PATTERNS OF MARRIAGE SEASONALITY IN RURAL FRANCE

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In view of the recent articles[1] and comments [2] in Local Population Studies on the seasonality of marriages in certain English parishes, it may be of interest to readers to hear of similar work which has been carried out recently on this topic in France as part of a wider study of the changing role of marriage in local migratory patterns.

There are indeed many aspects of the study of marriage which can be of great importance to the understanding of the dynamics of local population changes and the nature of patterns of social change. Thus, the study of marriages can have not only the pure demographic approach of studies of nuptiality rates, age at marriage and so forth, but also changing social contacts, attitudes and values can often accurately be determined by looking at marriage horizons and marriage between members of different social or occupationa groups. Similarly, the seasonality of marriage is one important aspect of such a study and it is the aim here to illustrate how, over the recent period 1860-1970, and at both the local and national scale, the seasonal pattern of marriages has undergone a series of fundamental changes: and how, by isolating any one period, this pattern can provide a wealth of detail about the rhythm of local social life.

Sources and measurement

The sources used for this study are, at the local scale, the Marriage Registers of a sample of 70 communes (parishes) consulted for the period 1860-1970. At the national scale, information on the monthly distribution of marriages is contained in the Annuaires Statistiques issued by the National Statistical Office. As Mr. Bradley has pointed out, it is very important to measure and graph accurately the information gathered, particularly at the local level where one may be

dealing with very small numbers. Thus, it is much more convenient to make comparisons between periods and places if frequencies are presented in terms of percentages and if, of course, one is duly reticent about implying significant patterns from very small samples. A further point is that it may also introduce considerable exaggeration into the pattern to use the month as a basis of measurement, given that months are of unequal length. This can be particularly important where, as often happens, one day of the week is particularly favoured for marriage (for example, in this study 79% of the marriages considered occurred on a Saturday in 1970, compared with 3.5% for the same area in the 1860s). Thus, in any one year there may be five Saturdays in one month and so this could influence the pattern at the local scale: a completely regular pattern of, say, four marriages every Saturday throughout the year in a parish would, grouped simply by month, show maxima in January, April, July, September and December in 1972, but this would clearly bear no relation to seasonal changes. Although this bias would tend to even itself out over a number of years, it is important to remember this if, for example, one is dealing with one large parish in a single year. Moreover, it is also important in any case to allow for the fact that there are differing numbers of days in a month. Two solutions are presented here: where the information is available, weekly totals may be used (as in Figs. 2 and 3) which is both accurate and provides a sensitive indicator of changes in seasonality; where the information is available only by month, then the quickest way is simply to work out an average number per day for each month. This can then be compared with the average per day for the whole year as illustrated in Fig. 1a. While these methods are, of course, best used on large totals, it is as well to remember the problems involved in using the month as a base.

The changing national pattern of seasonality

Although the basic interest in this study is to look at local patterns, it is important to look briefly at the evolution of marriage seasonality for France as a whole, as this may provide a useful context for later discussion. We see from Fig. 1A that for 1875 the months which exceeded the daily average for the year were January, February, April, June, October and November, whilst in 1969 the situation is greatly altered: the maxima occurring in this case in April, June, July, August and September. Thus the winter maximum of a hundred years ago has been replaced by the summer maximum of today. These changes are clearly linked to the general transition of French

FIG.1A. SEASONALITY OF MARRIAGES IN FRANCE

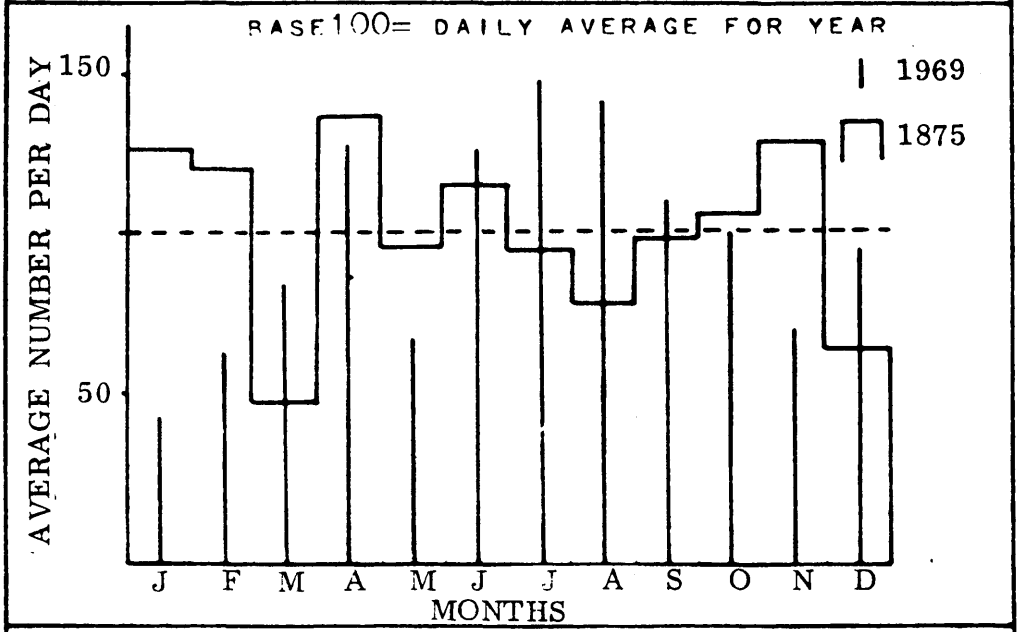
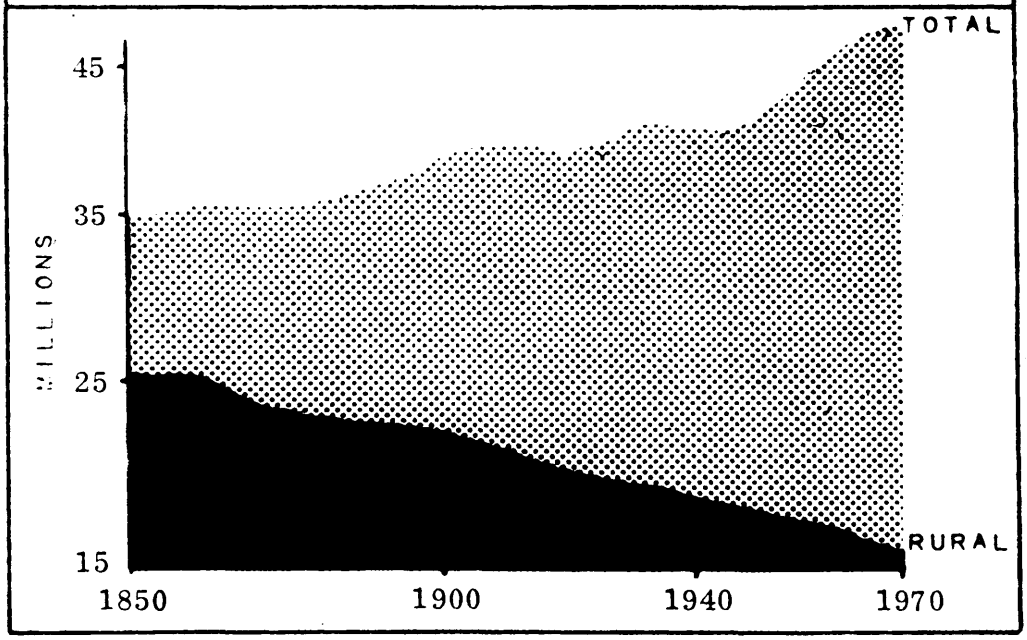


FIG.1B. POPULATION CHANGES IN FRANCE



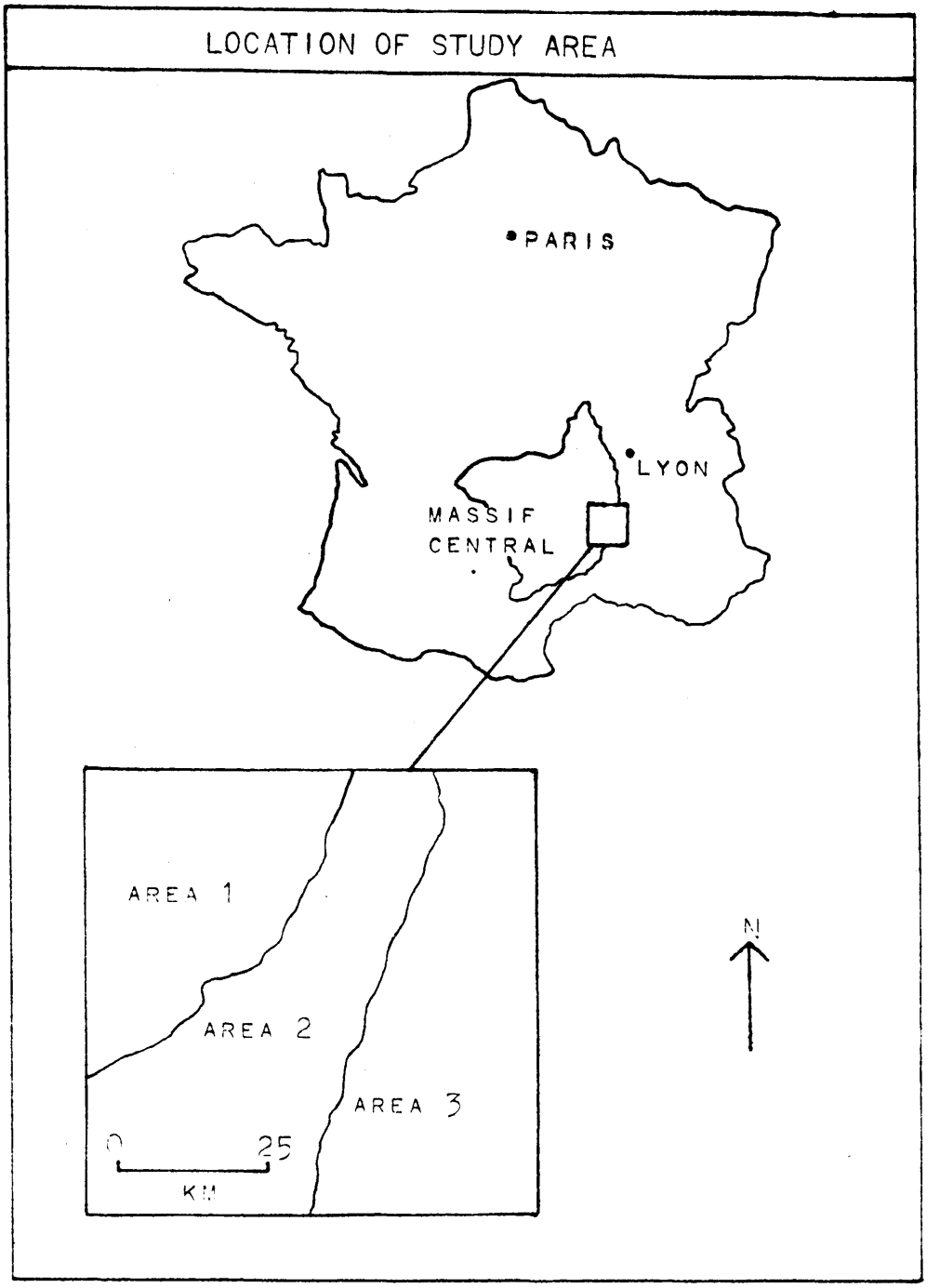
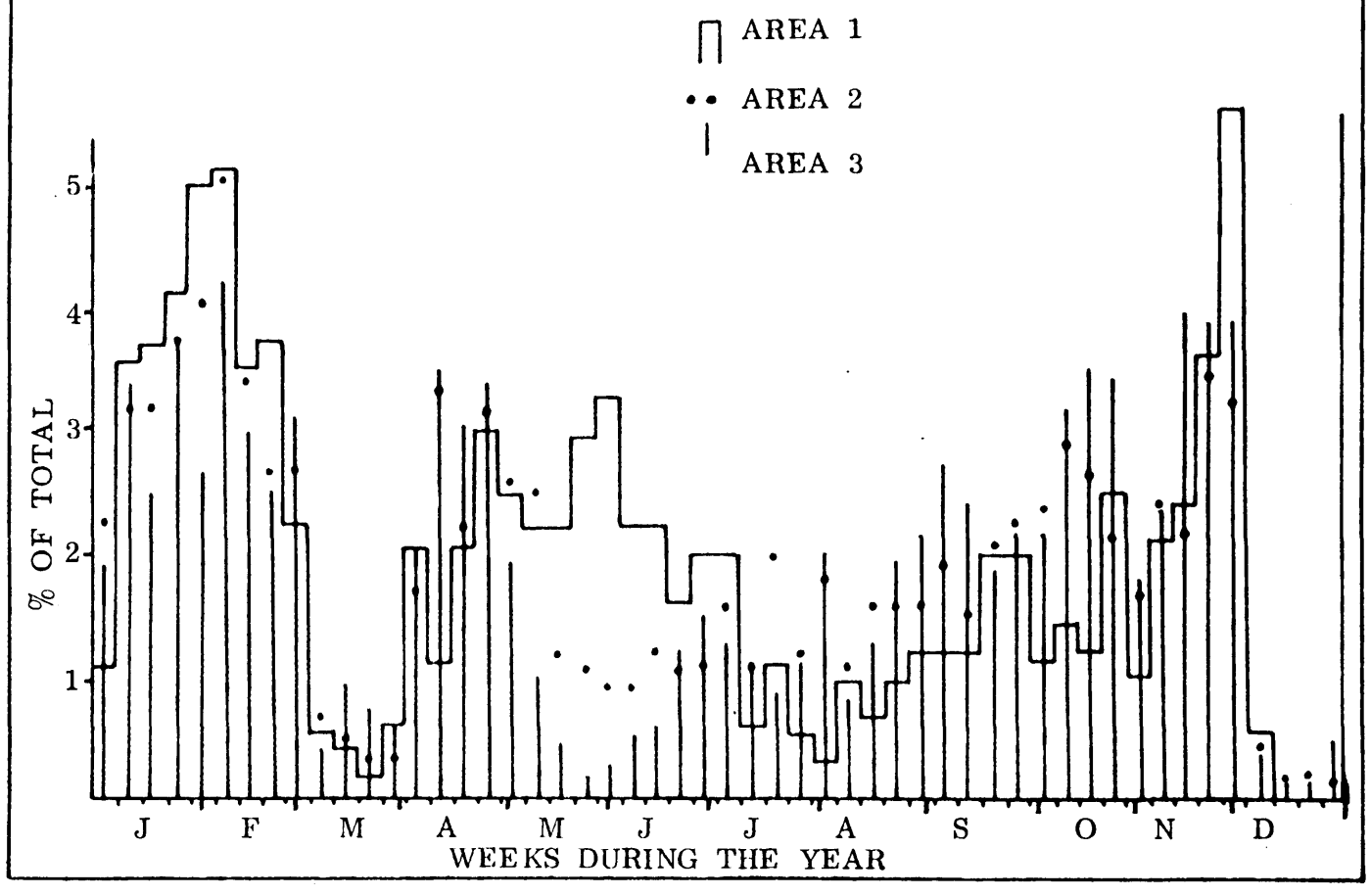


Table 1 : Total Population of Sample Communes

	1876	1968	% Change
Area 1	14136	5645	- 60.07
Area 2	42920	19148	- 55.39
Area 3	19017	9788	- 48.53
Total	76073	34581	- 54.54

FIG. 2 REGIONAL VARIATIONS IN MARRIAGE SEASONALITY 1860s



society from predominantly rural and agricultural to predominately urban. A simple measure of this for comparison is given by Fig.1B which shoes the increasing total population of France and the declining rural proportion, the decline being from 67.5% in 1876 to under 30% at the present moment. Thus, whereas a hundred years ago the summer months were the time of intense activity on the farm with little time for marriage, the present pattern reflects rather the choice of summer as a time of holidays and reliable weather. A further interesting feature of the reversal of these patterns is the changing role of religion: in the 19th century the months of March and December were the minimum months, linked closely to religious festivals during which periods marriage was variously forbidden or discouraged. At the present time neither March nor December is the minimum month. Thus we can see that even at the national scale the study of seasonality can bring out important patterns; and that, differing from the suggestion of Mr. Bradley that in his area seasonal patterns tended to be subdued at the start of the nineteenth century, for France as a whole, and as we shall see for local areas, there were very considerable differences, which were gradually replaced by other patterns depending on different factors but of no less variety.

Influences on the local pattern

Having set out the national context of seasonality of marriage, it is a further aim of this paper to look more closely at a local level at the precise nature of the inter-relationships between the rural economy and the spacing of marriage, bringing out particularly as dominant themes religion, the role of seasonal emigration within the general organisation of agriculture, and the influence of rural depopulation upon social structure. Let us take as an example here three very different but adjacent areas to the west of the Rhone Valley on the fringe of the Central Massif: area 1 is an area of high plateau and past-oral economy in the massif proper; area 2 forms part of the highly dissected and poor Northern Cevennes; and area 3 a lowland area of Mediterranean climate where the main speciality is the vine and, formerly, the silk worm. Figure 2 shows the pattern of seasonality for these three areas during the period 1863-67 and shows that, while the overall pattern of maxima and minima resembles closely the graph already described for France as a whole, there are significant differences at particular times of the year in the 3 regions under study.

FIG. 3 CHANGES IN MARRIAGE SEASONALITY 1860-1970

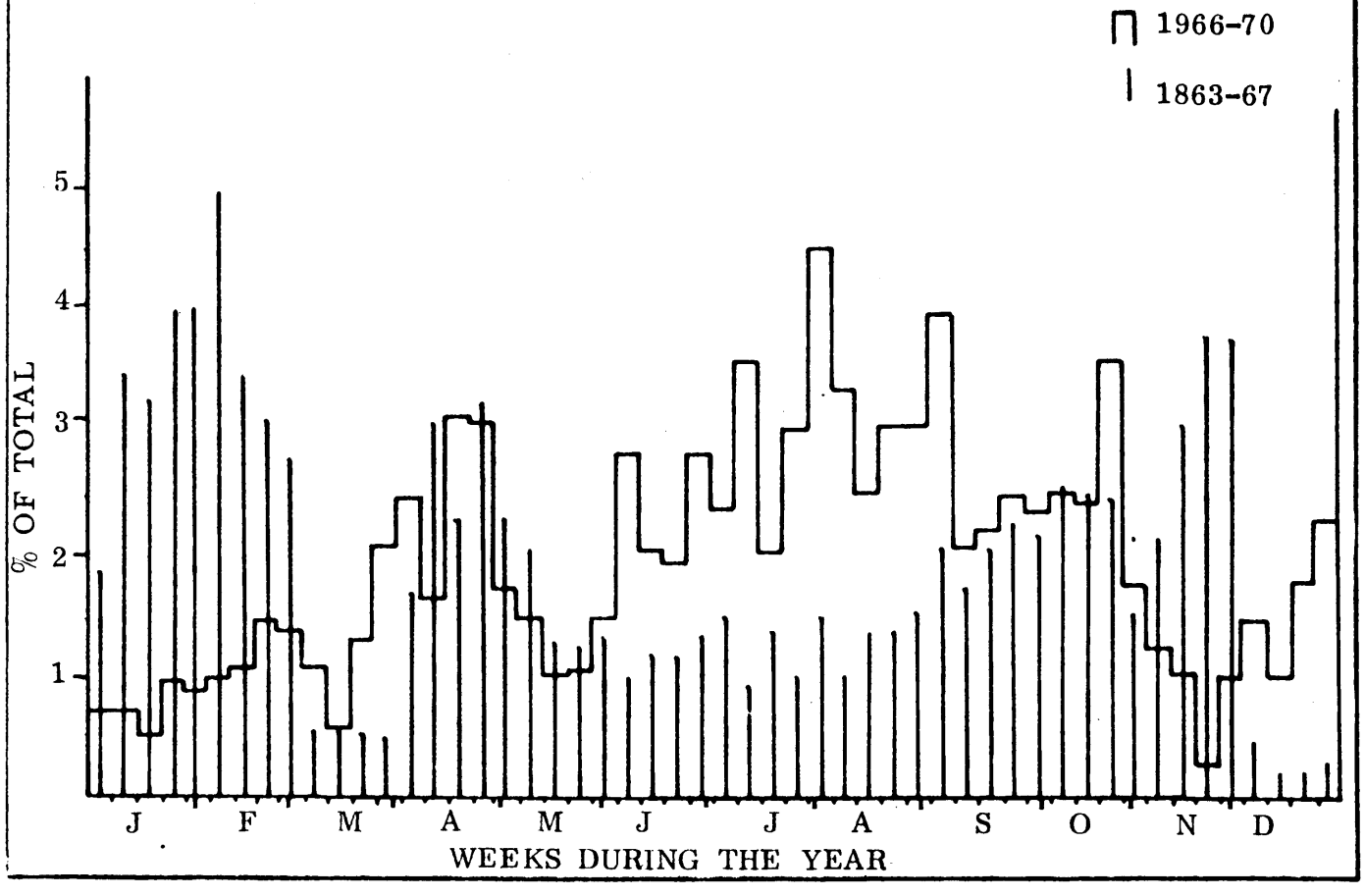
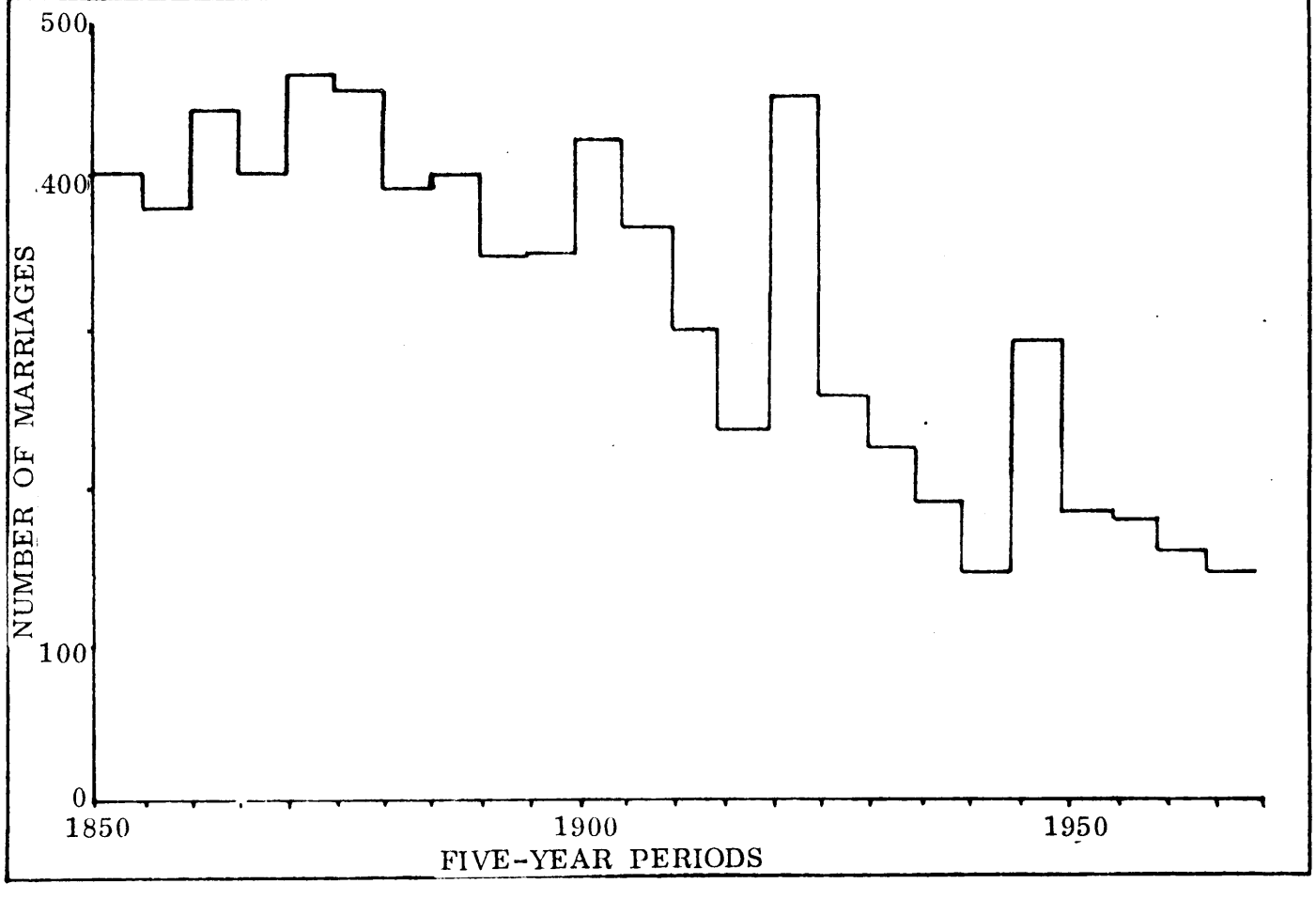


FIG. 4 TOTAL NUMBER OF MARRIAGES IN STUDY AREA 1860-1970



Firstly we see a very vigorous avoidance of the period between the end of February and the start of April, and of the last few weeks of the year: this provides very eloquent testimony to the role of religion in the social life of this largely Catholic area: the influence of the parish priest was always very great and particularly so in area 1, more isolated and backward that the others. It is of further interest, moreover, to note that it is in area three that there existed a small Protestant minority and one can thus attribute the slightly greater frequency of marriage during the minimum periods to precisely this phenomenon. Thus religious differences can have very significant effects on local patterns of this sort.

A second, and very important, aspect of this study is to reveal how intimately the rhythm of social life was tied to the nature of the economic system. We are thus concerned to explain the differences shown on the graph between the three areas, particularly in the period from the beginning of May to the end of June. Three related aspects help to provide this explanation: the nature of the rural economy, the population density and the importance of seasonal emigration. In the high plateau area (Area 1), of dominantly pastoral economy and population densities adequately adjusted to the area's economic potential, this period came at the end of a very long winter when there was still ample time for social events such as marriage. In the lowland area (Area 3), on the other hand, this was a period of intense economic activity linked to the raising of silk worms which were a vital resource for an otherwise impoverished peasant population. Thus, during most of May and early June almost the total workforce was engaged in collecting the mulberry leaves or in the business of raising the worms, which was a very intensive and time-consuming operation. There was clearly little time for marriage, and it is indeed the third week of May which is the lowest period of all.

It is in the second of the areas chosen, the Northern Cévennes, that the influence of overpopulation and seasonal migration are particularly apparent. This was an area of extremely high population densities in relation to its very poor economic base. As in many other areas of France (3), seasonal emigration became a vital element in the local economy, as a response both to the demand for labour elsewhere and to the local surplus population: the emigration of, for example, builders' labourers from the Auvergne and the Limousin to Paris is very well known and, equally the descent from the Alps to the surrounding plains has frequently been discussed. In the area under study, however, the emigration was more localised and took place in

spring and summer. Thus, in May and June, Area 2 saw the departure of hundreds of men and women to work in the silk-growing areas lower down, which provided them with their only source of cash income. This had a major effect on the rhythm of social life. There were, moreover, a host of very complex seasonal migrations from all these areas, which helped to restrict the frequency of marriage all through the summer: not only did the demands of harvest at home restrict the pattern of social activity but also many workers migrated temporarily for hay-cutting and the wheat harvest. Later, towards the end of the summer, the grape harvest attracted numerous migrants, again especially from the overpopulated Cévennes. It was thus at the end of these intense periods of activity on the land and after the return of the temporary migrants that these village communities had again enough time for such exacting social activities as marriage.

Changes in the local pattern

That there were considerable variations between areas in the mid-nineteenth century in the seasonality of marriage has thus been illustrated: marriage was definitely confined to the winter months of relative inactivity in the farming calendar, but there were considerable variations according to the details of the local economy and seasonal migrations. A final aim of this paper is to indicate the value, as has already been done in outline for France as a whole, of the analysis of temporal changes in the pattern to illustrate the response at the local level to patterns of social change. Here we take the period 1863-1970 as this has been a time of very profound changes which have greatly altered the nature of the peasant economy, and in particular entailed massive depopulation, a decline in agriculture and the almost total disappearance of temporary migrations.

Many of the village populations in the study area have declined by up to 75% over the century which has in turn meant the decline in the number of marriages as illustrated in Fig. 4. [4] What this has meant for the rhythm of local social life is shown by Fig. 3 which reveals, for the three areas combined, an almost total reversal of the earlier pattern: the summer now becomes the very clearly favoured period with winter, particularly the earlier months of the year, characterised by very low frequencies. From the religious point of view, while there is still a certain decline during March, this is much less well marked than previously and the former avoidance of December has largely disappeared, reflecting the