In the League of Nations series at the Quai d'Orsay archives there is a document announcing the 1917 foundation in Paris of the Société Proudhon, chaired by French deputy Jean Hennessy. The Société's aim was to "help create a Society of Allied Countries now at war against militaristic empires. In response to imperial conspiracy, the Society will put forth a federation of democracies." During the First World War dozens of groups and hundreds of private citizens in almost every Western country produced similar texts stating their aspirations for lasting peace. There is thus nothing surprising in finding archival documents from eccentric and not-so-eccentric groups advocating an alliance of democracies against autocratic countries, a supranational organization to do away with war, or a parliament of mankind to bring lasting peace on earth.\(^1\)\(^2\)

\(^1\) Archives du ministère des Affaires étrangères [hereafter MAE], Société des Nations [hereafter SDN], 14, fol. 72-76.

For many reasons, however, the Société Proudhon was different from other groups advocating an international structure dedicated to lasting peace. First, the Société linked itself explicitly with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's views. While Proudhon is generally remembered for his well-known socialist motto "Property is theft!" his views on federalism, expressed in his 1863 book *Du principe fédératif et de la nécessité de reconstituer le parti de la Révolution*, greatly influenced modern political theory. Second, Jean Hennessy's group linked domestic and international issues in a unique way through the doctrines of federalism and regionalism. Its successive name changes — *Ligue d'action régionaliste*, then *Société Proudhon*, and finally *Ligue pour l'organisation de la Société des Nations* — illustrated this imbrication of the national and the international. Members of the Société Proudhon believed that solutions that would benefit France could benefit the world as well.

The dialectical relationship between regionalism and internationalism through federalism calls for closer examination, and the Société Proudhon provides a concrete example. Due to disciplinary barriers between national and international history, historians of France who study regionalism generally focus only on the national and rarely venture into its international extrapolation. For instance, in his insightful book on the political thought of famous regionalist Jean Charles-Brun, Julian Wright notes that "Proudhon federalism implied international federation," but his examination of Charles-Brun's involvement in the promotion of the League of Nations takes the transition to the international stage for granted and fails to consider the impact of World War I on regionalist ideas. For their part,

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4 Julian Wright, *The Regionalist Movement in France, 1890-1914: Jean Charles-Brun and French Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 95. The same can be said of François Dubasque's recent dissertation on Jean Hennessy: François Dubasque, "Jean Hennessy (1874-1944): itinéraire militant d'un politique entre milieux réformateurs et réseaux d'influence" (Ph.D. diss, Université Michel de Montaigne – Bordeaux III,
international historians generally overlook domestic roots of international federalism. Jean-Michel Guieu's stimulating dissertation on French advocates of the League of Nations during the interwar years mentions the existence and the objectives of the Société Proudhon but overlooks its domestic implications. Only in a recent article does Guieu more closely examine Jean Hennessy's evolution from regionalism to internationalism from a "Europeanist" perspective.

Jean Hennessy: Between politics, regionalism, and federalism

Jean Hennessy (1874-1944) came from a wealthy family of the Cognac region, renowned for its high-quality liquor production. The family fortune relieved Hennessy of the need to make a living, and he devoted most of his career to public life. He financed two newspapers, L'Œuvre and Le Quotidien, and remained continuously involved in the Collège libre des sciences sociales founded in Paris in 1895. His "tortuous political career" took him from the conservative Right at the beginning of the century to the center Left in the twenties; he swung back to the Right in 1926. In the thirties, influenced by radical right-wing anti-parliamentary discourse, Hennessy founded the Parti social-national, its slogan "Neither Left nor Right" becoming the symbol of French political and ideological ambiguity before


7 Guieu, "Les apôtres français," 591. He was elected on the Cartel des Gauches list in 1924 and served as French ambassador to Switzerland from 1924 to 1928. From 1928 to 1930, he was Minister for Agriculture under the Poincaré, Briand, and Tardieu governments.
World War II. Although he was one of the eighty deputies to vote against granting Pétain full power in 1940, he eventually grew closer to the Marshal and the Vichy regime. Hennessy died in Lausanne in 1944.

This brief account of Hennessy's public life certainly shows a twisted path, yet it was no more so than those of many other Frenchmen during the interwar years. Hennessy's varied political positions can be deceiving if one forgets his lifelong focus, which was regionalism. His political swings, his daring allegiance to republicanism in 1940, and his rapprochement with Pétain under Vichy all become understandable when read through his devotion to regionalism.

The first regionalist statement came from the literary world in 1854, when a group of young writers including Frédéric Mistral founded the Félibrige to preserve and foster regional dialects, notably Occitan. Political regionalism emerged during the Third Republic when regionalists promoted regional identity and distinctiveness in response to Jacobin centralization. They called for social, economic, cultural, and political development of the French regions, which, they believed, were natural and thus more logical units than the arbitrary departmental divisions inherited from the French Revolution. At the bottom of this debate lay longstanding Jacobin-Girondin antagonism.

Regionalists' dislike of the centralizing Jacobin state was not an antagonism between the Left and the Right. Indeed,

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8 Jean Hennessy, Ni à Droite, ni à Gauche (Paris: Figuière, 1935); and Wright, 168-9.

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Jacobinism was found on both sides. Likewise, regionalism appealed to right- and left-wingers, as the membership of the Société Proudhon shows. Regionalists asserted their determination to avoid the traditional French political dichotomy, to be, as Hennessy said, "neither right nor left." This neutrality might explain the movement's appeal; it became, for better or worse, what Thierry Gasnier called "an ideological crossroads."

Despite their determination to stay away from political partisanship, regionalists could not help but become involved. In the political instability of the young and contested Third Republic, regionalism soon became associated with monarchism. Charles Maurras saw regional divisions as the revival of Old Regime provinces and used regionalism to condemn republicanism. After the Dreyfus Affair, key regionalists such as Jean Charles-Brun and Joseph Paul-Boncour devoted their efforts to distinguishing regionalism from monarchism, affirming regionalism's full compatibility with republicanism. They also linked regionalism closely with Proudhon federalist theory, presenting regionalism as a praxis based on a scientific

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12 Flory, 13.
13 The list of the thirty-three founding members of the Société Proudhon shows the heterogeneity of the movement. Beside leading regionalists (Hennessy, Charles-Brun, Jean D'Esthieux, Jean Brunhés, Louis Sarran) and the management of the daily newspaper L'Oeuvre (Director Gustave Téry and journalist Robert de Jouvenel), we find, among others, symbolist writer Paul Adam, the founder of the Ligue des Droits de l'homme Ferdinand Buisson (1927 Nobel Peace Prize), professors (George Renard, Étienne Richet, Fernand Farjanel), politicians (Alexandre Bérard, Charles Heuzey, marquis de Villeneuve), and the ferociously anti-Semitic Clément Serpeille de Gobineau, Arthur de Gobineau's grandson.
15 Maurras' novel Les déracinés, published in 1897, embodied the kind of sentimental regionalism favored by monarchists.
16 See the debate on this subject between Charles Maurras and Joseph Paul-Boncour in Un débat nouveau sur la République et la décentralization (Toulouse: Société provinciale d'édition, 1905) in which Paul-Boncour argued that regionalism was compatible with republican values. See also Thiesse, 69.
interpretation of human development rather than as a doctrine or an ideology. They thereby sought to overturn the accusations of irrationalism and sentimentalism to which monarchist regionalism was vulnerable.\footnote{Wright, 24.} Hence Jean Charles-Brun paraphrased Proudhon, saying that "regionalism is less a system than a method and a discipline."\footnote{Charles-Brun, \textit{Le régionalisme}, 2; and Wright, xi.} Despite these efforts, many regionalists, above all their leading figures Charles-Brun and Hennessy, were won over four decades later by Vichy's provincial propaganda and by Pétain's National Revolution. They interpreted the new regime's "ruralism" as a unique opportunity for regional development. For many years to come, this grim association between regionalism and collaboration prevented a dispassionate study of the movement.\footnote{See for example Gérard Namer, "L'idéologie régionaliste," \textit{Tumultes} 3 (1993): 233-44.}

**Thinking about international organization**

Hennessy founded the Ligue de représentation professionnelle et d'action régionaliste, usually known as the Ligue d'action régionaliste (LAR) in 1911. Its longer name revealed the specific orientation of Hennessy's regionalism. Instead of departments, he advocated profession-oriented regional assemblies, a corporatism that appealed to both the Right and to Social Catholics. From 1913 to 1916, Hennessy vainly brought reform projects before the National Assembly until the 1917 Clémentel law created regional organizations composed of regional chambers of commerce.\footnote{Guieu, "De Proudhon à Pétain," 112; Wright, 195; and Thiesse, 64.} Contrary to current scholarly consensus,\footnote{See Thiesse, 100; and Meyer, 32.} regionalists continued to lobby during World War I despite conditions that made it risky to condemn French centralization. True, their activities seemed – from a domestic point of view – less vigorous during wartime but only because regionalists sought a new mission as their leaders turned their attention to international issues. Like

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{Wright, 24.}
\item \footnote{Charles-Brun, \textit{Le régionalisme}, 2; and Wright, xi.}
\item \footnote{See for example Gérard Namer, "L'idéologie régionaliste," \textit{Tumultes} 3 (1993): 233-44.}
\item \footnote{Guieu, "De Proudhon à Pétain," 112; Wright, 195; and Thiesse, 64.}
\item \footnote{See Thiesse, 100; and Meyer, 32.}
\end{itemize}
thousands of their fellow citizens, regionalists thought that lasting peace could come out of war and that they possessed the key to world peace. That key was federalism.

Federalism was indeed a panacea, working both in the domestic realm as a "social organization principle" and in the international realm as a "system to do away with national sovereignty." During World War I, regionalists sought, through conferences, meetings, and newspaper articles, to persuade public opinion and political leaders of the soundness of the federal method for bringing world peace.

In December 1917, Jean Charles-Brun delivered a lecture to the LAR entitled "The Principles of Federalism." The aim, he said, was "to untangle the question of the League of Nations which is the most confused of all things." Charles-Brun explained that the idea of a League of Nations appealed to French regionalists because of both "tradition" and "method." Traditionally, regionalists since the French Revolution advocated the virtues of federalism; now that a League of Nations was imminent, they firmly believed that it "could not prevail if not based on federalism." Invoking Proudhon, Charles-Brun then presented federalism as a bottom-up system. In the federal regime, power stemmed from individual states – or regions in the case of France – and not from central government. Thus, federalism was contrary to decentralization, which perpetuated the same hierarchical relationship with power flowing from the central government to smaller entities. States, said Charles-Brun, would inevitably endorse international federalism because it better served their interests; they would decide which powers would or would not be devoted to a central government that they would have created. Here lies the real importance of the League

23 See for example the three-day LAR meeting on the League of Nations, July 1917, MAE, SDN, 8, supplément 1917.
24 Musée national des arts et des traditions populaires [hereafter MNATP], Charles-Brun records, 9, "Ligue d'action régionaliste. Dimanche 9 décembre 1917. Discours de M. Charles Brun (sic)."
of Nations for French regionalists: it represented a unique opportunity to build a federal-type union from the ground up. A League of Nations built on a federal basis would show the world, especially France, the soundness of regionalist ideas. If regionalism, as Charles-Brun argued in his preface to Proudhon's *Le principe fédératif*, had been a stage on the road to federalism,25 new conditions created by the war turned the whole project upside down. International federalism became a means to promote regionalism.

Charles-Brun may have convinced his audience, but many questions remained regarding the feasibility of a federal-type union. Could this apparently ideal system, this "general method by which all problems are solved," be established as soon as the war was over? Here, theory met reality. According to Proudhon,

> a confederation of great monarchies, or even more of democratic empires, is impossible. States such as France, Austria, England, Russia, or Prussia may make treaties of alliance or trade among themselves; but they resist federalization because their principles are contrary to it and will set them against any federal company and because they would have to abandon some part of their sovereignty and recognize an arbiter set above them, at least for certain matters. Their nature is to command, not to compromise or to obey.26

The situation in December 1917 was essentially the same as the one Proudhon described in 1863. For one thing, monarchies and imperial democracies, as Proudhon called them,27 still existed. Moreover, they had been fighting for more than two years for their own survival. After peace had been declared, they would surely not consent to abandon some of their powers – including self defense – to a foreign authority in order to gain a hypothetical security through federalism. Despite Proudhon's claim that his method was "progressive," his *Principe fédératif* posed an even bigger problem: international federation,

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25 Wright, 76.
26 Proudhon, 41.
27 Proudhon indeed believed that democracies, like all other regimes except federation, were inherently imperialistic. See Ibid., 51.

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Proudhon asserted, could not fully succeed until all states composing it were themselves federations. The system is coherent, but it suffers from a paradox: in order to implement international federation, federation must already be the dominant domestic regime. How did regionalists cope with such theoretical constraints? The only solution was to adjust theory to fit existing conditions.

**The Société Proudhon and international organization**

In May 1918, the Ligue d'action régionaliste became the Société d'études et d'action fédéraliste, or Société Proudhon, thereby explicitly acknowledging its inspiration. Jean Hennessy still chaired the association, which looked more like a traditional alliance than a Proudhonian-type federation. According to the propaganda pamphlet of the Société Proudhon, victory was the sole priority of allied nations because lasting peace was impossible in the presence of states "which have not yet renounced imperialist principles."²⁸ At first, a group of nations would form "the core of a democratic organization" which would eventually include "all liberated people" in a large federation.²⁹ Only this kind of union could ensure peace in the modern world, according to the pamphlet. Would nations accept the obligations and constraints of federalism, especially those regarding national sovereignty? The members of the Société Proudhon were optimistic: "It is a fact that [federation] imposes upon nations a partial renunciation of their absolute sovereignty, but the public must realize that, in the name of superior national interests, that renunciation is inevitable."

"Superior national interests" thus called for partial renunciation of sovereignty. Moreover, this renunciation was not merely necessary or crucial, but "inevitable." The sooner public opinion, especially French, understood that inevitability, the better the chances of achieving lasting peace. Jean Hennessy was

²⁸ Obviously, this condemnation was directed against Germany's continental imperialism and not against French or British colonial imperialism in Africa or elsewhere.

²⁹ MAE, SDN, 14, fol. 72-3.
even clearer during in a speech delivered before the Collège libre des sciences sociales in March 1918. For him, France's future as a great power depended entirely upon the establishment of such an international organization:

I fear . . . that at some point in the future when wartime ties have slackened France may not recover the influence that she has exerted in the past. It would be better to give up some sovereignty in a reciprocal agreement with other states that similarly obligate themselves then to face as a weakened power some threat of foreign domination, however disguised. That's the real reason we should look to the establishment of a new order.30

According to Hennessy, there had been a time when France, the greatest among great powers, "asked for no help; instead, other nations asked France for help." The situation in 1918 was unfortunately different. "For thirty or forty years, decadence has threatened our country, low birth rate being its most visible sign," said Hennessy, who feared that France would not be able "to stand up by herself" after the war. Therefore, "[w]e must federate democratic societies," said Hennessy. "Otherwise, the authority and power of our own society, the French society, the greatest nation on earth, will diminish."

Hennessy based his argument in favor of an international federation on what he considered a realistic and lucid appraisal of France's power at the end of the war. He saw a League of Nations in which France would play a central role as his country's last hope for great power status. Before being a federalist, the French deputy was a patriot.

A League of Nations project

During the summer of 1918, one section of the Société Proudhon turned into the Ligue pour l'organisation de la Société des Nations (LOSDN), thereby achieving the transition from

regionalism to internationalism. Regionalism would save France from within; internationalism would preserve France from international anarchy and maintain its power on the international scene. Two missions, one method: federalism. A few months later, in November 1918, the Allied victory over Germany raised the expectations of all internationalists. Lasting peace was at hand.

An outline of the League of Nations Covenant was released in January 1919. The document disappointed both federalists and internationalists who thought of it as a collection of half measures incapable of ensuring lasting peace. Most of them, however, chose to see its good side rather than condemning it, probably because they had spent so much energy lobbying for an international organization.  

During February 1919, Hennessy delivered speeches in numerous French towns to promote his version of a League of Nations.  

Finally, on 8 March 1919, the Société Proudhon, through the LOSDN, released its own proposal for an international organization and sent copies to delegates at the Paris Peace Conference who were still discussing the final Covenant of the League of Nations. The LOSDN proposal again reveals the gap between the federalist ideal and the reality of international relations at the end of the war.

Though the proposal reasserted the LOSDN's federalist stance, it discarded one important element of Proudhon's theory by stating that international federation could be established even if not all nations were federations. More surprisingly, it abandoned the idea of a league comprised of only a small number of nations. An organization of this kind, according to the project, was only a traditional alliance. This embrace of a large and open league is unexpected since the Société Proudhon's goal

31 See Bouchard, ch. 5.  
32 See accounts of Hennessy's conferences in Tours, Angoulême, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Marseille, and Saint-Étienne produced by the Police Générale for the Ministry of the Interior in Archives nationales de France [hereafter AN], F7, 13416.  
33 The project was published in *L'Oeuvre*, 8 Mar. 1919.
at its foundation was precisely the establishment of a democratic alliance against autocratic countries. Victory, and perhaps Germany's new republican regime, changed members' views. Although many nations remained undemocratic, federalism could now put up with political diversity.

Apart from those concessions to reality, two federalist principles formed the basis of the LOSDN project. First, the international organization would be based on a set of "fundamental laws" voted by a two-thirds majority in the International Assembly that would apply to all member states. Second, assuming that federalism should infringe as little as possible upon national sovereignty, these fundamental laws would only deal with a limited number of issues, such as mandatory arbitration, limitation of armaments, or the creation of an international police force. 34

Despite its profession of faith in federalism, the LOSDN project was no different from those of other peace groups and advocates of the time. The international organization was classically divided between legislative, executive, and judicial powers embodied respectively in an International Assembly, a Supreme Court, and an International Government. States, not individuals, ran the organization, although states were asked to acknowledge ethnic minorities when choosing their delegates to the International Assembly. Finally, the project stated that the new organization should take into account the "degree of civilization" of each nation "according to its importance" when fixing the number of votes that each should have in the International Assembly. The "importance" of each nation was conveniently left undefined, but this article was obviously designed to safeguard France's interests within the League of Nations. Again, federalism yielded to patriotism.

The Société Proudhon, which had 3,600 members in 1921, 35 pursued its activities in the 1920s, although with declining

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34 Other federal issues were internationalization of armament production, international regulation of means of communication, freedom of conscience, and issues regarding protection of the weak, workers, minorities, etc.
35 MNATP, Charles-Brun records, 9.
intensity. One important contribution was the foundation in 1921 of a Chair of International Federalism at the Institut des hautes études internationales in Paris, first held by Jean Charles-Brun. The main task of the Société, at least in the immediate postwar years, was to lobby for modifications to the League of Nations Covenant that federalists deemed necessary to build true lasting peace. Jean Hennessy emphasized the role of public opinion in reforming the League. In a letter of invitation to a LOSDN meeting in 1919, he highlighted the public's crucial responsibility:

Article 26 [of the League of Nations Covenant] envisages the possibility of discussing and adopting amendments suggested by the various governments of the participating States. Those are inevitably influenced by public opinion. Our association must consult this opinion and organize its propaganda accordingly.\(^3^6\)

During the interwar years, Jean Hennessy remained an ardent defender of internationalism. Along with Léon Bourgeois, René Viviani, and Gabriel Hanotaux, he joined the first French delegation to the League of Nations and was elected chair of the Fédération française des associations pour la Société des Nations (FFSDN). As the years went by, he realized that "by advocating too large and universal a League of Nations, we perhaps missed our goal,"\(^3^7\) and he started promoting a federal European League of Nations as a first step towards a larger one. The Geneva organization deeply disappointed him, and as he shifted to the Right, he resigned from the FFSDN in 1933 but stayed loyal to regionalism and federalism.

Hennessy, Charles-Brun, and other regionalists/federalists relentlessly tried to convince public opinion – and through it, political authorities – of the necessity of domestic and international reforms. Proudhonian federalism presented itself as an infallible method based, in Hennessy’s words, on a "law," i.e. "on the great concentration law that regulates all economic and

\(^{3^6}\) Hennessy to M. Bossu, 16 June 1919, AN, F7, 14316, fol. 98.

\(^{3^7}\) Cited in Guieu, "De Proudhon à Pétain," 118-23.
social relations." The task then was less to convince than to make people realize that federalism was inevitable. One way to better understand both the federalists' openness to political diversity and the regionalists' claim to transcend political contingencies in the tumultuous France of the 1930s is to consider their absolute belief in the universality of the federal method, although universalism often gave way to particularism.

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38 "Lettre d'invitation de la Ligue d'action professionnelle et d'action régionaliste," 18 July 1917, AN, F7, 13416, fol. 116.