

A HISTORY OF CORPORATE OWNERSHIP – FRANCE

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The French model of corporate ownership and control is quite different from the Anglo-American model. It has been described as an insider model because it contains a high degree of concentration of ownership, while the wider dispersion of ownership characterised by the U.K. and U.S. models has been termed an outsider model. Why are there such widely differing models between France, and indeed many Continental European countries, on the one hand, and the U.S. and the U.K., on the other? La Porta, Lopez-De-Silvanes and Shleifer (1998) have advanced the view that ownership in capital markets is concentrated where there is an absence of strong investor protection embodied in the legal system and regulatory arrangements. La Porta *et al.* highlight the role of contemporary institutions but downplay the role of historical factors in shaping the structure of capital markets. The theme of this paper is that historical elements can produce profound shocks and deep after waves, the effects of which move through an economy for many generations fashioning the collective psyche of people in such a way as to present barriers to innovation and change. These historical elements have manifested themselves in events such as the rise and the collapse of the Mississippi System, the introduction of the *assignats* into revolutionary France in the 1790s, the changing role of religious factors (attitudes against usury and trade for example), and the emergence of politico-economic attitudes on the role of state interventionism (Colbertism and its later nineteenth century manifestation through Saint Simonianism, Socialism, etc). Add to these the cultural elements of a strong sense that each generation is just the temporary custodian of the family's *patrimoine* faced with the objective of passing it on in even better shape to the next generation, and one finds a different set of factors that helped shape the development of corporate ownership structures in France.

The financing of a corporation may arise in three ways: (1) bank borrowing; (2) borrowing from the capital market; (3) self-financing through the use of retained profits. Borrowing from the banking sector and the capital markets dilutes the ownership of a corporation. Self-financing, on the other hand, strengthens the concentration of ownership. In France over the last three hundred years historical factors have produced a weak capital and banking structure. Because of these weaknesses there has been, until relatively recently, a significant reliance on self-financing. Self-financing in turn implies that ownership remains concentrated in the hands of individuals and families.

This paper starts with an overview of the current situation relating to corporate ownership in France. From there it moves back to the past to show how the failures of the banking system arising from the collapses of the Royal Bank and the Mississippi Company in 1720 and the *assignats* experiment in the 1790s had deep effects on the emergence of the an efficient banking and capital market structure in France. It will be contended that reliance on the self-financing of corporations was a natural outcome of the difficulties of both the banking system and the capital market. Finally, three examples of the growth of family controlled companies, the automobile manufacturer Peugeot, the cosmetic producer L'Oréal, and the tyre manufacturer Michelin, are presented to provide some support for the underlying theme of the paper. These companies also serve to counter Easterbrook's (1997) view that 'a high concentration of ownership is associated with lesser efficiency'.

The Current Corporate Ownership Structure in France

The ownership of companies in France has frequently been a very hot political issue. In the 1930s the Prime Minister, Edouard Daladier, vehemently criticised the two hundred 'grandes familles' whom he contended were in control of all aspects of French business life as well as the Banque de France, the stock exchange and the press. Daladier's two hundred big families have been shown to be a myth (Anderson, 1965). Nevertheless, a wider range of families does exercise a highly significant part in the ownership of French companies.

Three salient features of France's current corporate ownership structure are (1) concentration of ownership; (2) extensive family ownership; (3) the role of holding companies. In France (2) and (3) are closely linked. Bloch and Kremp (2001) in their recent study of French companies state 'Concentration of direct ownership and voting power is very high in France'. They found that families play a most important role in ownership and voting power 'Around 40% of unlisted firms have, as first shareholder, individuals owning directly more than 50% of the capital. For the CAC 40 firms, individuals are not the largest blockholder, but when they effectively are present as blockholders, they hold around 30% of the voting rights and have the

control in fact.’ (Bloch and Kremp, 2001, 123). A recent French study by Allouche and Amann (1995) showed that, in 1992, 28.3% of the top 1,000 industrial companies were controlled by families (foreigners 23.5% and state 28.2%). Furthermore, when excluding the state and foreign owned companies from the analysis, families controlled 59% of the top 500 industrial companies, an increase of 10% on the 1982 statistics. In December 2002 the business magazine, Le Nouvel Economiste, estimated that the five hundred richest families in France had a fortune of 106 billion euro. Within this group the fifty richest families had assets of 72 billion euro and the ten richest had assets of 43 billion euro.

Additionally, as distinct from the United States, where there has been a predominantly multidivisional corporate structure, there are many holding-company structures controlling large industrial groups in France. Lévy-Leboyer (1980) explained the development of these holding companies as arising from banking and capital market limitations:

...financial constraints, particularly the inability of the banks and the capital markets to cope with businesses’ new requirements, finally brought into being large industrial groups tied together by financial holding companies. (1980, p. 629)

History and Corporate Ownership – An Overview

History is revelatory in identifying many of the key factors that have produced the current corporate ownership structure in France. Analysing this historical evolution and development is a complex task. Those looking for some type of linear progression with newer institutions building on and evolving from older institutions may be disappointed for the last three hundred years embrace a wide range of diverging tendencies. There are many discontinuities. In this respect the history of corporate finance in France is quite distinct from that of the U.K. In the latter country political revolution, involving warring factions, had ended by the end of the seventeenth century and a significant part of the financial revolution had taken place by the third decade of the eighteenth century. In Britain one can see a type of linear progress as institutions built on institutions. Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries British banks and insurance companies became increasingly adept at channelling savings to investors. The

stock exchange efficiently raised finance to fund the borrowing requirements of the Exchequer and to provide capital to the trading companies that were extending Britain's imperial and colonial power. The political system hovered around the centre rarely oscillating excessively to the left. Additionally, and importantly, Britain was not invaded.

France was to have a more tumultuous three hundred year history. During the eighteenth century it was involved in a number of long and expensive wars (The War of the Spanish Succession 1701-14; the War with Spain 1718-20; the War of the Polish Succession 1733-38; the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48); the Seven Years' War, 1756-63; the War for American Independence, 1778-1783; the wars that emerged from the Revolution 1792 to the start of the Napoleonic Wars). It possessed a monarchy until the revolution of 1789, a revolution until the arrival of Napoleon. From there political life experienced the tumult of the restorations of the monarchy and of the Napoleonic dynasty. Add to these the siege of Paris by the Germans in 1870, the commune in Paris when twenty to thirty thousand citizens were killed in a mini-civil war in 1871. The German invasion of 1870 was the prelude to two further invasions during the two World Wars of the twentieth century. These political developments frequently meant that industrial developments had to play second fiddle to the political orchestrations of wars, civil wars and invasions. And yet, notwithstanding these developments on the home soil, France became one of the largest colonial powers of the last three centuries ruling sizeable tracts of land in Africa, North and South America and Asia.

Because France was frequently at war, both internally and externally, the political instability of the country was accompanied by financial instability. Wars and revolutions require financing. This financing in turn created significant state borrowing and debt. Perforce the banking system and the capital market were heavily tapped to provide finance for these wars. As a corollary to this the state's heavy recourse to borrowing left substantially less available for the banks and the capital markets to provide to the private sector. The next two sections show the development of (1) the banking sector and (2) the capital market against this background of long periods of warfare.

The Evolution of the French Banking System

This section highlights three elements in the banking system in the eighteenth century that cast a long shadow over the history of France. These are (1) John Law's Mississippi system; (2) the surrogate banking system provided by the French *notaires*; (3) the *assignats* experience during the French revolution. It will then show the knock-on effects that these developments had for the banking system in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Renaissance Italy, seventeenth century Holland and Sweden, and, belatedly, England, with the establishment of the Bank of England in 1694, grew through the establishment and development of their respective banking systems. While the English banking system grew and helped to finance the war against Louis XIV the French banking system remained underdeveloped to the point that Louis XIV had to rely on the protestant Genevan based bankers – many of whom he had forced out of France through the revocation of the Edict of Nantes - to finance a large part of his budgetary deficit.

The death of Louis XIV essentially left France bankrupt creating an environment in which the Scottish born John Law (1671-1729) could present a new financial architecture aimed at (1) relieving the shortage of money through the establishment of a note issuing bank and (2) reducing the state's indebtedness through the creation of a trading company which would have as one of its objectives the conversion of government securities into equity of the company. Both of these developments were to have a profound effect on banking and the capital markets in France.

The General Bank was established by Law in May 1716 – see Murphy (1997). It was modelled on the Bank of England in that it obtained its banking privileges from the state in return for taking up part of the national debt - part of the outstanding amount of short term *billets d'état*. The early success of the General Bank enabled Law to embark on the second aspect of his macroeconomic strategy, namely the management of the national debt. To do so he needed to create a trading company on the lines of the British trading companies such as the East India Company and the South Sea Company. In August 1717 he established the Company of the

West (Compagnie d'Occident), which was given monopoly-trading rights over French Louisiana - an area representing half of the landmass of the United States today (excluding Alaska). It acquired these trading rights in return for re-structuring, and accepting a lower interest rate, on part of the outstanding amount of *billets d'état*. The Company benefited in that it acquired rights to exploit the agricultural and mineral potential of this huge area. The state benefited in that part of its floating short-term debt was converted into long-term debt, which bore a lower rate of interest. Shareholders in the new company, who swapped *billets d'état* in return for the company's shares, had the prospect of large capital gains if the wealth of Louisiana was properly exploited. The nominal value of each share, which came to be known as *mères*, issued by the Company of the West was 500 livres, but, as they were purchased with *billets d'état*, then standing at a discount of over 70%, it meant that the initial shareholders purchased their shares at a price of around 150 to 170 livres. It took nearly two years for the shares to reach their nominal issue price of 500 livres.

Initially there was little interest in the Company and Law had difficulty in selling its shares. A year after its establishment Law started to use the Company of the West to mount a series of spectacular takeovers and mergers. At the same time he developed the General Bank by ensuring that it was used as the government's bank for the receipt and disbursement of state funds.

In August 1718 the Company of the West acquired the lease of the tobacco farm, while in December it took over the Company of Senegal. In the same month the General Bank's operations were re-organised and it was re-named the Royal Bank, a development showing the extent to which Law had become a key member of the Regent's inner circle.

In May 1719 Law merged the enlarged Company of the West with the Company of the East Indies and China to form the Company of the Indies. Further acquisitions in the form of the Company of Africa and the lease of the Mint were made in June and July of that year. These acquisitions and mergers required financing. Law arranged this through the issue of two tranches of shares known as the *filles*, and *petites filles*. It has already been shown that the *mères*, issued in 1717 on the establishment of the Company of the West, were subscribed for in

billets d'état, which were standing at a very sizeable discount. Effectively they cost around 150 livres in 1717, though issued at a nominal price of 500 livres. The second issue of shares, the *filles*, were issued in June 1719 at 550 livres, a 50 livres premium suggesting wider public interest in the shares after an interval of nearly two years. The share price jumped in July enabling Law to issue a further batch of shares, the *petites filles*, this time at 1,000 livres each.

By the end of July 1719 Law's Company had issued 300,000 shares with a nominal value of 150 million livres. The share price, having jumped from 500 to over 1,000 in July 1719, the stage was set for further leverage of Europe's first major stock market boom. This boom was linked to Law's wish to take-over France's national debt by swapping shares for government securities. The sheer magnitude of this operation proved to be breathtaking.

On August 26, 1719 the Regent presented Law's proposal for the Mississippi Company, as it was popularly known, to take over the tax farms and the remainder of the national debt. Law's plan was to lend the King 1.2 billion livres at an interest rate of 3% so as to repay the national debt. This money would be used to repay the long-term state debts, the annuities (*rentes*), the remaining short-term floating debt (*billets d'état*), the cost of offices (*charges*) that had been or would be suppressed, and the shares of the tax farms.

Under the plan holders of government securities were forced to give up government securities, bearing a 5% rate of interest, while at the same time they were offered the possibility of acquiring shares of the Company yielding far less in terms of dividend but possessing the prospect of sizeable capital gains. With the share price jumping from 2,250 on August 1 to 2,940 on August 14, to 5,000 and over in mid-September, capital gains rather than dividends occupied the minds of most transactors. By these measures Law proposed 'the radical cure' for the French economy. He aimed to transform the Company from a trading company to a trading-cum-financial conglomerate, controlling the State's finances most notably tax collection and debt management.

Using Du Tot and Giraudeau¹ as sources, the sharp rise in the share price during August may be observed. On August 1 the original shares, the *mères*, which, as has been shown, could have been bought for around 150 livres in 1717 stood at 2,750. By August 30 they had risen to 4,100 and by September 4 they were at 5,000 livres, with the *filles* and *petites filles* rising *pari-passu*. The debt holders recognising the prospect of a capital gain were quite happy to transfer their debt into shares rather than bonds. They needed the prospect of an expected capital gain to compensate for the interest reduction on their securities from 4% to 3%. Their difficulty in fact became one of converting quickly enough into the shares of the Company as the price of the shares rose very sharply during September.

Within a three-week period in September/October the Company issued 324,000 shares, of which 300,000 were sold to the public at 5,000 livres a share, amounting in all to 1.5 billion livres. The Company had now started to operate in a different manner to that characterising its operations between August 1717 and August 1719 when it had raised around 106 million through the first three share issues.

The shares reached a 1719 high of 10,000 on December 2. At this point the market valuation of the Mississippi Company was 6.24 billion livres. Concomitant with these developments the banknote issue of the Royal Bank had been increased from 160 million livres in June to 1 billion livres by the end of 1719 as money was lent to existing shareholders to purchase further shares. France was awash with liquidity, particularly after the Company guaranteed a floor price of 9,000 livres a share in early 1720 through the establishment of a buying and selling agency known as the 'bureau d'achat et de vente'. Effectively, the workings of this agency monetized shares.

In February 1720 the Royal Bank and the Company of the Indies were formally merged together. At this juncture, Law, who had been appointed Controller General of Finances, in January 1720, wrote:

“One sees here a sequence of ideas which are interlinked and which reveal more and more the principle on which they are based.” (Law, 1934, iii, 98-99)

For a while the System, in all its unifying beauty, seemed to work. Economic activity boomed, the national debt seemed to be under control, money was plentiful and the interest rate had been driven down to 2%.

Law had created a financial system the long-term viability of which was crucially dependent on the growth of the real economy. There had to be some equilibrium relationship between the financial system and the real economy. For a while a temporary equilibrium existed, as transactors seemed content to remain within the financial circuit trading money for shares, and shares for money. However, once money started spilling too quickly from the financial circuit into the real economy problems arose. The real economy proved to be incapable of generating a sufficient growth in commodities to match the monetary expansion so that the excess money created inflation and balance of payments problems. Law had always believed that the growth in the real economy, spurred on by monetary expansion, would be sufficient to mop up the newly created money. Indeed he went further and argued that monetary expansion would lead to a balance of payments surplus in Money and Trade (1705). For a period Law tried to lock transactors into the financial circuit by a series of measures ranging from prohibitions on the holding of more than 500 livres of specie or bullion, to the demonetization of gold and a phased monthly demonetization of silver. Temporarily these measures worked. But there was still too much liquidity in the System. On May 21, 1720 an *arrêt* was published stipulating that shares were to be reduced by four ninths (from 9,000 to 5,000) and banknotes by half (eg. a banknotes worth 10,000 livres to be reduced to 5,000 livres) between May and December.

This was an attempt to reduce the liquidity of the System thereby bringing the financial circuit back into line with the real economy. Despite the revocation of this May 21 *arrêt* a couple of days later - due to public pressure - the effect on confidence was so great that the System never recovered from it. The price of shares and banknotes fell continuously during the summer (ironically, at this point the shares in the South Sea were rising rapidly) and the autumn of 1720. Law was forced to flee the country, with the aid of the Regent, in December.

However, Law had shown that he was able to conceptualize and establish if only for a short period, a modern non-metallic world at the start of the eighteenth century. It would take economists and financial leaders another couple of centuries to produce for the global economy what Law had briefly achieved in France in France during 1719-20. Du Tot realised the full extent of this achievement:

In this state, this construction was admired by everyone in France and was the envy of our neighbours who were really alarmed by it. Its beauty even surpassed all the hopes that had been placed in it since it made people despise and refuse gold and silver. It was a type of miracle which posterity will not believe. However, it is clear that there was a period, of many months, when no one wanted them [gold and silver]. (Du Tot, 1935, i, 106)

The failure of Law's System produced a very strong reaction against banks, credit and financial innovation. It also heralded a *retour en arrière* for the French financial system to the old one dominated by religious directives controlling the methods of borrowing and lending and the state constituting the main borrower of funds through the creation of rentes (annuities). In this strange financial no man's land where interest could not be explicitly charged, contracts had to be drawn up separating the ownership of savings from the streams of revenue it generated. The *notaires* (notaries) were at the centre of this system. Indeed their role was so central, in the absence of traditional style bankers, that they became surrogate bankers.

The Notaires as Bankers

The credit market in eighteenth century France cannot be interpreted as one in which there was a free flow of funds between surplus and deficit units with the rate of interest acting as an equilibrating factor in the allocation of funds. Religion was a key element in explaining developments here. The usury laws limited the role of the rate of interest. At their most basic the usury laws stipulated that the rate of interest was illegal. However, the needs of trade and commercial life along with the adroitness of canonical lawyers, merchants and notaries created an environment in which interest was charged and paid but never explicitly mentioned by

name. Just as the system of *permission tacites* had evolved to overcome censorship laws and keep France's printing and publishing industry alive in the eighteenth century, so also a tacit jurisprudential structure evolved permitting the *de facto* payment of interest whilst at the same time maintaining the *de jure* ban on it. *Rentes* (annuities) became the *coda* for interest in this environment.

In France the usury laws meant that a lender of funds could not simultaneously stipulate both the rate of return and the duration of the financial contract. Turgot (1766) wrote of this:

You have indeed one method to make the receipt of interest lawful, it is to lend your capital for an indefinite term, and to give up all right to be repaid it, which is to be optional to your debtor, when he pleases, or when he can. If you find any inconvenience on the score of security, or if you foresee you shall want your money in a certain number of years, you have no other course to take but not to lend: It is better for you to deprive this merchant of this most fortunate opportunity, than to commit a sin by assisting him. (Turgot, 1766 [tr.1793])

If a rate of return was covertly stipulated as a *rente* it could not specify a redemption date. This meant that the loan was converted into an annuity redeemable whenever, if ever, the borrower, or his heirs, so deemed. Alternatively, the jurisprudence concealed the rate of return by stipulating specific amounts to be repaid at specific dates suggesting in some way that the lender was not charging a rate of interest but participating in a share of the profits of the borrower. As a result financial instruments were created in the form of *obligations*, *rentes constituées*, and *rentes viagères* to manoeuvre around the usury laws.

The hostility towards money and the rate of interest, allied with the failure of Law's Royal Bank, created an environment in which the standard evolution of banking from goldsmiths to credit creating deposit banks did not take place in France in the eighteenth century. Between 1720 and the Revolution, aside from bankers who discounted bills of exchange – an important media of exchange for merchants - and one or two scattered sightings of banks such as the Caisse d'Escompte, eighteenth century France existed without a formalised banking structure. While the Genevan based protestant bankers became major lenders to the government and big

merchant companies, the question arises as to how the more mundane business of banking was carried out in the absence of clearly constituted banks in France during this century.

Recently Hoffman, Postel-Vinay and Rosenthal (2001) have advanced the thesis that the French notarial system, in particular, the Parisian *notaires*, provided a sophisticated surrogate banking system. Because of the usury laws they were the intermediaries for every transaction embodying an implied rate of interest as they were the only agents who could create financial instruments in the form of *obligations*, *rentes constituées* and *rentes viagères*. The analysis of Hoffman *et al.* shows that the *notaires* acted as bankers by intermediating as agents between savers and borrowers. Because of the information base that they had on their clients they were able to identify creditworthy borrowers (i.e. those with sufficient asset collateral) and therefore provided a stable quasi-banking role. However, notwithstanding the pervasiveness of their intermediating activities, the *notaires* were for the most part only demi-bankers acting as a conduit for savers with surplus funds to borrowers, most notably the state. The *notaires* were usually not principals in these transactions nor did they act as bankers in the sense of lending credit to some multiple of the funds deposited with them. Furthermore most of the lending activity that they arranged was of a long-term nature. Their banking role was narrowed down further in that most of the lending that they intermediated was to the government on a long term basis through the acquisition of *rentes* or loans for the purchase of lands or property. Hoffman *et al.* admit in a footnote that the development of long term credit in both Britain and France initially was more beneficial for the public debt and the housing market than for industry and trade (2001, 361). Whatever about the validity of their reflection on the British situation, it is revealing in that it shows that French lending activity was concentrated in two sectors, the state and real estate.

The thesis of Hoffman *et al.* is that the *notaires* provided a type of golden age in banking acting as highly efficient intermediaries between savers and borrowers. Their information base – they were able to pool and share information up to the early part of the nineteenth century - provided detailed knowledge on the assets of borrowers and whether they were encumbered or not. This information enabled them to provide high quality borrowers for savers with surplus funds. The utilisation of this information provided a stable background for lenders in which

there was a low risk of default. This stability in turn generated confidence in the system and increased the number of lenders prepared to act through the notarial system.

An alternative interpretation is to view this surrogate banking system as costly, highly conservative and inefficient because of the additional complication that the usury laws prevented the rate of interest from allocating credit between savers and borrowers. The notaires operated a highly effective cartel. In 1659 there were 113 notaires in Paris. Despite the growth of Paris the number of notaires remained the same until they rose to 122 in 1859! The system was costly in that transactors were subject to notarial fees and excluded from the market if they did not have appropriate asset backing. The usury laws, which set a ceiling rate of interest of 5%, effectively ensured that the *notaires* faced with excess demand for credit could filter out borrowers by the value of their asset collateral rather than the quality of the intended investment project. It was conservative in that the vast bulk of lending was to the government and property sectors. Incipient industrialists would have found it practically impossible to borrow through the *notaires*. Above all it must be pointed out that the notarial system was not a banking system in the sense of providing a flexible structure for the expansion of credit. All the *notaires* did was to increase the velocity of circulation of money by making it easier for some borrowers to access savers. However, they were not principals in the financial transactions and were in no way capable of lending money against reserves deposited with them.

The Assignats Experiment

The revolutionaries were quick to recognise the strait jacket of the financial system of the Ancien Régime. In October 1789 they repealed the legislation that criminalized the stipulation of a rate of interest on a contract. In July 1796 they abolished the ceiling rate of interest. Between these two dates they set up a paper money system. The revolutionaries, copying in many respects Law's earlier theoretical plans for a land bank in Scotland, financed the early stages of the revolution through the issue of the *assignats*, a paper money initially assigned, or, collateralized, by confiscated ecclesiastical property. Initially, when first issued through a decree of December 19, 1789, the *assignats* bore a rate of interest of five per cent. The interest

payments were quickly stopped and the *assignats* were transformed into fiat money in 1790. The creation of the *assignats* produced heated debate in the French Assembly with partisans of the System maintaining that they were not inflationary financial instruments because they were fully backed by the confiscated ecclesiastical property. Other parliamentarians reminded their listeners of Law and his System. In September 1790 the Abbé Maury melodramatically held up a fistful of banknotes in the Assembly remarking:

Alas! At this moment I hold in my trembling hands many of Law's banknotes, these fictive pledges of an immense and illusory capital, which I drew from a huge depot where they have been held for the instruction of posterity. With sorrow I look at these paper instruments of so many crimes, I see them still covered with the tears and blood of our fathers and I offer them today to the representatives of the French nation as beacons placed on the reefs so as to perpetuate the memory of this massive shipwreck.
(Archives Parlementaires, vol. 19, September 28, 1790, 300)

Maury's warning words were not accepted. After a period of success during 1790-92, when the *assignats* successfully financed the first phases of the Revolution, the over-issue of *assignats* in 1793-4 led to hyperinflation and the collapse of this new feature of the financial system. Taking a price index of 100 in January 1791, White (1989) showed that it rose to 30,411 by March 1796. This hyper-inflationary experience, reinforcing the earlier collapse of Law's System, strengthened a strong anti-banking and financial innovation view in France.

It was not until 1800 that a quasi-central bank, the Banque de France, was established and even here the primary reason for its establishment was to lend money to Napoleon's government. Additionally, jealous of its monopoly issuing powers the Banque de France spent its first fifty years trying to block the creation of other banks. The massive gap between the British and French banking systems may be seen by reading Henry Thornton's discussions in An Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Paper Credit of Great Britain (1802) on the role of the paper credit system in Britain. Thornton, a professional banker, attacked Adam Smith for his lack of understanding of the extent to which banknotes and bank credit had become central to the financing of the British economy. He showed the sophisticated layers of different types of paper credit that had been introduced in Britain to finance economic activity and the central

role of the Bank of England in the provision of credit. The London banks depended on the Bank of England and the country banks in turn depended on the London banks. Furthermore, Thornton showed the ways in which the Bank of England could improve its function as a lender of last resort to the banking system. This at the very time that the Banque de France had just been established!

The legacy of the failure of Law's bank, reinforced by the failure of the *assignats*, intensified the *bas de laine* mentality i.e the hoarding of gold and silver in woollen socks underneath the mattress. Not only did the French hoard gold and silver but they also used specie as the main medium of exchange for a most of the nineteenth century. This strong preference for specie meant that it constituted 95% of the money supply in 1803, 82% in 1845, and 68% in 1870. By 1885 it still amounted to over 52% of the money supply (Cameron, 1967, 116).

The vesting of significant monopoly powers in the Banque de France, along with the extensive use of specie as a circulating medium, meant that the banking system remained underdeveloped for the first half of the nineteenth century. How could a paper based media of exchange system emerge when, up to 1847, the smallest denomination note of the Banque de France was 500 francs? This, as Cameron (1967, 117) has pointed out, was greater than the annual per capita income in France at the time. How could a credit creating banking system thrive when the currency (i.e. gold and silver coins) to deposits ratio was so high? Furthermore the Banque de France systematically blocked the emergence of other banks in order to maintain its monopoly banking powers. It was not until 1848 that legislation was introduced to charter joint-stock banks. The change in legislation enabled the Pereire brothers to establish the Crédit Mobilier in 1852 and in that same year the Crédit Foncier started business. In 1859 the Crédit Industriel et Commercial was created while in 1863/64 the Crédit Lyonnais and the Société Générale were established. Notwithstanding the creation of these banks, cheques were not legally recognized until 1865 and the public still had a strong bias in favour of specie. Cameron concluded on the French banking system up to 1870:

At the end of its 'take-off' period the French economy had approximately the same bank density as Scotland had had in the middle of the eighteenth century. France had fewer bank assets per inhabitant in the mid-nineteenth century than England or

Scotland had had in 1770 and in 1870 had not reached the position that they had held before the beginning of the nineteenth century' (1967, 110)

Specie continued to be a preferential form of money up to World War 1. By 1913 despite the expansion of bank deposits from 17.2% in 1880 to 44.3% of M1 defined as coin, banknotes and bank deposits, they still constituted only a small part of the overall money supply. In the U.S. and U.K. bank deposits represented about 88% of M1 at this point in time. This conservatism with respect to deposit creation had its counterpart in the area of credit expansion.

Gueslin observed that between the 1880s and 1930s companies had to rely on self-financing rather than bank credit '...banking credit remained more or less limited and the financing of the economy came about through the accumulation of savings: primarily as companies directly used parts of their cash flow, but also by the transfer of domestic savings via the financial market' (1992, 63) This meant that the banking sector despite its expansion in the middle part of the nineteenth century continued to play a predominantly conservative role in extending credit to the industrial sector.

Between the two World Wars the imbalance between the development of banks in France and in Great Britain and the U.S. was very great. One indicator of this is the size of bank deposits per caput. Gueslin noted that in 1937 bank deposits per capita amounted to 1,700 francs in France as against 12,000 francs per inhabitant in the U.S. and 10,100 francs in the U.K.

The apparent backwardness of France can be explained by the lesser importance there of bank deposits, the existence of channels for financial savings, the competition of the savings banks ...and by the probable existence of hoarding, reflecting the still essentially rural nature of the country (Gueslin, 1992, 87).

In Gueslin's view 'It was only after 1966, and not without difficulty, that the commercial banks of France were really able to flourish'. The road, from John Law's Royal Bank in 1720 to an efficient commercial banking system in France in 1966, had been a long one.

Capital Market Developments

As has been shown, over-borrowing by Louis XIV left France effectively bankrupt and created the conditions for John Law to embark on the most dramatic macroeconomic experiment of the eighteenth century. The apparent success of his Mississippi System showed the potential for an economy to operate without metallic money and to innovate with respect to re-structuring the national debt. Fears that Law had discovered the Philosopher's Stone led the British to follow suit and use the South Sea Company to re-structure the public debt. The strong anti-banking mentality that arose from the collapse of the Royal Bank in 1720 was accompanied by a strong official reaction to joint stock companies. Again the events of 1720 were central to this reaction.

Ironically, in a bid to corner the market for loanable funds, the South Sea Company pressurised the British government to introduce the Bubble Act of 1720. The Act nullified bubble companies that had been established without joint stock charters from Parliament. It backfired in the face of the South Sea Company, for, in precipitating a collapse of the smaller bubble companies, it forced holders of such fallen stock to sell South Sea in order to pay for these losses. These sales in turn caused the price of the South Sea Company to collapse. The far greater consequence of the Bubble Act was that it effectively prevented British companies from obtaining joint-stock charters for more than a century. This remained the situation in Britain until the repeal of the Bubble Act in 1825 and the introduction of the Companies Act – popularly known as the Limited Liability Acts – in 1862.

It was a similar, if not longer, story in France. From 1721 onwards, due to the collapse of Law's Mississippi Company, it was particularly difficult for companies to obtain full limited liability status. Investors, wishing to form joint stock companies, could only do so by acquiring permission from the government and undergoing a cumbersome process of establishing their charters through complicated legal procedures.

Through the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century French jurisprudence confined, all but a few companies, to two legal structures:

- (1) Simple partnerships (*Sociétés en nom collectif*)
- (2) Limited partnerships (*Sociétés en commandite*)

In the simple partnerships all partners were equally liable for the firm's debts. In the case of the limited partnerships the 'sleeping partner' (the *commandite*) who subscribed the capital only risked the amount that he subscribed, whereas the active partner or partners assumed unlimited liability. For example, the Irish born economist Richard Cantillon, who made a fortune out of the Mississippi System, ensured that he was the 'sleeping partner' so that his liability was limited to the capital that he subscribed to his bank (Murphy, 1986).

The simple and limited partnerships were unsatisfactory corporate structures for the development of large sized companies. Owners and managers did not want to face the problem of unlimited liability. Additionally, there were very high transaction costs for partners wishing to withdraw their capital. Say and Chailley remarked about the previous system which required companies to have government authorisation 'This was really a deplorable system either because of the slowness that it entailed in the establishment of companies, or, because of its arbitrariness, or, because, in the case of bankruptcy, shareholders blamed the government, and, believed themselves entitled to demand it to compensate them for their losses'. (1892, ii, 887)

The earlier change in the British legislation, along with the incipient financing needs of the newly created railroads, led to the French following the British example through the introduction of the Limited Liability Acts (*Loi sur les sociétés*) by virtue of the Law of July 24, 1867. This Act ensured that companies could be established freely under a limited liability charter without having to seek the formal and costly authorisation of the Conseil d'Etat. The new act encouraged the growth of limited liability companies but the ability of these companies to tap the capital market was limited. Aside from railway companies domestic French companies had difficulties in initially attracting French investors. The new act encouraged the growth of limited liability companies but the ability of these companies to tap the capital market was constrained. Aside from the railway companies domestic French

companies appear to have found it difficult to attract French investors. Lévy-Leboyer has focused attention on the relative immaturity of capital markets in France as against those of the U.S. and U.K. in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century. This lack of maturity prevented mergers developing to produce growth in the industrial sector. He observed:

Before 1913 and during World War I, the volume of security issues and the number of mergers remained rather low-probably because of widespread prejudice against industrial shares and the lack of experience in marketing these securities on the part of banks and brokerage houses, which had previously dealt primarily in railroad bonds, public utilities and foreign securities. (1980, 600)

In pre-World War I France there was a tendency on the part of French people to invest in government bonds or foreign securities rather than in equities. A German remarked at the time ‘If they do not succeed in changing the attitudes of the higher classes of the population, then nothing will stop France from becoming a nation of rentiers. The organization of her banking system is well designed to produce such an outcome’ (Gueslin, 1992, 72). The oral tradition in France provides many stories of ancestors who lost fortunes in railway shares and loans to Russia and other eastern European countries. Trunks full of these useless shares and bonds are to be found in family attics and in junk shops.

Bonin, writing of the Belle Epoque period from 1895-1914, noted that the majority of companies ‘...remained hostile to external capital, to increases of capital, to borrowing and to the banks. Self financing dominated (two thirds in 1913) due to profits, the quick amortization of capital expenditure, financial reserves and a treasury the abundance of which was revealed by the expansion of bank deposits’ (1988, 40). Using Teneul and Lévy-Leboyer’s estimates Gueslin concluded that ‘...even if there were some exceptions, most investment on the eve of the First World War did come from undistributed profits’. (1992, 81)

Conclusion on Historical Elements influencing Corporate Ownership

By this stage the main themes of this paper have started to emerge. For a great part of its three hundred year history since the rise and fall of John Law's Mississippi System, France has been underbanked and has had a weak capital market. The stock market crash of 1720 involved the complete destruction of the Royal Bank's banknotes and created considerable hostility to banks, credit and financial innovation. This anti-banking mentality is implicit in Turgot's great work Réflexions sur la formation et la distribution de la richesse (Reflections on the Formation and the Distribution of Wealth), first published in 1766. The Réflexions introduced the concept of capital into economics and showed the link between savings and investment in the generation of economic growth. It was to have a profound influence on the theory of capital formation in the 19th century. Yet, for all its brilliance, Turgot missed out because his analysis of the process of capital formation was confined to the time warp of eighteenth-century France, an economy in which banks did not exist and in which the capital market was the exclusive preserve of the government. Turgot maintained that savings financed investment and that savings were generated by abstention from consumption expenditure. He saw no role for the banking system in this process of capital formation. Indeed neither the words bank or credit appears in the Réflexions. Thus we are left with the paradox that one of the great books on capital formation has only a very elementary link with modern works on corporate finance. Turgot's strong antipathy towards banks, which started with his first economic writing pillorying John Law and his System (1749), was symptomatic of eighteenth-century French attitudes towards money, banks, credit and financial innovation.

Add to this antipathy, the hyperinflationary experience created by the *assignats*, and the French public's desire to use specie rather than money created by banks becomes clearer. The heavy reliance on specie as a medium of exchange made it difficult for banks to emerge. In turn their ability to expand credit was limited by their difficulties in building up sufficient reserves of specie to create deposits. This is not to say that there were no banks operating in France in the first half of the nineteenth century but that their influence was relatively small. Even the '*haute banque*' which started to pioneer the art of merchant banking in the early part of the nineteenth century was so '*haute*' that it did not cater for most of the emerging industrial sectors. It

concentrated on investments in the railways, real estate, public works (roads, bridges, canals) and insurance.

Meanwhile the stock market, aside from financing the government, had difficulties in generating equity issues because of the legal restraints that prevented the creation of limited liability companies up to 1867. Even after this companies did not use the capital market intensively. A great deal of the later nineteenth century French investment in the stock market was in railway stocks and foreign investments.

The difficulties that the banks and the stock market experienced up to the middle of the nineteenth century help to explain why France came late to the industrial revolution and why, against such a background, it is not surprising to find family ownership, often concealed through a wide network of holding companies, exercising such a sizeable role in the corporate ownership structure. The difficulties of borrowing from the banking system and raising money through the stock market created a tradition of reliance on self-financing. Financing in this way made it easier to keep the company in the family and provides one explanation as to why family ownership had a greater presence in the French corporate landscape than in the Anglo American world.

Finding companies that span the three hundred years that we are investigating which might fit this mould is a difficult task. It is the nature of companies to rise or fall, to be taken over or merged. Few remain in the same direct ownership over a prolonged period of time. One company that remained in the same family ownership was the printing and publishing company, Didot, which later became Firmin-Didot. Founded in 1698 it remained in business for three hundred years. It was a major book publisher, it was the company that printed the *assignats* during the Revolution, and it was a publishing house always to the fore in the area of printing technology – it was the first to introduce, for example, the Stanhope press in France in 1818 (Jammes, 1998). Throughout its long history the predominant form of financing for Didot was through the use of retained profits. Even when it issued shares it was only to family members for the purpose of facilitating the transfer of ownership from one generation to another.

Three companies with a strong family involvement and a corporate history spanning a hundred years or more have been selected to show the reliance they had on self-financing. They all started with simple products, a hair dye, a rubber ball and a pepper mill. From these simple origins they have developed into global companies in which descendants of the founders still have very sizeable holdings and representation in the management and direction of the companies. The companies are L'Oréal, Michelin and Peugeot. A sample of three does not prove the thesis of this paper but I believe that they are illustrative of a trend in French corporate life where family ownership is still so strongly embedded. They are also three of the most powerful and profitable French companies, employing a total of three hundred and seventy thousand workers. Because they have been family owned and controlled companies it is difficult to penetrate into the decision making of these companies. Families are discreet and, in many cases, reluctant to open their archives to the public. One way of assessing these companies is to examine the archives on these companies maintained by one of their bankers, the Crédit Lyonnais. These archives show the assessments of this bank's financial analysts towards these companies over a long period of time.

L'OREAL

L'Oréal is one of the leading cosmetics manufacturers in the world. In 2002 with a labour force of nearly 50,000 it had sales of 14.3 billion euro and had a market capitalisation amounting to 39 billion euro. The origins of L'Oréal trace back to 1909 when a simple partnership trading as Schueller and Sperry was established to sell a newly created product for dyeing hair. The name of the company summed up its activities The French Company for the Harmless Dyeing of Hair (La Société Française de Teintures Inoffensives pour Cheveux). Starting with a capital of 135,000 francs it was transformed into a limited liability company (société anonyme) in 1939 by a merger with Foncière Driant under the name Société l'Oréal. The new company had a capital of 7 million francs. In 1950 it merged with Monsavon, a company that it would later sell to Procter and Gamble. In 1953 its turnover was 60 million francs with net profits of 1.85 million. Over the next fifty years it grew at a very fast pace so that by 2002 turnover had increased to 14.3 billion euros and net profits to 1.2 billion euros. This performance has made it one of the outstanding shares on the French stock exchange.

With such a huge growth it might be natural to expect a wide diffusion of ownership of the shares of the company. This is not the case with closely held shares accounting for 352 million of the 655 million shares outstanding. Its founder, Eugène Schueller, and more recently his daughter, Ms. Liliane Bettencourt, since the death of her father in 1957, have been the major shareholders. In 1967 analysts at the Crédit Lyonnais estimated that Madame Bettencourt owned over 50% of the capital of the company (CL Etude 9011/4, February 9, 1967) at a time when its turnover amounted to about 295 million francs and its market capitalisation was 528 million francs. She and her family currently own 51% of Gesparal (Nestlé control the other 49%), which in turn owns 54% of L'Oréal. Though her ownership share of the company has been reduced she still has over twenty five per cent of a far larger company with, as noted above, turnover of 14.3 billion euro in 2002. L'Expansion valued her fortune at 13.7 billion euro in 2002.

The difficulty the company had borrowing from the banking system in its early days may be observed from the caution that its bankers had lending it money in 1951 shortly after its takeover of Monsavon.

The conclusion of the Crédit Lyonnais's analyst was:

A slowing down of its sales could quickly place the Company in difficulties: this slowdown has already manifested itself for some of the Oréal lines (permanent waves, hair dyes, Ambre Solaire, shampoos, etc.). The Company has announced some cutback measures: reductions in seasonal employments, and a cutback of 20% on the publicity budget but overhead costs have not been noticeably reduced the Company contending that the two merged businesses cannot use the same sales representatives and that reductions in the publicity budget will take time. (CL, 5 July 1951)

The analyst obviously did not like the amount spent on advertising – a sine qua non of the cosmetics business - commenting on its 'flashy publicity' ('une publicité tapageuse'). Though he recommended that the bank should lend to L'Oréal he expressed the view that it should be of a short term rather than a long-term duration.

Faced with conservative bankers who found it difficult to detect the growth of a business in this perceived doubtful area of ladies fashion ('la mode féminine') the Schueller/Bettencourt family concentrated to a significant extent on self-financing to meet its capital expenditure requirements:

For the period 1971-74 the group l'Oréal has an important investment programme amounting to a total of nearly 330 million francs. Its financing will be easily assured by the recent borrowing of 75 million francs and by self-financing (depreciation + retained profits 1970: about 81 million francs). No numerical increase in capital is expected, particularly because the level of indebtedness is only about 30 per cent of the group's permanent capital. (CL Etude 9011/8, 26 Mai, 1971).

The reliance on self-financing provided L'Oréal with a strong balance sheet that enabled it to borrow from the banking system to finance new acquisitions. By the 1970s 'ladies fashion' had become recognized as a very strong growth market and L'Oréal was well positioned to become the global fashion leader that it has since become.

PEUGEOT

Peugeot is the leading French constructor of automobiles. It is the second largest automobile company in Europe. In 2002 it employed over 190,000 workers and produced sales of 54.4 billion euro. Peugeot, as a family controlled company, has had a long and fascinating history. The origin of the Peugeot manufacturing dynasty stretches back to the water mill construction business of Jean Pequignot Peugeot in the eighteenth century. An ability to adapt to new trends and technologies has always been the hallmark of this family. In 1815 the brothers Jean-Pierre and Jean Frederic Peugeot teamed up with Jacques Maillard-Salins to run a steelworks and a saw blade factory in the area of Montbéliard. In 1842 Jean-Frédéric invented the peppermill, still an essential element of the average kitchen. But this was only one of many ironmongery objects that the company specialized in. Saws, razors, sewing machines, clocks, stays and hoops for crinoline skirts etc were produced in the factory. Its ironmongery experience led to it

producing the spokes of bicycle wheels and this in turn led to it becoming the biggest bicycle manufacturer in France. Bicycle production in turn led to automobile production.

In 1896 Armand Peugeot established the ‘Société Anonyme des Automobiles Peugeot’ despite the misgivings of some members of the family who refused to allow him for a further fourteen years to use the Peugeot ‘lion’ logo. The nominal capital of the company was 800,000 francs divided into 800 shares of 1,000 francs each. 350 shares were granted to Armand Peugeot as a payment for ‘his contribution in bringing in the factory at Audincourt, the patents, cars in the process of production, leases, etc’ (CL November, 1908). In 1898 the nominal capital was increased to 2,400,000 francs through the creation of another 1,600 shares of 1,000 francs each.

This increase in capital was to help finance the establishment of a new factory at Lille. By 1900 Peugeot was producing the Peugeot Phaeton Type 28 with a speed of 35 kilometers an hour. Over its first ten years the company’s balance sheet showed losses alternating with profits as the technology of the automobile industry underwent sizeable transformations as the following table shows:

<u>Year</u>	Profits/Losses (Francs)
1896/7	-53,000
1897/8	169,000
1898/9	360,000
1899/0	532,000
1900/1	-345,000
1901/2	-1,001,000
1902/3	464,000
1903/4	827,000
1904/5	315,000
1905/6	1,164,000
1906/7	1,585,000

The large losses experienced between 1900-1902 were due to losses incurred on outdated models and heavy depreciation of the stock of spare parts for these models, as well as losses on the hiring of commercial vehicles. Over the twelve-year period from 1896 to 1907 the company made profits of 3,547,000 of which 2,104,000 francs (59%) were distributed as profits and 1,443,000 (41%) put into reserves. From this it may be seen that from the very start Peugeot had a policy of re-investing a considerable part of its profits. So was Peugeot, at this stage of its existence, a company that could be considered as a good lending opportunity for the bank? The analysts of the Crédit Lyonnais considered that the industrial and financial situation of the company was 'good and solid'. They then qualified this by noting 'Nevertheless because of the risks inherent in the automobile industry arising from the intense competition both from French and international companies, the company is not guaranteed to produce regular profits in the future' (CL, November 1908, p. 33). They were correct in this assessment because survival in the automobile industry at this time was difficult due to technological shocks ranging from changes in engine and chassis types to transformations in assembly line techniques.

The Peugeot family almost lost control of the company in the late 1920s due to financing problems. The Crédit Lyonnais blamed this policy on the arrival of three newcomers to the company between 1923-29 - Lucien Rosengart (1923-28) and Ricardo Gualino and Albert Oustric between 1928-30. Rosengart briefly took over, as Managing Director from Robert Peugeot as a result of the latter's long illness. Rosengart, described as someone who '*passait pour avoir des idées originales en matière de construction automobile,*' appears to have changed the company's policy to one of expanding dividends at the expense of making sufficient provision for depreciation and increasing reserves. The analyst at the Crédit Lyonnais argued that rapid technological progress created the need for continuous re-tooling of factories suggesting that annual depreciations of 20 million francs should have been made rather than the 12 to 13 million francs as practiced between 1925-26 to 1928-29 at a time when dividend payments had been annually increased from 10 to 21 million francs. Rosengart was forced to resign in January 1929. Peugeot, in need of financial assistance, linked up with Gualino and Oustric. This was to be a very short arrangement for the bankruptcy of the latter's bank in 1930 led to considerable losses at Peugeot. The family took back control of the

company appointing three out of the five board directors - Robert Peugeot, Jean-Pierre Peugeot and Jules Peugeot.

The brief flirtation with bankers such as Oustric, allied with the temporary move away from a policy of heavy reliance on self-financing, created a near catastrophic result for the Peugeot family in the early 1930s. This experience appears to have hardened the family to returning to its tried and tested policy of large-scale reliance on self-financing. Chadeau, describing how Peugeot emerged as the market leader between 1932-40 in France focused on the self-financing strategy of the company:

...Peugeot's leadership decreed that each model launched had to be profitable in its own right, rather than as apart of a range. Whatever the rationale, the strategy made self-financing feasible and left family ownership intact. (1993, 195)

Loubet observed that up to 1963 it is clear that Peugeot gave priority to reducing indebtedness or not taking on debt, quite the contrary to the approach of state owned companies, Simca and Renault (Loubet, 1995: 81). By the 1970s Peugeot was sufficiently large for it to acquire 90 per cent of Citroen's capital and then in 1977 it bought out Chrysler's European operations. Peugeot now ranks as the second biggest European car manufacturer after Volkswagen. Notwithstanding the acquisitions and mergers of Peugeot and the use of dynamic outsiders such as Jacques Calvet and Jean-Pierre Folz as CEOs, the family's holding in Automobiles Peugeot currently amounts to 27 per cent. Even more significantly the Peugeot family controls over 40% of the voting rights. The family's wealth was estimated at 2.67 billion euro in 2002 by L'Expansion. Thierry Peugeot took over the co-chairmanship of the company, alongside Jean-Martin Folz, shortly after the death of Pierre Peugeot in December 2002, continuing the strong representation by the family in the direction of the company.

MICHELIN

Michelin is Europe's biggest manufacturer of tyres. It employs around 128,000 workers who produced sales of 15.7 billion in 2002. The history of Michelin traces back to 1829 when a

young Scotswoman, Elizabeth Pugh Barker, a niece of the Scottish scientist MacIntosh, married Edouard Daubree. The new Madame Daubree used the rubber solution, discovered by her uncle, to make playing balls for her children. The use of rubber in this way encouraged two cousins, Aristide Barbier and Nicolas Edouard Daubree, to set up, in 1832, a small factory using vulcanized rubber products for the manufacture of seals, belts, valves and pipes that could be used in agricultural machinery. In 1889 André and Edouard Michelin took over their grandfather, Aristide Barbier's agricultural equipment business. Edouard Michelin diversified the business into the manufacture of tyres and managed the company for the next fifty years. By the time of his death in 1940 he had built it into a company employing 25,000 employees. Today the Michelin family is estimated to own 25 per cent of the company and its wealth in 2002, has been estimated at 1.1 billion euro.

Ownership and control of the company was kept in the family through the use of founder's shares and strict rules as to who could hold these shares. In 1928 these rules stipulated how shares would be kept in the family:

...they [holders' shares] may be passed on to descendants or their relations up to the fourth degree [of consanguinity] or to someone who is already a shareholder. In all other cases the transfer is subordinate to the agreement of the Inspection Board and its managers, and, in default of this agreement, to the right of preemption that is formally reserved to the other shareholders. (CL, 4908/3, Mai, 1930)

At the same time as the AGM voted in favour of this ruling, Etienne Michelin was made a co-managing director of the company alongside his father. The growth of the business along with its capital-intensive nature did mean that that the Michelins needed to access outside capital as well as use retained profits. This they did through the issue of long-term bonds. This in turn caused problems for their bankers because of their limited access to information on the company's balance sheet. In 1930 when Michelin was seeking a loan of 200 million francs the analysts of the Crédit Lyonnais attempted to uncover the financial situation of the company so as to determine whether the bank would provide some of the capital required. It is obvious from reading the analysts' report of May 1930 that it was difficult determining the profitability

of the company, which, because of its partnership status, was not obliged to publish any public accounts. The analyst did provide the following for the period 1925-28:

<u>End year</u>	<u>Profits Distributed</u>	<u>Amounts put aside in Reserves</u>
	<i>Francs millions</i>	
1925	29	29
1926	31	126
1927	58	58
1929	60	60

Assuming that the banking analyst had access to part of the company’s accounts – although he did state that he did not know how this ‘réglement de l’exercice’ had been compiled - the above statistics show that Michelin appeared to have a policy of retaining a very significant amount of its profits. The retention rate amounted to 50% of its profits in the years 1925, 1927 and 1929. In 1926, on the back of very significant growth, it retained 126 million francs of its profits, over four times the amount it retained in 1925. The analyst concluded that ‘the development of the business has been made almost exclusively by recourse to retained profits and the management appears to be very prudent’. (CL 4908/3, May 1930, p. 7)

By this stage Michelin, still a family business (‘une affaire de famille’) had become the dominant manufacturer of tyres in France – its main factory at Clermont Ferrand was producing 4 to 5 million tyres annually - and it was exporting more tyres than its competitors in the United States.

In 1920 Michelin had borrowed 73.4 million francs at 6%. In 1930 it was successful in borrowing 300 million francs at 4.5% repayable from 1931 to 1960. In 1946, with its main factory at Clermont Ferrand badly damaged by Allied bombing, Michelin went back to the banks with a request to borrow 500 million francs. The banking analysts threw their hands in the air in trying to make sense of the accounts provided The ‘réglement de l’exercice’ which had shown results of as high as 126 million francs in 1927 had dropped to 6 million in 1934 and then risen to a high of 40 million in 1939! Because of the lack of knowledge on the

distributions of profits to the shareholders and the management the balance sheet was impossible to decipher properly.

The extent of Michelin's use of self-financing may be seen from a further report by the Crédit Lyonnais in 1959 when Michelin was contemplating an issue of bonds to help finance its long term investment. The investment programme envisaged expenditure between 1958 and 1963 of 55.4 billion old francs. Of this sum 75% was to be met by self-financing.

Though now a publicly quoted company the Michelin family still owns twenty five per cent of the company. The reliance on self-financing has been a profitable one for members of this family.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that historical phenomena have had a major impact in the determination of France's corporate ownership structure. Corporate finance is generated principally from three sources – banks, the capital market and self-financing. If we consider them as the three furrows leading to corporate investment then history shows that two of these furrows, the banks and the capital market, were subject to considerable upheaval rendering them inoperable as channels for corporate finance for a long period in France's corporate history. The major financial shocks arose as a result of the rise and collapse of John Law's Mississippi System and the hyper-inflationary experience generated by the assignats. These events not only created a strong anti-banking and financial innovation attitude but they also encouraged a specie holding mentality amongst the French that made it difficult for banks to develop fully even after the establishment of the big multi-branch banks such as the Crédit Lyonnais and the Société Générale in the 1860s. Faced with restricted access to the banks and capital markets, business entrepreneurs had to rely on self-financing as a method of growing their business. Self-financing in turn enabled these entrepreneurs and their descendants to retain sizeable shareholdings in the family controlled business. Hence, from an historical perspective, it is not surprising to see French families owning such a large proportion of French

corporations. Examples of this reliance on self-financing drawn from the experiences of the Bettencourt/Schueller, Michelin and Peugeot families have been shown above. Furthermore this style of ownership ties in with the French mentality that asset ownership is an inter-generational phenomenon. The objective of holding wealth is to pass on to the next generation assets that have risen in value.

There are of course other variables that help explain the high degree of concentration of corporate ownership by families in France. One of the most important amongst these is the French approach to the financing of pensions. The absence of funded pension schemes has led to a far lower profile by pension funds and assurance companies in the French stock market. In 1997 pension funds and assurance companies constituted 49% of household savings in the United Kingdom and 30% in the United States as against 18% in France. The current industrial unrest in France is exactly about this issue with trade unions arguing that it is the state that should provide long and generous pensions out of general taxation. The continuation of this pension fund policy will imply, given the demographic structure, that the percentage of GDP devoted to retirement payments will rise from 12 per cent at present to 16 per cent by 2040. The consequences of this for taxation are probably unsustainable in the long run. If so, there will be increasing emphasis on funded pension schemes which will produce greater investment by pension funds and assurance companies in the French stock market. This may lead to a dilution of corporate ownership along the lines that we have witnessed in the U.K. market in the twentieth century.

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ⁱ Du Tot, loc. cit; Giraudeau 'Variations exactes de tous les effets en papier, qui ont eu cours sur la place de Paris, a commencer au mois d'Aout 1719 jusques au dernier mars 1721' in the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, Ms. 4061.