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Building modern Washhouses in mid-nineteenth-century France: increasing working class families income or/and keeping women at home?

On February, 3 1851, the French *Assemblée législative* passed a bill allowing to subsidize cities which undertook to build modern public baths and wash-houses. This measure took place in the Public Baths Movement, launched in Great Britain some decades ago. The bill was submitted by Jean-Baptiste Dumas, the French Minister for Agriculture and Trade. He had found his inspiration in England. In this country, two bills were passed in 1846 and 1847, allowing parishes and towns councils to build and to manage public baths and wash-houses.

However, the French declination of the public baths movement was specific since it put the stress on washing facilities: the baths were essentially supposed to compensate the losses of the wash-houses sections of the establishments. Wash-houses were considered as a mean to improve the health of urban working class people, endangered by linen drying inside already insalubrious dwellings.¹ The bill was specially designed for big cities, even if its final version was modified: the sum which could be allocated to a city was reduced and only one establishment per city could be subsidized. These changes took into account the reluctance of the *Assemblée législative*, dominated by members from rural constituencies.

I will deal with the representations of urban working class women and of their roles involved in the bill, and in the few establishments built under it. What kind of women were supposed to benefit from modern washhouses? What were these benefits for them and for their families? How were they supposed to work in these washhouses? My reflections are based on the following sources: the debates at the *Assemblée législative*², the works of the commission Dumas established in order to examine the issue of baths and wash-houses before submitting the bill³, nineteenth century physicians, hygienists and social reformers' works, and the records concerning a specific establishment built under the bill in Nantes. Nantes is a large seaport and industrial city located at the bottom of the estuary of the river Loire, on the Atlantic coast.⁴

1 M. Thornton Williams, *Washing the "Great Unwashed". Public Baths in Urban America, 1840-1920*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1991, p. 9.

2 These debates can be found in the *Moniteur universel* (now *MU*).

3 These studies are reprinted in *Bains et Lavoirs publics* (now *BLP*), Paris, Gide et Baudry éditeurs, 1850.

4 These records can be consulted in the Archives municipales de Nantes (now *AMN*) and in the Archives départementales de Loire-Atlantique (now *ADLA*).

Washing facilities for housewives

The establishments the bill was to subsidize should offer their services free-of-charge or at reduced prices. For women laundering for a living, they would be a blessing. However laundresses were not welcome, as the wash-houses were especially designed for housewives washing their family linen.

Alphonse Pinède and André Maurice de Saint-Léger were members of the commission established by Dumas. They crossed the Channel in order to study baths and wash-houses in England. Pinède noticed that the tariff of the wash-houses advantaged housewives and discouraged laundresses: the price for the first hour was low, and the following hours were more expensive. The aim was to prevent laundresses from staying in the wash-house all day long.⁵ The architects Jacques-Emile Gilbert and Emile Trélat, also members of the Commission, suggested to adopt this principle in municipally run wash-houses in Paris.⁶ This gradual tariff was also favored by Armand de Melun, who reported the bill in the *Assemblée législative*. According to this catholic social reformer, it had another positive effect: it advantaged modest women, who possessed few linen, against richer ones.⁷ In Nantes too, Charles-Aimé Dauban praised the gradual tariff. Dauban was a *lycée* (grammar school) teacher who wrote a report for the mayor of Nantes about the opportunity of applying for the benefit of the bill.⁸ Such a tariff was voted by the *Conseil municipal* of Nantes.⁹ Moreover, on the days when women were to be admitted free-of-charge in the wash-house, it was decided they would be forbidden to stay more than two hours.¹⁰ The same tariff was adopted in the wash-house of the workers' housing estate of Mulhouse, in Alsace. This establishment, built in 1851, was also subsidized by the bill.¹¹

Laundresses had a bad reputation in the nineteenth century. They were considered boisterous, immoral and too talkative, and accused of spreading rumors.¹² In some Parisian wash-houses, they were separated from housewives, sometimes without the knowledge of the later.¹³ This

5 A. Pinède, "Rapport à M. le Ministre de l'Agriculture et du Commerce sur les bains et lavoirs publics de l'Angleterre, 10 novembre 1849" in *Bains et Lavoirs Publics, Commission instituée par ordre de M. le Président de la République, ministère de l'Agriculture et du Commerce*, Paris, Gide et J. Baudry, 1850, p. 7-24. See p. 5.

6 Gilbert and E. Trélat, "Premier rapport fait à la commission des bains et lavoirs par MM. Emile Trélat et Gilbert" in *Bains et lavoirs publics, op. cit.*, p. 47-55. See p. 54-55.

7 *MU*, 3e supplément au n° 199, 18/07/1850, p. 2465. Gilbert and Trélat, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

8 Dauban, *De l'établissement à Nantes de bains et lavoirs publics. Rapport de la Commission chargée, par M. le Maire de Nantes, d'étudier cette question*, Nantes, Imprimerie William Busseuil, Rue Santeuil, 8, 1851, p. 14.

9 AMN, 1M234.

10 Bains et lavoirs publics. Projet d'un établissement modèle, 5 juin 1852, AMN, 1M234.

11 E. Muller, *Habitations ouvrières et agricoles. Cités, bains et lavoirs. Sociétés alimentaires*, Paris, Librairie scientifique-industrielle et agricole de Lacroix-Comon, 1856, p. 251-252.

12 F. Wasserman et C. Voisenat, *Blanchisseuse, laveuse, repasseuse*, Fresnes, Ecomusée de Fresnes, 1986. 1986, p. 57.

13 Gilbert and E. Trélat, *op. cit.*, p. 48-49.

bad reputation was consistent with the general hostility against female workers when their jobs led them out of home. This hostility had sprung with the Industrial Revolution.¹⁴ According to conservatives thinkers like Jules Simon, home was the best place for a woman, as her virtue could easily be corrupted by the contact with other people, and even with other women.¹⁵ Moreover, laundresses were considered as a threat for social order, as they had their own professional organization, complex and mainly independent from men. A women undertaker took the linen from the clients, and entrusted it to laundresses who cleaned it in a wash-house or in a washing-boat¹⁶. Some women also washed simultaneously for their families and for a female employer. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the tendency was to discourage such activities. They were supposed to be supplanted by industrial laundries, where women were mere salaried workers.¹⁷

French legislators were mainly conservative. However the priority they gave to housewives against laundresses was not only rooted in the fear of corruption or in the threat to social order engendered by women working according their own rules.

Health, salubrious Dwellings and increased Incomes

Dumas and Melun described the risks women encountered when they laundered in poorly designed wash-houses or washing-boats, or directly in rivers.¹⁸ A washing-boat (*bateau-lavoir* in French) was a wash-house built upon a flat-bottomed boat. These establishments palliated the lack of sewers. Moored at a river bank, they had a direct access to water, and they could easily dispose of used water. But washing-boats were more and more considered as obstacles to navigation, and in the case of Paris, as eyesores.¹⁹

Dumas and Melun found their inspiration in the works of physicians and hygienists. These scientists had developed an interest in the processes of laundry and in their dangers for the women. The entries “washhouse” in dictionaries, handbooks or lessons dealing with hygiene²⁰ demonstrates

14 J. W. Scott, “ ‘L’ouvrière, mot impie, mot sordide’... Le discours de l’économie politique française sur les ouvrières. 1840-1860”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, n° 58, 1990, p. 2-15. See p. 6-9.

15 J. Simon, *L’ouvrière*, [1861], Brionne, Gérard Montfort éditeur, 1977, p. 82.

16 J. Moisy, *Les lavoirs de Paris*, Paris, Librairie de E. Sausset, 1884, p. 24.

17 M. Perrot, « La ménagère parisienne dans l’espace parisien à la fin du XIXe siècle », in Collectif, *Stratégie des femmes*, Paris, Tierce, 1984, p. 78-96. See p. 95.

18 *MU*, 1er supplément au n° 157, 06/06/1850, p. 1951 and 1er supplément au n° 35, 04/02/1851, p. 364.

19 F.-X. Trivière, *Au carrefour des eaux. Bateaux-lavoirs et usages de la rivière*, Nantes-Laval, Siloë, 1996, p. 7-8 and J. Grüning, *Dirty Laundry: Public Hygiene and Public Space in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy, Arizona State University, August 2011, p. 56 and p. 68-74.

20 See for instance E. Beaugrand, « Lavoires. Hygiène publique », Dechambre (dir.), *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences médicales*, Paris, P. Asselin, Sr de Labé, Victor Masson et fils, 1869, tome deuxième, p. 93-106; L. Fleury, « Vingt-troisième leçon. Des bains. – Des différentes applications extérieures de l’eau. – Du blanchissage et des lavoires », *Cours d’hygiène*, Paris, Labé, éditeur-libraire de la Faculté de Médecine, 1852, p. 559-604 and A. Tardieu,

this interest, as did the essay on the illnesses of laundresses written by Adelphe Espagne, a Professor of medicine.²¹ This essay took place in a “research program” about the occupational illnesses of tradesmen. This program was launched at the end of eighteenth century.²²

Laundresses payed a greater tribute to the dangers of washing operations than housewives, as they dedicated more time to this occupation. However, the choice of privileging housewives was logical, as the legislators' main aim was to sanitize the homes of urban working class families by helping them to dry their linen. Dumas and Melun showed an interest for the health of women but they put the stress on the following fact: moist linen endangered the health of inhabitants of small and insalubrious dwellings.²³ Significantly, Melun's twin brother had also promoted a bill concerning insalubrious dwellings, which was voted in 1850. As for the illnesses caused by laundering, they relied upon the works of physicians and hygienists for arguments. According to Dumas' and Melun's hopes, linen could be dried as well as washed in modern and efficient wash-houses. So, such establishments were a key factor to prevent or to fight cholera.²⁴ This was a powerful argument, after the recent epidemic in 1849. The establishments built under the bill should also serve as models for further realizations and the subvention was supposed to cover the expenses caused by the experimentation of new drying methods.²⁵

Modern wash-houses were also supposed to reduce the time dedicated to washing. Thus, they would help to keep women at home. But, for the same reason, they could contribute to increase the income of working class families, since housewives could dedicate their saved time to profitable occupations. Like most of their contemporaries, Dumas and Melun believed it was better for women to stay at home. So, homework was the only mean to conciliate both aims. It was clearly stated by Dumas. Accorded to him, women could dedicate their saved time to earning money at home while supervising their children:

“Diminishing the duration of this toil [the laundering] by a half or two thirds is the greatest economy one can pursue and the most desirable one that one can achieve, as it combines two effects: it makes the housewife free to pursue a profitable occupation and it restores the supervising of the mother upon her family.”²⁶

article « Lavoires », *Dictionnaire d'hygiène publique et de salubrité*, deuxième édition, tome deuxième, 1862, p. 184.

21 A. Espagne, *Observations sur quelques points de l'industrie et de l'hygiène du blanchissage et spécialement sur les callosités antibrachiales et phalangiennes que présentent les blanchisseuses du Lez*, Paris, Asselin, Gendre et succesor de Labé – Montpellier, Goulet, libraire, 1864.

22 G. Jorland, *Une société à soigner. Hygiène et salubrité publique en France au XIXe siècle*, Paris, Gallimard, 2010, p. 71.

23 *MU*, 3e supplément au n° 199, 18/07/1850, p. 2465, n° 327, 32/11/1850, p. 3336, 2e supplément au n° 342, 08/12/1850, p. 3503, 1er supplément au n° 35, 04/02/1851, p. 364.

24 *MU*, n° 327, 32/11/1850, p. 3335 and 3337.

25 *MU*, n° 327, 23/11/1850, p. 3335 and 3337, 2e supplément au n° 342, 08/12/1850, p. 3503.

26 “[Une] réduction de la moitié ou des deux tiers sur la durée de ce travail [le blanchissage] constitue l'économie la plus large qu'on puisse rechercher et la plus désirable qu'on puisse accomplir. En effet, elle a le double résultat de rendre à la ménagère sa liberté pour un travail lucratif, et de rendre à sa famille la surveillance maternelle.” *MU*, 06/06/1850, p. 1951

The opposition to the bill was actually partly rooted in this potential increase of income. Some members feared that an increased income would draw more inhabitants into large cities, which were already crowded and insalubrious and which corrupted both minds and bodies, and that it would at the same time deprive rural France of a very necessary workforce.²⁷

Laundering in modern Washhouses

The representations of women, of their social roles and of their needs had an impact on the services provided by the few wash-houses built under the 1851-bill, and also on the way their services were organized. This organization generated a strong opposition from women, since it went against long time habits. Moreover housewives had to be convinced that bringing back home dry -or almost dry- linen was worth the increase of expense and time it demanded.

Separate Compartments: for the Sake of Discipline or Decency?

French observers pointed out that in English wash-houses washers were separated from each others, each women working in an individual washing compartment.²⁸ Some observers praised this system because it prevented women from chatting.²⁹ This praise was consistent with the idea that promiscuity endangered female virtue. The wash-house of Nantes and the big establishment built in the rue du Temple in Paris³⁰ followed the English model, their source of inspiration.³¹ The washing compartments also made impossible for women to see their fellow washers, and the French observers noticed that they thus met a demand of English poor housewives. These women were ashamed of their ragged or very dirty linen and clothes.³² Compartments also protected decency in another way: the first operation of laundering took place there, and it consisted in soaking and

²⁷ *MU*, 23/11/1850, p. 3335.

²⁸ A. Pinède, *op. cit.*, p. 13; Rouget de Lisle, « Notice historique, théorique et pratique sur le blanchissage du linge de toile, de la flanelle de santé et des divers vêtements ; par M. Rouget de Lisle (*fin*). Quatrième partie. Construction des buanderies et lavoirs publics », *Bulletin de la Société d'encouragement pour l'industrie nationale*, cinquante et unième année (N° DLXXIII), mars 1852, p. 227-244, see. p. 233; E. Beaugrand, *op. cit.*, p. 97-98 and M. A. Legoyt, « Bains et lavoirs publics », *La France et l'étranger. Etudes de statistiques comparées*, t. II, Paris, Veuve Berger-Levrault et fils, libraires-éditeurs, 1870, p. 180-182, see p. 181.

²⁹ M. A. Legoyt, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

³⁰ Historians disagree about this establishment's creation. According to Vigarello, it was built under the bill, but for Csergo it was directly paid by the Emperor and former president, Napoléon III. G. Vigarello, *Le propre et le sale*, Paris, Seuil, 1985, p. 215 and J. Csergo, *Liberté, Égalité, Propreté : la morale de l'hygiène au XIXe siècle*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1988, p. 157.

³¹ AMN 1 M 235 and J. Moisy, *op. cit.*, p. 64

³² Saint-Léger, "Rapport de M. de St-Léger, ingénieur en chef des mines, sur un Voyage en Angleterre, pour visiter des Etablissements de Bains et Lavoirs publics. Lu devant la commission le 26 mars 1850", in *Bains et lavoirs publics*, *op. cit.*, p. 130-176. See p. 135.

rubbing the linen in cold water in order to eliminate blood and other organic stains.³³ Later in the century, Gérardin pointed out that French housewives were also reluctant to proceed publicly to this operation, “because of a very natural feeling of propriety”.³⁴

But individual compartments went against the habits of French housewives and laundresses. Jules Moisy was the founder of the Parisian Guild Chamber of wash-houses masters at the end of the century, and a former wash-house master himself. He explained that women could never get used to the rue du Temple wash-houses. The washing compartments prevented them from chatting. Moreover they implied that the individual troughs were smaller than those in washing-boats and the washers couldn't get used to them. According to Moisy, this caused the establishment to close after a few years.³⁵

Whether it was motivated by discipline or by decency, the isolation of washers was a big issue in France and in Continental Europe. It was important enough to create a debate during the General Congress on Hygiene held in Brussels in 1852. The 4th section dealt with the theme: “working class dwellings, public baths and wash-houses, hospitals and old people's homes”³⁶ and the document given to the delegates stated that “the wash-houses section should comprise a certain number of compartments or boxes, separated by lateral partitions made of waterproof materials, between 1,80 and 2 meters high, in order to isolate completely each washer”³⁷. Goulier was an architect, member of the French delegation. He protested that isolation was not absolutely necessary. According to him, even English wash-houses themselves didn't systematically adopt this principle.³⁸

In France, the strict isolation of washers seems to have been confined to the experimental establishments built under the 1851-bill in the middle of the century, and not to all of them: in the wash-houses of Mulhouse, women worked side by side, laundering in two big basins. In 1869, Emile Beaugrand, the librarian of Paris Faculty of Medicine,³⁹ wrote a description of French wash-houses. According to him, French housewives were not as “ridiculously reserved”⁴⁰ as Englishwomen, and, in French wash-houses, they were only separated by mobile partitions, ending

33 A. Espagne, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

34 “par un sentiment de convenance bien naturel”. M. Gérardin, « Les lavoirs publics à Paris », *Revue d'hygiène et de police sanitaire*, Paris, G. Masson, éditeur, 8^e année, 1886, p. 18-28. See p. 26-27.

35 J. Moisy, *op. cit.*, p. 12 and 64.

36 “habitations d'ouvriers, bains et lavoirs publics, hôpitaux et hospices”. *Compte-rendu du congrès général d'hygiène publique de Bruxelles, session de 1852*, *Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale*, série 1, t. 48, juillet 1852, p. 443-476. See p. 450.

37 “La section des lavoirs comprendra un certain nombre de compartiments ou loges séparées latéralement par des cloisons en matériaux imperméables, de 1m80 à 2 mètres de hauteur, de manière à isoler complètement chaque laveuse”. *Compte-rendu du congrès général d'hygiène publique de Bruxelles, session de 1852*, *op. cit.*, p. 456.

38 *Compte-rendu du congrès général d'hygiène publique de Bruxelles, session de 1852*, p. 455-458.

39 C. Moriceau, « Les perceptions des risques au travail dans la seconde moitié du XIX^e siècle : entre connaissance, déni et prévention », *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 2009/1, n° 56-1, p. 11-27, p. 13.

40 “ridiculement réservées”. E. Beaugrand, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

at the waist height.⁴¹ The catalogue of a firm manufacturing equipments for baths, wash-houses and washing-boats, at the end of the 1850ies or the beginning of the 1860ies, showed this individual compartments.⁴²

Spin-drying and hot air drying

Legislators, hygienists and physicians were convinced that drying linen at home caused a mortal danger. However, this opinion was not shared by women, according to some descriptions of wash-houses written in the second half of the 19th century. I will examine the reasons why they were reluctant to make use of these facilities.

According to Gilbert and Trélat, in Paris, in the middle of the century, only one wash-house did offer hot air drying facilities. They noticed that few women had recourse to this service.⁴³ Almost twenty years later, another observer pointed out that the washers were reluctant to use the wringing-machines. They considered this service too expensive, even if two or three of them could join their money to share the use of one machine⁴⁴. The hot air dryers faced the same problem: as late as 1884, Moisy noticed that they used so much fuel that the wash-house masters had to ask so high a price for their use that they did not get any clients.⁴⁵ However, the price was not the only reason why housewives rarely made use of wringing-machines or hot air dryers. They were convinced that the wringing-machines spoiled the linen. This fear was noticed by several observers. The housewives of Mulhouse still feared to use the wringing-machines in 1867.

They also rarely made use of hot air dryers, but for a different reason: the dryers needed several hours to dry the linen and housewives could not leave their homes for such a long time. However, the dwelling conditions were much better in the workers' housing estates of Mulhouse than for the bulk of urban working class people, for whom the 1851-bill was designed. Each house had several rooms, so drying inside was less insalubrious. Moreover, small gardens were attached to the houses, where it was possible to hang up laundry in summer. This may explain why Alsatian housewives were reluctant to use both wringing-machines and hot air dryers.⁴⁶ The opportunity to hang the linen outside was a strong inducement not to use drying facilities. As late as 1886,

41 E. Beaugrand, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

42 Compagnie générale de blanchisseries, lavoirs, séchoirs et bains et de construction d'appareils spéciaux pour l'industrie et l'économie domestique, Prix-courant. *Des instructions spéciales accompagnent chaque appareil expédié*, non daté (fin des années 1850 ou 1860). See p. 9.

43 Gilbert et E. Trélat, *op. cit.*, p. 47.].

44 E. Beaugrand, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

45 J. Moisy, *op. cit.* p. 53.

46 "Bains et lavoirs établis à Mulhouse", *Bulletin de la Société industrielle de Mulhouse*, t. XXXVII, Mulhouse, Imprimerie de L. Bader, p. 245-284, see p. 247 and 255-256.

Gérardin noticed that, in the center of Paris, 70% of the washers had recourse to hot air dryers, against only 20% for the washers in the outskirts of the city. He explained this difference by the lodging conditions. In the center, the lodgings were small and it was forbidden to hang the linen from the windows and in courtyards. Gérardin noticed the same difference in the use of wringing-machines.⁴⁷ A sunny climate could also prevent the use of drying facilities, as in Montpellier, in the South of France⁴⁸.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, hygienists, physicians and social reformers condemned the refusal to use the drying facilities. They considered that housewives were responsible for the insalubrity of their dwellings and they blamed them for their parsimony and routine. Especially, the fear that wringing-machines would spoil the linen was condemned as unfounded. This new discourse could be compared to the discourse of the champions of industrial hygiene.⁴⁹ and it sounded differently from the debates in the *Assemblée législative*, where Dumas and Melun presented housewives as victims.

We may wonder if housewives changed their habits during the second half of the century. It is difficult to give an answer, from the sources I have read hitherto. However, some elements lead to think that housewives underwent a kind of “hygienic acculturation”.⁵⁰ In the 1860's, observers still described linen drying inside lodgings, in Mulhouse or in Montpellier for instance. Two decades later, Gérardin considered that, in Paris, the impossibility to hang the linen outside automatically led to use drying facilities in wash-houses. He also excluded that women would travel on a tramway carrying moist linen.⁵¹ Moisy shared Gérardin's views about the difference between the center and the periphery of Paris, but he gave another explanation. According to him, in Paris, the only users of wringing-machines were professional laundresses, and housewives brought back moist linen at home. This was why the use of wringing-machines was more developed in the center of Paris. But, if we follow Gérardin, the housewives living in the periphery had the opportunity to hang their wet linen outside...

The increasing demand for drying facilities met a renewed offer. As soon as 1870, an article published in a review of statistics pointed out the slowness of the drying process in Parisian wash-houses, compared to English ones. So, these facilities existed in Paris, and they met their demand.⁵²

47 M. Gérardin, « Les lavoirs publics à Paris », *Revue d'hygiène et de police sanitaire*, Paris, G. Masson, éditeur, 8^e année, 1886, p. 18-28. See p. 21.

48 A. Espagne, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

49 C. Moriceau, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

50 I have borrowed this expression from Caroline Moriceau, who employed it about industrial workers and employers. C. Moriceau, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

51 M. Gérardin, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

52 M. A. Legoyt, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

During the 1880's, in Paris, washing-boats' masters tried to develop their offer of washing facilities.⁵³ From these elements, we may conclude for the time being in favor of a change in habits, at least in Paris. If this “hygienic acculturation” took place, it was contemporary to the change in the workers' attitude toward the dangers in manufactures and workshops, beginning in the 1880's.⁵⁴

The 1851-bill was a failure. Only a few baths and wash-houses were built under it. The kind of wash-houses it wanted to develop, based on the English model, did not meet the needs of urban population. The destiny of the great establishment of the rue du Temple is emblematic of this failure. So we cannot credit the bill for the possible erosion of the habit to hang wet linen inside. Anyway, the effective changes in laundering practices of urban housewives calls for further research.

⁵³ Jaimee Grüring mentioned two applications, from washing-houses masters, for a permission to enlarge their establishment and to build dryers on the roofs. Both applications got positive answers. J. Grüring, *op. cit.*, p. 158-160.

⁵⁴ C. Moriceau, *op. cit.*, p. 21.