve or modify the *remembrement* plan, which is later made definitive by an order of the prefect. In fact the formalities are not as simple as this, and the rights of the individual owners are protected in many ways, such as by the hearing of representations and the right of appeal to the departmental board or, eventually, to the courts.

With regard to the practical principles of the *remembrement*, the law contains a fundamental contradiction. It is stated that the aim is to improve the operation of the farm units. Yet all the work is carried out on an ownership basis.¹ No tenant farmer is represented on the boards, and although it is true that tenants can improve the layout of their fields by way of exchange, the farm-unit point of view may very well conflict with that of property.

The task of the surveyor is difficult. He has to determine the amount of land put into the pool by each owner, but the existing cadastral documents are not sufficiently accurate or up to date for the purpose. With the help of farmers, a certain number of land classes are defined, delineated, and appraised for purposes of comparison. Special crops, such as hop-yards, gardens, orchards, and vineyards used to be excluded from *remembrement*, but they now tend to be included in it, and the appraisal problem becomes more and more difficult. Happily, older men in the community know the advantages and drawbacks of every field, and their advice is very helpful.

After the estimate of the amount pooled by each owner is approved, work starts on the new plan. First of all, the network of lanes and drainage ditches is replanned on a logical basis. Then the fields are laid out according to a series of major principles: that each owner should have his land in one block (this was not strictly followed in the past, but is now enforced so far as possible), that parcels being allocated to owners in neighbouring villages should be on the outskirts of the area, that the small owners, who often farm more intensively and have inadequate means of transportation, should be given

¹ It is estimated that about 40 per cent. of the land in France is operated under cash or share tenancy.

land close to the village, that all fields should connect with one or more lanes, that all fields should be given geometrically regular shapes, and that so far as possible their lengths should be from 300 to 400 metres and their widths 100 metres or more.

The only principle required by the law is that the area received by each owner be of equivalent productive capacity to the area he pooled. This means that the areas of each class of land received and given may not be equal as long as the loss of some classes is compensated by the gain in others. In fact, the aim is to make these changes in class acreages and in total acreage as small as possible.

The law stated that land situated more than 3 kilometres from farmsteads should be set aside to create new family farms. Scattering of villages has also been considered. These measures, however, are not now enforced, as progress in farm mechanization and the improvement of roads and lanes make them less desirable than they were in the past. Also, the trend is not so much towards new farms as it was under the Vichy rule. The greater need, often, is for reforestation.

Though this law dates back to 1941, it is only since the liberation that the regrouping movement started on a significant scale. The Monnet Plan had called for a goal of 500,000 hectares in 1947 and 1 million each year thereafter. This has not been reached. In estimating the results, it has to be taken into account that two years elapse between the time that operations in a commune start and the time they are completed. Formalities are lengthy and changes of ownership can only take place at certain times of the year.

From 1946 to 1949 operations were completed on about 500,000 hectares, and nearly half of that area was completed in 1949 alone. In 1950, operations were conducted over more than 1,500,000 hectares and completions are expected to reach 500,000 hectares. The scale of operations is thus increasing, and if funds are available, may reach the goal of the Monnet Plan which was recently reduced to the more realistic figure of 750,000 hectares a year. Nevertheless, in present circumstances, it seems probable that investments in that field will be curtailed and that the *remembrement* programme will lag.

For a while after the liberation, the speed of the programme was limited by a lack of trained surveyors. Now, the problem is mostly financial.¹ The treasury subsidizes 80 per cent. (or sometimes even

¹ Also it is reported that the Génie Rural, the administration which handles *remembrement*, has insufficient staff to keep pace with more projects.

more) of the costs of *remembrement* which consist mostly of surveying and clerical expenses. The average cost per hectare in 1949 was about 3,750 francs (not including improvements in lanes and ditches, or the redrawing of cadastral documents), so the cost to the owner was less than 800 francs per hectare, only about one-third of a quintal of wheat.¹

This is one of the reasons why the programme has not lacked farm support. But more important is the change in attitude of farmers. France now has more than 130,000 tractors against about 30,000 pre-war, and the farmers are convinced of the advantages of mechanization. They are more receptive of new ideas. As more and more communes are regrouped, the advantages of the operation become more obvious to a greater number of those who are still inclined to doubt. Requests for *remembrement* thus tend to outpace the budgetary appropriations, and some kind of priority has to be established. This is why *remembrement* boards are only created in those communes where farm support is assured.

In spite of this satisfactory progress, *remembrement* is not without its difficulties. The costs of the operation, though small compared with its advantages, could be reduced possibly, if the procedure were simplified and if somewhat lower standards of accuracy were accepted in the surveying. Some changes have been made in that direction, but the measurement of acreage is still done with extreme care, although the productivity classifications of the land are, fundamentally, rough approximations. There may be justification, however, for the stringent surveying procedure from a psychological point of view.

Another difficulty may appear in the future. When *remembrement* operations, now mostly taking place in north-eastern France, are conducted in less progressive areas, they may meet with some farm resistance and certainly will involve greater appraisal difficulties. The problem of vineyards and orchards will be complex on account of the great number of factors influencing their value. Farm appraisal has received little attention from agricultural economists in France, and the lack of a theoretical basis is not helping matters.

Mention must also be made of the question of permanence. How long will the effects of *remembrement* last? There is little risk of re-division of holdings. The trend is now, in most areas, in the other

¹ One quintal (100 kg.) ÷ 3 = about 70 lb.

direction. Moreover, the law provides that the sanction of the appropriate departmental board will be required for any division of lands. *Remembrement* may become obsolete, however, if technical progress changes the conditions of agricultural work. The goal is to set up fields measuring 300 by 100 metres, i.e. 3 hectares, but many *remembrement* operations have been carried out which give an average size of parcel of less than 1 hectare. As those villages where this has occurred shift over from animal to mechanical draught power, new grouping operations will be needed.

That is probably the main weakness of *remembrement*. It is rigid, fixed, and unadaptable, while efficient application of resources to circumstances which are changing ever faster requires constant flexibility. Of course, rigidity is not solely a result of *remembrement*. It is the result of the whole system of property, and the French *remembrement* programme, as was mentioned above, is closely linked with property. To overcome this situation, a suggestion has been made that the improvement in farm layout should be based, not on ownership units, but on farm units, a system which has been named cultural regroupment.

Lively controversies have been going on between advocates of either solution. One big advantage of formal *remembrement* of the present kind is that it works. Cultural regroupment is only a project and a rather vague one at that. Probably it would be a kind of generalized system of land exchanges relating not to property in land but to the use of it. These exchanges, instead of being dependent on individual initiative and goodwill, would be imposed by a communal board. Formal *remembrement* of property would be the ultimate goal, but cultural regroupment, it is claimed, would be cheaper and could develop progressively. It would be flexible. But to be effective, it would have to involve suppression of property boundaries, because a farmer whose fields were grouped in one block by means of exchanges would then rearrange that block in the most convenient way for cultivation. The owners of the land would thus lose some of the attributes of property. Their ownership would not appear tangibly in solid earth, a change which would not be easily accepted. Moreover, it is not certain that the cost of cultural regroupment would be much lower than that of *remembrement*. About the same amount of surveying, planning, and appraisal would be needed, and it might be more difficult, as was pointed out earlier, to rearrange the lanes and ditches under this method than it would be with the other. Whether the

increased flexibility would compensate for these disadvantages is rather an academic question at present, as it will be only if, and when, cultural regroupment is put into practice that it can be answered.

For the present, concentration and *remembrement* are the two major methods by which the layout of scattered farms is improved. Concentration is feared by many people, and, in certain cases, is prohibited by law. The importance of *remembrement* is thus very great. There is little doubt that such a programme is needed. The advantages of improved field layout are evident. The progress of the programme is rapid and is certainly helping to improve agricultural productivity. It must not be forgotten, however, that more than one million 'farms' are of less than 10 hectares in size. Taking into account the diversified nature of French farming, most of them cannot have fields sufficiently large to make efficient operation of modern machinery possible.

Even if it cannot give complete efficiency to farm units of inadequate size, *remembrement* can help to some extent. It gives them a new lease on life. Those who believe in the existing system and who want to maintain peasant farming therefore favour *remembrement*. Others agree that it is a good thing in itself but, rather than attempt to solve the layout problem alone, they would prefer to attack the whole question of the lack of adjustment of the farm structure to modern economic and technical conditions.

Remembrement strengthens farm units of inadequate size. It also strengthens the system of uncontrolled ownership of rigid land holdings, of property in the sense of the old Roman Law. From a purely economic point of view, this system does not always seem conducive to the highest efficiency in the use of resources, to obtaining the highest standard of living for those who till the land, or to speedy adaptation to changing conditions. The agrarian structure is enveloped in a straight-jacket, and while *remembrement* gives it a little more breathing space, it does not liberate it from its rigidities, frictions, and major inefficiencies.

September 1950