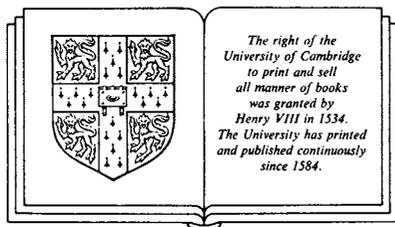

The politics of French business 1936–1945

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge
New York Port Chester
Melbourne Sydney

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1991
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Vinen, Richard Charles
The politics of French business 1936-1945 / Richard Charles Vinen.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 40440 1

1. Business and politics - France - History. 2. Industry and state -
France - History. 3. Industrial relations - France - History.
4. Employers' associations - France - Political activity - History.
I. Title.

HD3616.F82V56 1991

338.944-dc20 90-19803 CIP

ISBN 0 521 40440 1 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52240 4 paperback

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Chapter 1

Introduction

One of the most heavily worked seams of modern historiography is the study of the relationship between capitalism and the authoritarian anti-Marxist regimes that arose in Europe between 1922 and 1945.¹ Debate on this subject has been especially lively among historians of Germany. Indeed the study of the relationship between industry and politics in the Weimar Republic has become an industry in itself, and a highly politicized one at that.²

There has been far less study of the relationship between business and the Vichy regime that was installed in France after the defeat of 1940. One of the reasons for this apparent neglect is that historians have simply taken the links between business and Vichy for granted. By comparison with the Third Reich, Vichy looks like an open and shut case. It was headed by an ex-General not an ex-corporal; it was clearly a regime of the elites. The businessmen who thronged into the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs in July 1940 were in no danger of being jostled by drunken brownshirts. Vichy indulged in anti-capitalist rhetoric, but there were no assaults on the rights of property.

Business did well during the Vichy period. Work was provided for certain industries by the German war economy; labour organization was

¹ Daniel Guerin, *Fascism and Big Business* (London, 1973); Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship* (London, 1974); Jane Caplan, 'Theories of Fascism: Nicos Poulantzas as Historian', *History Workshop*, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 83–100; Stuart Woolf, 'Did a Fascist Economy Exist?', in idem (ed.), *The Nature of Fascism* (London, 1968).

² David Abraham, *The Collapse of the Weimar Public* (Princeton, N.J., 1982); Gerald Feldman, 'Big Business and the Kapp Putsch', *Central European History*, 4 (1971), 99–130; idem, *Iron and Steel in the German Inflation 1916–1923* (Princeton, N.J., 1977); Gerald Feldman and Ulrick Nockeu, 'Trade Associations and Economic Power: Interest Group Development in the German Iron and Steel Industries, 1900–1933', *Business History Review*, 49 (1975), 413–45; Henry A. Turner, 'Big Business and the Rise of Hitler', *American Historical Review*, 75 (1969), 56–70; idem, 'Hitler's Secret Pamphlet for Industrialists, 1927', *Journal of Modern History*, 40 (1968), 348–72; idem, 'The *Ruhr* Secret Cabinet of Heavy Industry in the Weimar Republic', *Central European History*, 3 (1970), 195–228; idem, *German Big Business and the Rise of Hitler* (Oxford, 1985).

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suppressed; industrial organization often amounted to state-sponsored self-regulation. Not surprisingly, all this has led historians to assume that business was one of the pillars of Vichy support. In particular, it has been assumed that business used Vichy in order to reverse the defeat that had been inflicted on it by the Popular Front government and the strikes of 1936. There is some evidence for this. It is true that the business mobilization against the Popular Front involved a good deal of rhetoric directed at the *classes moyennes* and especially at small businessmen. Vichy claimed to represent precisely these classes. It is also true that during the mobilization against the Popular Front many business associations adopted the ideology of corporatism which was the official ideology of the Vichy regime. Finally, several of the leaders who rose to prominence in the business movement after 1936 went on to play important roles at Vichy.

But few historians have investigated in any detail the link between the business mobilization against the Popular Front and business support for Vichy. Scholars such as Fridenson,³ Kolboom⁴ and Bourdé⁵ focus their research on the Popular Front and then make assumptions about the Vichy period that are founded on far less extensive knowledge. Similarly, historians like Paxton⁶ and Kedward⁷ rely on other historians to paint the Popular Front background to their brilliant portraits of Vichy. More recently historians have become increasingly inclined to explain the transition from the Third Republic to Vichy in terms of continuities, but 1940 remains a frontier that is rarely crossed in a single book or article.

The consequences of this division of scholarly effort are exacerbated by two factors. Firstly, the history of France between 1936 and 1945 is a history of constantly changing social alliances. Some of these alliances – such as that between the leaders of heavy industry and those who claimed to represent small business in 1936/7 or between the Gaullist state and the organized working class in 1944 – were highly awkward. Each of these alliances was therefore underwritten by a considerable body of myth that helped to make it more palatable by obscuring its real nature. Each time an alliance changed, the history of previous alliances was rewritten to suit the new alignment. This means that historians who focus on a short time-span are vulnerable in two ways. On the one hand, they may accept the views of previous periods presented within their own period. On the other, they may unconsciously absorb assumptions about their own period that were generated by the political circumstances of a later period. Thus the view of

³ Patrick Fridenson, 'Le patronat français', in René Rémond and Janine Bourdin (eds.), *La France et les Français 1938–1939* (Paris, 1978), pp. 139–58.

⁴ Ingo Kolboom, *La revanche des patrons: le patronat français face au front populaire* (Paris, 1986).

⁵ Guy Bourdé, *La défaite du front populaire* (Paris, 1977).

⁶ Robert Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (New York, 1972).

⁷ H. R. Kedward, 'Patriots and Patriotism in Vichy France', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 32 (1982), 175–92.

labour relations during the occupation presented by many historians has more to do with the circumstances of 1944 than those of 1940 to 1944. Similarly the view of the Matignon accords as a tacit collaboration between heavy industry and the Popular Front owes much to the political circumstances of 1940.

Secondly, historians of the period after the Popular Front and historians of Vichy ask different questions about their subjects. The study of business and politics is highly developed among historians of the Popular Front. But historians of Vichy rarely grant the subject more than a walk-on part in studies that concern other matters. Indeed, much of the study of Vichy has been approached from angles that actually impair an accurate view of business attitudes. In particular, many historians draw their evidence primarily from leaders of the left and the working class,⁸ while others write local studies that ignore regional variations in business attitudes to the regime.⁹ Even among historians who do concentrate on business attitudes there is a sharp divide between those working on the Popular Front and those working on Vichy. The former focus on business relations with organized labour,¹⁰ while the latter focus on the role of the state and on the extent to which Vichy industrial organization anticipated post-war developments.¹¹

Henry Ehrmann's *Organized Business in France* (1957) was the last work that attempted to deal with business throughout the period from 1936 to 1945. Ehrmann's book is full of insight, first-hand knowledge and sceptical common sense. But it was based on published material and testimonies that could not be cited. In the last few years an avalanche of documents concerning the period from 1936 to 1945 has become available. This book

⁸ The studies undertaken by Etienne Dejonghe, 'Les houillères à l'épreuve: 1944-1947', *Revue du Nord*, 227 (1975), 643-67, Darryl Holter, 'Miners against the State: French Miners and the Nationalization of Coalmining 1944-1949' (unpublished PhD. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1980), and Monique Luirard, *La région stéphanoise dans la guerre et dans la paix 1936-1951* (Saint-Etienne, 1980), all depend heavily on the testimony of working-class leaders.

⁹ The problems of local studies are exacerbated by the fact that many historians study areas in the political heartland of Vichy (i.e. the south) rather than the industrial heartland of France (i.e. the north). The studies of the Nord and Pas-de-Calais undertaken by Dejonghe, and J. Thullier, 'Aspects de la crise industrielle dans la région Nord/Pas de Calais sous l'occupation allemande', *Revue du Nord*, no. 2 spécial hors de série (1987), 419-67, do concentrate on an area that contained much of French industry but, because of their limited scope, these works say little about the relations between industry in this area and the rest of France or that between industry and the Vichy government.

¹⁰ Kolboom, *La revanche des patrons*; Fridenson, 'Le patronat français'; Bourdè, *La défaite du front populaire*; Adrian Rossiter, 'Corporatist Experiments in Republican France, 1916-1939' (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1986).

¹¹ Henri Rousso, 'L'organisation industrielle de Vichy', *Revue d'histoire de la deuxième guerre mondiale*, 116 (1979), 27-44; Philippe Mioche, *Le plan Monnet: genèse et élaboration, 1941-1947* (Paris, 1987); Richard F. Kuissel, *Capitalism and the State in Modern France: Renovation and Economic Management in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1981).

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will examine the politics of business in the light of these documents. Special attention will be paid to the apparent continuities between the politics of business during the Popular Front and the politics of business under the Vichy regime. Attention will also be devoted to the lowland that lies between the two peaks of scholarly interest: the period between the suppression of the general strike of November 1938 and the fall of France. It is in this period that the answers to two key questions are to be sought: firstly, what relationship did the 'réorganisation des patrons' of 1936 and 1937 have to the 'revanche des patrons' of 1938 and 1939; and secondly, to what extent had business achieved its objectives before the fall of France. It will be suggested that there was indeed a continuity in rhetoric between the employers' mobilization against the Popular Front and the Vichy regime, but that the social alliances that underlay that rhetoric had changed.