



From collective action to a pressure group. The birth of the National Syndicate of Wine Brokers in France and its action (1920s-1949)

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“From collective action to a pressure group”

The birth of the National Syndicate of wine brokers in France and its action (1920s-1949)

Le Bras Stéphane

The goal of this communication is to present the birth and the role of the National Syndicate of Wine brokers in France from the 1920s to 1949 and to show how a social conflict and social tensions can lead an unorganized corporation to a strong and effective Union.

The mid-1920s in France are marked by a series of unrest and collective actions from many pressure groups, from the left wing (socialists, communists) to the right wing (leagues and fascists paramilitary groups).

The French society experienced at this time many economic difficulties which resulted in a troubled and disturbed social situation.

This unrest is as well tangible in the wine society which is characterized since the 1900s by a profound restructuration of its field and an irregular economy (like shown by professors Gavignaud-Fontaine or Lachiver, crises are frequent in the wine economy and these crises are often followed by period of high but swift prosperity).

In the heart of this restructuring and of its hazards, the wine brokers, the vital wheels in the smooth running of the market, the essential go-betweens between the world of the property and that of the trade, have to face the fluctuations - ceaseless and excessive - of the prices, new commercial practices that leave them puzzled and the legislative interventionism of the State, which is often seen as disturbing in a profession marked by a liberal state of mind.

In front of these multiple pressures, the answers, in particular in Languedoc, are at first epidermic and anti-authority, to disrupt and perturb the market of wines, for secondly, on the initiative of the Southern brokers, make more constructive and more ambitious efforts to give birth to a real pressure group with widened skills.

These are the reasons why we'll see here the different causes of the problem, the long way to the Union and the birth of the National syndicate and its first actions.

These are just the outlines of my research

To the sources of the dissatisfaction: the question of the brokerage in the South

The role of the broker

The broker in wine is a major character of the wine-producing society. In four Southern departments (Aude, Gard, Hérault, Pyrénées-Orientales), which are in the Interwar period, the most producing four departments of the national territory, every village counts at least one broker. Called " Broker of goods ", its main activity - even exclusive - lies in the brokerage in wines. Officially recognized by the State with whom they acquit a registration fee, they assure the flow and display of the production. By his pivotal position, he is so able to know at best the state of the market, the capacities of some and wills of the others. If he knows which quantity this one wants to sell, he also knows at which moment the other one is be going to want to buy.

As a liaison officer, he visits some and the others to permit a bigger fluidity in the flow of stocks and in the establishment of contracts. The various testimonies often evoke the subtlety and the psychology of the brokers who have the difficult tries to make match an ambitious offer and a careful demand. In addition to this every day labor, the broker adds a weekly activity when he goes(surrenders) on markets of wines which are everyday of the week in the South of France. The go-between, allowing this time the physical meeting of the parts accompanies owners and traders there to ensure and secure the transactions or to present new buyers and new sellers.

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The brokers brake into two categories, the rural brokers and the urban brokers. The first ones are originated from the villages and work on their own when the second are working in more or less big companies (sometimes up to 50 employees).

Their activity as well as their probity and experience are an essential key to the market.

Protesting and refusing the situation

Nevertheless, while open the 1920s, the sector is in crisis. The number of brokers did not stop progressing since the end of the First world war " stressing the disorder within the profession ", disorder owed according to the testimonies to a lack of gratitude and to a proliferation of the " brown brokers " who try to benefit from periods of strong profitabilities on the wine markets, the whole without settling registration fees, realizing there of subsequent and fraudulent profits.

In front of this situation, the labor unions of local brokers propose the solutions which seem to them the most right and the most fundamental within the framework of a rational structuralization of the market: legislative gratitude of the status of the wine broker (the last definition of which dates 1866 and which joins in the non-specialized frame(executive) of the " broker of goods ") and the purification of the profession by the institution of a professional ID card or at least of an union card recognized by the Property and the Business as well as the rise of the rate of brokerage. But these measures are not heard by the various actors of the market of wines: state, traders, owners. It explains largely by two reasons. The first one comes from the relative youth of labor unions. Rare are the ones which have more than about fifteen years of existence. The second lies in the atomization of the local and regional syndicates: for the department of the Hérault in 1925, there are not less than six brokers' local labor unions.

To reduce this deficit of attention, the local labor unions(syndicates) in the South, in a context of fast and steady increase of the high cost of living and further to a new failure of the negotiations at the beginning of 1926, try then to disrupt(perturb) the market to make listen again their demands. In April, 1926, they dash into a long-term unitarian strike, an unique(only) fact due to its reach(impact) and its identical character. For the first time, the brokers claim only, and by the strength, rights for their profession.

Facing this movement, the traders, little inclined to see a part of their profits flying away, propose an appreciation of the brokerage and in May, the " Syndicate of the Wholesale trade of Montpellier " proposes the first one, followed by the other syndicates, an increase of the right of brokerage, then carried to 0,75 Fr, proposition which is accepted at once by the president of the Labor union of the brokers of Montpellier.

The long way to the Union

A profession under domination

Hardly of this first victory, the necessity of uniting in a federalist frame becomes more marked in the bend of the years 1920-1930.

Because, first of all, the problem is that the brokers stay profoundly dominated by the powerful Business. So, in the South, the rules of brokerage are always imposed by the Trade.

Indeed, the brokers are dominated by and subject to the regional Trade under the shape of a professional ID card and in the commitment written not to sell to the traders foreign to the region while the traders from their part make only a commitment to trade with the brokers owners of this card. Moreover, any deal will be officialized by a contract on which will be registered all the information relative to the deal.

This first stage towards the raising of moral standards of the profession is a half-victory for the brokers who see there recognizing the importance of their role but who have to accept an undeniable appointment of a guardian. As a matter of fact, the conditions and the standards of the brokerage are

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defined thus always by the Business then accepted by the brokers by means of asymmetric local collective agreements.

Furthermore, The strong subordination of the brokers in the wine-producing world is also perceptible during the coming in the South Mediterranean of the Commission of inquiry led by E. Barthe in 1930-31 on the situation of the vine growing of France and Algeria in the name of the Committee(Commission) of Drinks. During the hearings the opinion of the brokers leaders are always linking or subordinated to the Trade leaders.

The first attempts

In front of the degradation of a nevertheless profitable situation till the end of 1920s, takes place a reversal of tendency in the profession. Indeed, in the financial difficulties due to the economic crisis which strikes France quite hard, depreciation caused by the brown broker in increase and a market of wines which "overflows" comes to be added the drastic increase of the registration fees.

While up to there, liberalism was lauded, from now on, following the various headways having punctuated the last years, the corporatist movement, in a wide movement of defense of its interests, decide to unite. So, pushed by the acknowledgement in favour of the concentration and of the federalism, the major national federations (South, Bordeaux region, Algeria in particular) try to make contacts, to the heart of the 1930s and of the wine crisis which continues. These are diffuse contacts at first then solid secondly. This action with as main objective the recognition of a particular status, is interrupted by the degradation of the international situation in 1938 while the first signs of a national impact of the message are indisputable (correspondence with E. Barthe, private bill for the status of the Rural Brokers in June, 1938). It is the fundamental step there which has been crossed and which only the war will repel.

Indeed, the failures but also the success of the interwar period made become aware to the leaders of the big regional corporatist movements of the necessity of an union. The advantages of a concerted action is not to be demonstrated anymore and it's very clearly established around that a national union allowing them to press more effectively on the fates of their field, the whole in a triple optics clearly established: the rationalization, the purification and the control of the profession.

The National Syndicate

The birth of the Syndicate

If the idea was born even before 1938, international events but also, after the Liberation, disagreements, difficulties of understanding, regional issues (opposition of some local unions refractory to any idea of national unity) delayed the completion of negotiations.

The disagreements are numerous : the impossibility of finding an agreement on the agenda of a meeting, acrimony related to travel, endless negotiations about the venue and date of the meeting about the development of statutes and the election of a federal office.

Yet the urgent need for concerted action could make disappear the past reluctance and early 1946, long-term contacts are established between Bordeaux and southern representatives. These contacts help to settle a meeting March 20, 1946 in Bordeaux. Finally in September 1946, representatives of Montpellier invited their counterparts from Bordeaux and from Algeria to a meeting in the hotel of the Chamber of Commerce in Montpellier where discussions began around four central themes: the commission rates, the status of wine brokers, the creation of a National Federation, and "one of the finer points to consider" the financing of such a body.

September 5 at night, the bases of the "National Federation of Wines and Spirits Brokers from France and Algeria" are discarded and those articles are submitted by 1 January 1947. The new body, resulting of months of negotiations but also of several years of fighting has two basic goals:

- Be a permanent and lasting relationship with the unions of dealers, the National Union of wholesale trade in wines and spirits, bodies of qualified intermediaries, governments;

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- Allow adoption of a status brokers.

The first secretary is based in Montpellier, where is the secretary general administrative, permanent authority and effective interface between different parts of the Federation. He is the indispensable cog in the joint action. Decisions are taken by the majority of board members, elected annually, engaging the entire. Corporatist solidarity has indeed taken over the manic individualism that prevailed in the profession a few years ago.

Its first actions

It is a tool independent, territorially and economically powerful who sees the day. Designed and served as a real strength of peer group pressure, it will be able to show all its power, especially as it is joined in November 1947 by the Federation of Dealers in Burgundy and in January 1948 by two unions of Maine and lower Loire and Loire. With more than 3,000 members and twenty-eight unions in 1949, it focuses on its primary purpose, the voting official status of wine broker. For this, he resumed the basis for discussions which had almost resulted in 1938 and certain laws of the Vichy era that were to its advantage.

Thus, after an effective lobbying action towards the world of the Property and the State, on December 31, 1949, the law establishing the "status of rural broker" is adopted by Parliament. It's a victory of the "National Federation of Wines and Spirits Brokers" which here becomes a source of proposals and a pulse while a few years earlier the unions that formed the Union were just auxiliary to the property and especially to the Commerce. From secondary actors, brokers, high weight from federalism and corporatist national awareness of their responsibilities, becoming major players in the organization of wine market.

The statute ensures the monopoly of the sector to the profession. Indeed, the law establishes a professional identity card issued by the prefecture on the proposal of a commission of six members where brokers generally are the majority. This commission even has a right to regulate the profession by a "role of screening, to limit the constant number of brokers in a given region". Finally, this monopoly is reinforced by the requirement to have the card to link buyers and sellers. This is one more step to the consolidation of the profession and the elimination of "brown brokers" by heavy fines and forfeitures. Finally, it is forbidden to practice a profession that is incompatible with the job of broker, including that of the wholesaler. It's the end of an unacceptable situation for most brokers where some southern traders exercised, legally and in defiance of conflicts of interest reported by the profession, trading and brokering.

Here is a clear marker of a successful work accomplished and thoughtful regulation. It aims to clearly separate - and officially - the various intermediaries in the wine world and marks the independence - and ultimately recognized by the state - of the profession without which the wine market can no longer function.

Conclusion :

Thus, after a maturation that has lasted nearly twenty-five years, an organized and national union was born at a price of local struggles and a major effort to get out of a position of submission. It achieved its main goal: the control of its industry, its practices and its standards in a time of restructuration of the wine market. The brokers became a leader group in the wine market, ensuring through a political and unitarian offensive, embodied by the birth of the National Federation, the control, the monopoly and the regulation of the profession and above all its own destiny.