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The French Hygiene Offensive of the 1950s: A Critical Moment in the History of Manners*

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Historians reflecting on the trajectory of urban industrial societies usually think of factories and railroads, schools and shops, trade unions and women's rights. But any of us who dropped into the daily life of fin de siècle France would be struck before anything else by the smell—of crowded apartments without ventilation or water, of outhouses with no means of evacuation shared by dozens of families, of clothes never changed, feet rarely washed, and teeth that had never met a toothbrush.

These conditions, and the smells that went with them, changed dramatically in the twentieth century—an instance of what the sociologist Norbert Elias famously labeled “the process of civilization.” Mass-produced soap and synthetic shampoo followed running water into homes and shops. Privies moved from courtyards to staircase landings and into apartments, while apartments themselves were increasingly furnished with the hardware of better hygiene: water heaters, washing machines, sinks, bidets, and bathtubs. Plastic tablecloths and wash-and-wear shirts joined linoleum, deodorant, and toothpaste in the arsenal of cleanliness.

The civilizing process also had an internal aspect: a historic makeover both of the way people treated their bodies and of sensibilities about what was tolerable and what was disgusting, which advanced in tandem with the material culture of scrubbed skin and tidy dwellings. Just as better plumbing made cleaner lives possible, a discomfort with old standards of propriety—because they were downright unpleasant or merely considered so by others—led people to invest the time and money it took to be less dirty.

This evolution of “manners,” as Elias called them, was inexorable, yet it was neither quick nor steady. In cities that depended on tourism—Deauville and Cannes, for example—it moved forward more quickly, as it did in Strasbourg, which began the twentieth century as part of the Reich. Other towns and regions did not see public water and sewage facilities until after World War II. Villages flattened in the Great War and rebuilt in the 1920s had newer buildings and better sanitation than did those picturesque hamlets,

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where people continued to inhabit houses dating back generations. It proceeded, moreover, in a particularly French idiom. This means not only that the French showed less urgency in the rush toward modern hygiene than the English or the Germans did but also that the state played a larger role in France than in most other countries.

This process reached critical mass in what I call the “hygiene revolution” of the 1950s. Nudged by the media, propelled by state action, inspired no doubt by the American brand, and supported by a surge in consumerism and a widespread desire to be younger, hipper, and cleaner—in a word, more modern—the French began to leave their tubless cold-water flats and collective *pissotières* behind them and to adopt more refined standards of personal hygiene. It was, by most accounts, a long road to travel.

A HISTORY OF DIRT

The dirtiness of the old French countryside was legendary. Ernst Junger, quartering in the Lorraine village of Labry in 1917, expressed his disgust with the hygienic standards of the place (see fig. 1). “The vain search for a water closet,” he wrote, “is the outstanding memory one has of the villages of Lorraine. Baths appear to be unknown.” “Much as I esteem the French,” he added, “I cannot help thinking that this is a characteristic side of their life.”¹

In most villages, the same filthy water served for bathing, washing clothes, and steeping hemp, wrapping the whole area in “suffocating stinks.” Village laundry days occurred only once or twice a year—which hardly mattered, since the peasants seldom changed their clothes. Men’s underwear arrived around 1885, women’s undergarments even later. Nightclothes were unknown.² Peasants considered grime a sort of carapace, and many “never washed at all, even after the labours of a summer’s day—a good sweat was held to be cleansing in itself.”³ They regarded strong body odor as a sign of rude good health and sexual prowess. Pierre-Jakez Hélias, watching “Parisians” bathing in the sea at Penhors (Brittany) wondered, “Were their asses so dirty? If they’d gone on like that they wouldn’t have had any smell left at all.”⁴

Nineteenth-century towns were hardly more sanitary. Crowding smothered

¹ Ernst Jünger, *The Storm of Steel: From the Diary of a German Storm-Troop Officer on the Western Front* (1929; repr., New York, 1996), 205.

² Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (Stanford, CA, 1976), 147.

³ On the nineteenth-century village of Chassignolles, see Gillian Tindall, *Célestine: Voices from a French Village* (London, 1996), 95–96. On the peasant culture of hygiene in the Limousin, see Maurice Robert, *Mémoire et identité: Traverses ethnographiques en Limousin* (Limoges, 1991), 389–90.

⁴ Pierre-Jakez Hélias, *The Horse of Pride: Life in a Breton Village* (New Haven, CT, 1978), 314.



7. PRIVÉS - sans conduite d'eau, 3 cases et urinoir

FIG. 1.—*Privés—sans conduite d'eau, 3 cases et urinoir* [Privies—without running water, three huts and a urinal], behind the school in the village of Bousseviller, Alsace, 1920s, photograph. Paul-Edouard Glath, *L'hygiène à l'école et au village* (Niederbronn, 1946), following page 32. Permission courtesy of Dr. Colette Sichel-Glath.

whatever urge most people had to stay clean, and conditions were, if not worse, then at least more dangerous: warrens of overcrowded, humid flats; crumbling walls and peeling paint; the density and stink of neighbors, garbage, and human waste; and the all-but-complete lack of *conforts* (amenities) that forced inhabitants to burn coal without proper ventilation, to lug water up steep, narrow stairs, to use filthy, collective *cabinets d'aisances* (outhouses), or simply to urinate on the staircase or throw their night soil into the street. Under these circumstances, any reasonable standard of hygiene was unthinkable and epidemics almost inevitable.⁵

The jerry-built suburbs presented even worse conditions than the cities. The

⁵ See Dr. Depouilly, "L'eau dans les logements ouvriers," *Revue d'Hygiène et de Police Sanitaire* (1900): 1088. See also David S. Barnes, *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle against Filth and Germs* (Baltimore, 2006), 223; and République Française, Département de la Seine, Ville de Paris, Commission des Logements Insalubres, *Rapport général sur les travaux de la commission pendant les années 1890–1891–1892* (Paris, 1895), 15–25. Mary Lynn Stewart estimates that a full

hygienist Dr. Octave Du Mesnil offered a picture of one Paris *banlieue*: “Raised up on this rolling terrain,” he wrote, “most of these buildings can be reached only by private road, pitted and puddled, where in the absence of any piping, rainwater and household waste water stagnate and sink into the walkways, which are often lower than the streets.” Residents commonly threw their refuse into the street, while in the stairwells and courtyards could be found disgusting privies leaking fetid water. Du Mesnil described a typical outhouse, sitting off the Avenue de Choisy on the southern edge of the city, as consisting of “a shallow hole, surrounded by three low wicker partitions. Above the hole are placed two boards, six or eight inches wide. When this improvised cesspool is full, which happens often, due to the shallowness of the pit, a new hole is simply dug and the partition moved, until that hole is also filled. Thanks to this mobile outhouse, moved around several times next to the houses it serves, the whole neighborhood is infected.”⁶

Alongside the sheer impracticality of keeping clean and the folk wisdom emphasizing the prophylactic power of dirt, the shame attached to naked bodies deterred their comprehensive washing. “I am over sixty-eight and *never* have I washed *there!*” protested one woman who found herself in hospital and threatened with a bath.⁷ Educational manuals warned that warm baths would encourage pupils to “think evil thoughts” and, while wanting “to respect the mystery of cleanliness,” cautioned “that everything that goes beyond the boundaries of a healthy and necessary hygiene leads imperceptibly to unfortunate results.”⁸ Emilie Carles’s peasant father in the Haute-Savoie looked after his toddler granddaughter for weeks without changing her scratchy wool clothes because he could not bear the idea of seeing a female body—even that of a three-year-old.⁹

Oppressive modesty held even the upper classes in its grip: “No one in my family took a bath!” recalled the comtesse de Pange; “The idea of plunging into water up to our necks seemed pagan.” And when a doctor prescribed a bath to check the fever of the little comtesse de Broglie, the servants made

bath required thirty trips to the fountain. Mary Lynn Stewart, *For Health and Beauty: Physical Culture for Frenchwomen, 1880s–1930s* (Baltimore, 2001), 66.

⁶ Octave Du Mesnil, *L’hygiène à Paris: L’habitation du pauvre* (Paris, 1890), 23–24 and 31–32.

⁷ Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 148.

⁸ C. Pavet de Courteille, *Hygiène des collèges dits des maisons d’éducation* (Paris, 1827), 84; F. Foy, *Manuel d’hygiène; ou, Histoire des moyens propres à conserver la santé et à perfectionner le physique et le moral de l’homme* (Paris, 1845), 526.

⁹ Emilie Carles, *A Life of Her Own: The Transformation of a Countrywoman in Twentieth-Century France*, trans. Avriël H. Goldberger (New York, 1991), 122–23.

sure she wore a nightshirt.¹⁰ Even Liane de Pougy, who grew up to be one of the Belle Époque's great courtesans, learned to bathe wearing a chemise when she was a young girl.¹¹

For those who followed it, religion erected another barrier to personal hygiene, linked as it was to "notions of luxury and sensuousness." Church authorities considered the body "an instrument of sin" and worried that too much care for it would lead to "evil thoughts," as people looked at and touched themselves.¹² Magdeleine Peyronnet, describing her Carmelite convent in the 1930s, painted a dreadful picture: "No washstand, soap, or toothbrush. Ablutions, carried out with a rag already used by others and dipped in a little water, touched only hands and face. On the first Thursday of every month, a special basin was brought round the cells for nuns to wash their feet—no higher than the ankles. All other parts were out of bounds; cleaning or touching them would be a mortal sin."¹³ "Immaculate" was a moral state, not a physical one.

Religious or republican, this aversion to naked bodies impeded the nation's efforts to improve the state of its sanitation—a sort of domestic *mission civilisatrice*.¹⁴ Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, schools set

¹⁰ Comtesse de Pange, *Comment j'ai vu 1900* (Paris, 1975), 86. The *peignoir de bain*, according to Olivier Le Goff, represented a revealing compromise between modesty and hygiene. Olivier Le Goff, *L'invention du confort: Naissance d'une forme sociale* (Lyon, 1994), 43.

¹¹ Liane de Pougy, *My Blue Notebooks* (New York, 1979), 100; cited in Stewart, *For Health and Beauty*, 81.

¹² Julia Csergo, *Liberté, égalité, propreté: La morale de l'hygiène au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1988), 32; Pierre Levêque, "Avant-propos," in *Éducation et hygiène du corps à travers l'histoire*, Actes du colloque de l'Association Interuniversitaire de l'Est (Dijon, September 26–27, 1989), ed. Pierre Levêque (Dijon, 1991), ii; and Claude Langlois, "Catholics and Seculars," in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, vol. 1, *Conflicts and Divisions*, ed. Pierre Nora, with Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York, 1996), 124; my thanks to Vicki Caron for this citation. On the other hand, monasteries were often oases of cleanliness. See Witold Rybczynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York, 1986), 28–29. Lawrence Wright notes that in an earlier period monasteries were the guardians of sanitation and "pioneers of water supply and drainage"; in one English monastery, the routine called for warm water and soap for baths up to four times a year, head shaving every three weeks, and a foot bath every Saturday. Lawrence Wright, *Clean and Decent: The Fascinating History of the Bathroom and the Water Closet and of Sundry Habits, Fashions, and Accessories of the Toilet, Principally in Great Britain, France, and America* (New York, 1960), 25–26.

¹³ Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York, 1994), 182.

¹⁴ Olivier Faure, "Hygiène, hygiénisme, et santé publique en France, XIX–XXe siècle," in *À votre santé! Éducation et santé sous la IVe République*, ed. Didier Nourrisson (Saint-Étienne, 2002), 23–27.

out to reform pupils' "habits of order and cleanliness."¹⁵ Often collaborating with local *commissions d'hygiène*—groups of medical men and other concerned experts, usually under the authority of the police—they called for better facilities so that children could accustom themselves to drinking clean water, washing themselves regularly, and using amenities more commodious than the feces-covered holes in the ground or courtyard latrines most were used to.¹⁶

An 1865 law for "the care of bodily cleanliness" required teachers to make sure that students washed faces, necks, hands, and feet, that hair was free of parasites, and that underwear was acceptably clean. Lessons hammered home these simple rules: don't lick your fingers before you turn a page; don't pick your nose; don't scratch your pimples; and, above all, keep your mouth clean. In a world without toothpaste, schools taught pupils to use a bit of warm, soapy water to clean their mouths after every meal.¹⁷ Textbooks told students to change their underwear every few days, condemned corsets, extolled the virtues of potable water and ventilation, and tacked on the moral lesson that "[good] health required sobriety, temperance, exercise, and serenity."¹⁸

The cleanliness curriculum expanded under the Ferry Laws of the 1880s and ran the length of a student's school career.¹⁹ Even so, progress came

¹⁵ République Française, Département de la Seine, Ville de Paris, Commission des Logements Insalubres, *Rapport général sur les travaux de la commission pendant les années 1862, 1863, 1864, et 1865* (Paris, 1866), 10–11, in Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), Paris, F.⁸ carton 211, Rapports de la commission des Logements Insalubres.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris (hereafter APP), Conseil d'Hygiène Publique et de Salubrité du Département de la Seine, *Rapports sur les travaux des Commissions d'Hygiène du Département de la Seine et des Communes de Saint-Cloud, Sèvres, et Meudon en 1900: Rapport général au Conseil d'Hygiène de la Seine par le Docteur A. Le Roy Des Barres* (Paris, 1902), 8e arrondissement, 75–78.

¹⁷ Julia Csergo, "Propreté et enfance au XIXe siècle," in *Éducation à la santé, XIXe–XXe siècle*, ed. Didier Nourrisson (Rennes, 2002), 47–50; Georges Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, 1988), 206–7. And see Catherine Rollet, "History of the Health Notebook in France: A Stake for Mothers, Doctors, and the State," *Dynamis* (2003): 143–46.

¹⁸ Stewart, *For Health and Beauty*, 70–72. And see Brigitte Sandrin Berthon, *Apprendre la santé à l'école* (Paris, 1997), 9.

¹⁹ See "Arrêté du Ministre de l'Instruction Publique, fixant le nouveau programme de l'enseignement secondaire classique dans les classes de lettres (28 janvier 1890)," *Recueil des lois et actes de l'instruction publique (année 1890, premier semestre)*, 105–6; "Circulaire relative à une nouvelle répartition des matières de l'enseignement scientifique dans les classes supérieures des lettres (12 août 1890)," in *Circulaires et instructions officielles relatives à l'instruction publique*, vol. 11, *June 1889–December 1893* (Paris, 1894), 280; Adrien Proust, *Douze conférences d'hygiène, rédigées conformément au plan d'études du 12 août 1890*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1895), cited in Barnes,

slowly. Dr. Depouilly, examining young students in “one of the least working-class quarters of Paris” in 1900, found that only fourteen of the forty had any experience of a bathtub. Twelve knew what a sponge was for; the others had never washed anything more than their hands and faces.²⁰

Few teachers could have reported the improvements that Paul-Edouard Glath brought to his school in the village of Bousseviller, in Alsace. Arriving there in 1924, Glath found that his students’ habits “left much to be desired.” The school’s privies served mostly for dumping garbage, and its lone water pump in the courtyard did not work.²¹ None of his students had a toothbrush at home or, in fact, had ever used one. A natural reformer, Glath attacked the filth and neglect he found everywhere. He had the children collect snails and sold them to pay for a washroom, fed by water piped in from his own residence next door, and glasses, toothbrushes, and soap dishes for all the students. He further made sure that the children had regular medical and dental exams. At a time when, according to Glath, 87.5 percent of the French population had never visited a dentist and only 38 percent brushed their teeth “regularly,” the students in Bousseviller now practiced the most impeccable oral hygiene (see fig. 2).²²

Like the schools, the army of the Third Republic made itself the agent of modern hygiene. Military officials had long complained about the poor physical quality of recruits, and Second Empire draft boards had often noted “the extraordinary filth in which countrymen wallowed.”²³ The army managed to effect some small reforms in the 1850s. The first Imperial school of military health was created in 1856, and new rules substituted individual mess tins for the big collective tins in which spoons and fingers had previously intermin-

The Great Stink, 174–76; and Ernestine Wirth, *La future ménagère: Lectures et leçons sur l'économie domestique, la science du ménage, l'hygiène, les qualités et les connaissances nécessaires à une maîtresse de maison; À l'usage des écoles et des pensionnats de demoiselles* (Paris, 1882), 385–91.

²⁰ Csergo, “Propreté et enfance,” 57.

²¹ Paul-Edouard Glath, *L'hygiène à l'école et au village* (Niederbronn, 1946), 33.

²² *Ibid.*, 41–46. Glath refers to a study of German schools showing that 42 percent of students had their own toothbrush, 18 percent used the “family toothbrush,” and 39 percent never brushed. Moreover, of those who did clean their teeth, a substantial proportion did so only on Sunday.

²³ Archives de l'État-Major de l'Armée de Terre, Service Historique (hereafter Service Historique), 1 M 2200—Commission d'Hygiène; Conseil de Santé, note from the War Ministry, “Observations et propositions du Conseil de Santé,” December 1839; note from Dr. A. F. Malapert, secretary of the Conseil de Santé des Armées, “Considérations hygiéniques sur l'habillement des troupes, et sur les causes de maladies qui existent dans l'armée,” February 13, 1840.

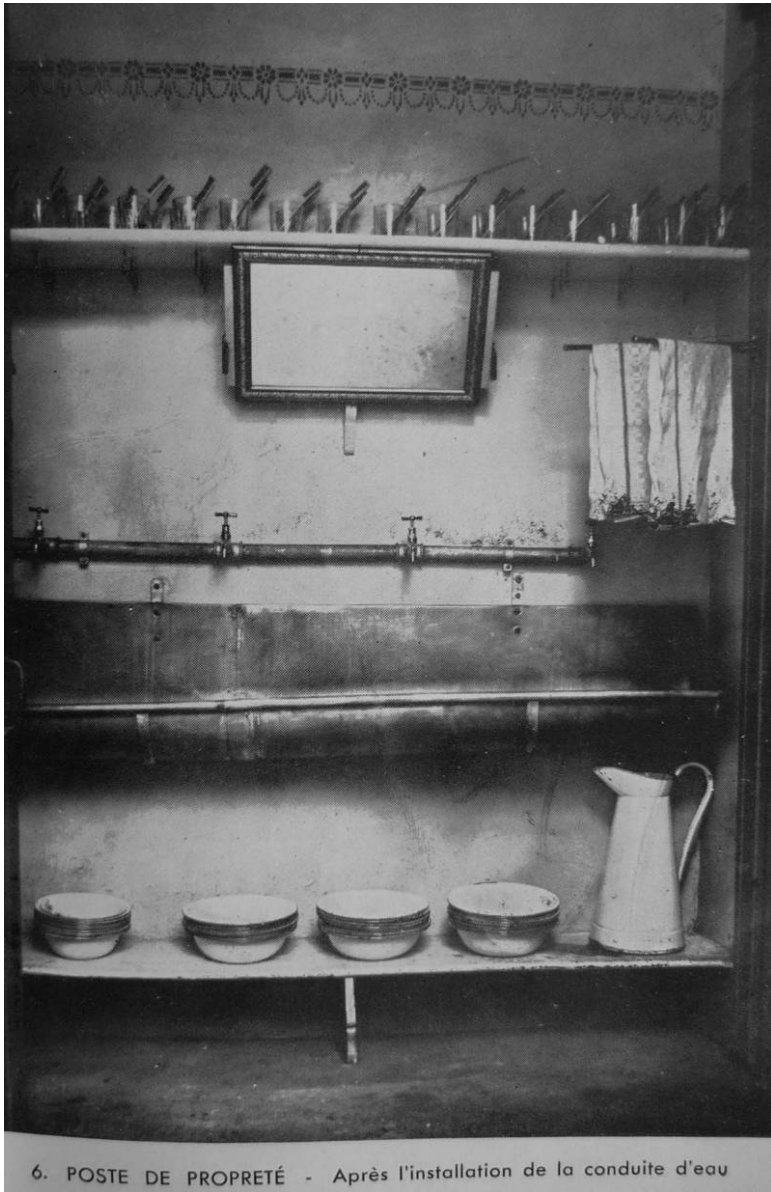


FIG. 2.—*Poste de propreté—après l'installation de la conduite d'eau* [Cleanup area—after the installation of running water], classroom of Paul-Edouard Glath, Bousseviller, Alsace, photograph. Notice the neat line of glasses with toothbrushes in them. Paul-Edouard Glath, *L'hygiène à l'école et au village* (Niederbronn, 1946), following page 32. Permission courtesy of Dr. Colette Sichel-Glath.

gled.²⁴ After the shattering defeat of 1870–71 raised the stakes, reformers concluded that dirt and ignorance made for bad soldiers. An army composed of literate, healthy recruits, they reasoned, would be the keystone of national revival, particularly as the habits they learned under the colors followed them back into civilian life.

The program for healthier soldiers called for both better facilities and better instruction. The army recognized first the need to get recruits out of barracks that often dated back to the days of Vauban; to install plumbing for latrines and showers; to build quarters with sufficient air, light, and personal space; and to give the soldiers lighter clothing, beds without lice, and strict training in habits that would support improved personal hygiene. By the 1890s—in theory, at least—the army welcomed new conscripts to the barracks with inoculations, haircuts, toothbrushes, and a change of underwear. It provided sinks for washing, latrines, even showers. And it expected soldiers to use them—often in the face of significant resistance from young men afraid of water and disgusted by the indecency of collective bathing. Indeed, G. Tellier's *Manuel d'hygiène* for soldiers (1902) prescribed a regime of washing, bathing, and teeth cleaning that reached well beyond the standards reigning in France in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁵

It was easier to write regulations than to impose them on soldiers who had grown up believing in “the traditional virtues attributed to grime” and the “profound indecency of male nudity.” Odile Roynette relates the story of a young artilleryman in Douai in 1903, taken with his unit to the local bathhouse for the regulation shower. Singled out by his commander for his particular dirtiness, “since he refused to wash out of a fear of water,” this soldier was dragged into the shower and held there by his comrades. Eight days later he was dead. No one could say what killed him, exactly, but suspicion fell upon the “horror provoked by the water running down his body,” and the officers involved received disciplinary sanction.²⁶

Moreover, the actual physical state of the barracks did not always match the demands of military directives. Reports from various garrisons to the Lachaud parliamentary commission, established in 1913 to look into the state of hygiene in the army, paint a picture of mixed conditions. Soldiers ate much better than most of their civilian counterparts, with lots of meat, vegetables, and potatoes. Most quarters had running water, although it was not always dependably free of coliform bacteria, but they often lacked adequate shower

²⁴ Jean Des Cilleuls, “L'école du service de santé militaire,” *Revue Historique de l'Armée* (October 1954): 157; Odile Roynette, “Bon pour le service”: *L'expérience de la caserne en France à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 2000), 141.

²⁵ Dr. G. Tellier, *La santé du soldat: Manuel d'hygiène pratique à l'usage des hommes de troupe* (Paris, 1902), 14–23.

²⁶ Roynette, “Bon pour le service,” 161–62.

space and convenient washrooms and toilets. Many commanders told the commission that the latrines sat uncomfortably close to the regimental kitchens.²⁷ Nonetheless, in a country where only a tiny proportion of young men had ever seen any of these amenities, even imperfect conditions were a revelation, and a young man of military age had less chance of dying of disease in a barracks than under his own roof. Young recruits returning home “stood out as less habitually dirty than their peers.”²⁸

Those who taught the virtues of cleanliness often salted this practical message with morality, as in the 1871 primer telling elementary students that “dirty bodies and clothes bespeak a dirty soul.”²⁹ Science, laying out the real genealogy of disease, tended to separate hygiene from virtue. It nevertheless failed to detach the instrumental elements of public policy from the instinctive disgust that the cleaner classes felt for the dirtier and the fear of anarchy and pollution inspired in the former by the latter. “Dirt,” as the anthropologist Mary Douglas famously wrote, “offends against order.” The “civilizing mission” of the schools and the military and the architects of public housing always remained at some level a war against social revolution.³⁰

²⁷ See the dossiers on the Parliamentary inquiry into the state of hygiene in the army, reported by Dr. Edouard Lachaud, deputy from the Corrèze and president of the Commission d’Hygiène de la Chambre des Députés, in *Service Historique*, 1 M 2200.

²⁸ On epidemics in the barracks, see a review of an article by a Dr. Puissan, “médecin principal de l’armée” [originally published in *Revue Scientifique* (1er semestre 1913): 683], *Revue d’Hygiène et de Police Sanitaire* (1914): 48–50; APP, “Causes de l’absence d’épidémies de fièvres éruptives dans le 1er corps d’armée de son bon état de sanitaire général,” 358; and Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, 149, 300. See also a manuscript by Dr. Gély-Guinard, *120e Régiment d’Infanterie: Relations entre le travail et le repos quotidienn de la troupe; De l’entraînement physique et de son action sur le moral; Action du café, du vin, de l’eau-de-vie sur l’organisme fatigué; Conditions hygiéniques de la partie moyenne de la Meuse—ses influences aux diverses saisons de l’année sur la troupe carnée et au travail* (n.d.), available at *Service Historique*; and André Tournade, *La pratique de l’hygiène en campagne* (Paris, 1918), 35 and 151.

²⁹ Le Docteur Descieux, *Leçons d’hygiène à l’usage des enfants des écoles primaires* (Paris, 1871), 57, 62.

³⁰ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York, 1996), 2. On the link between class and sanitation, see Neil Blackadder, “Merde! Performing Filth in the Bourgeois Public Sector,” in *Filth, Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life*, ed. William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson (Minneapolis, 2005), 185. Barnes writes that the bourgeois belief in the virtues of “cleanliness and order” helped them “rationalize the calamities that seemed to result from the poverty, inequality, and squalor to which industrialization and urbanization gave birth.” Barnes, *The Great Stink*, 93. On the cultural politics of architecture, see Monique Eleb and Anne Debarre, *L’invention de l’habitation moderne: Paris 1880–1914; Architectures de la vie privée, suite* (Paris, 1995), 215–50; and Jean Taricat and Martine Villars, *Le logement à bon marché: Chronique; Paris, 1850–1930* (Boulogne, 1982), 15 and 42–43.

Strategy for social stability or simple project of social improvement, better hygiene depended on access to the basic necessities. Of course, culture always set the parameters of behavior; higher incomes did not automatically lead to better plumbing, or better plumbing to more diligent washing (the proletarian bathtub full of coal was a common metaphor for popular insouciance). Nevertheless, it is certain that hygiene tended to become more conscientious as it became more convenient.

WASHING AWAY THE PAST

The indispensable element for such convenience was water. Public authorities, even before the age of germ theory, understood that clean water was the key to fighting epidemics and reducing mortality.³¹ Without it, wrote M.-E. Cheysson in 1905, “[there is] neither propriety, nor hygiene, nor health, nor dignity, . . . nor virtue.”³² Paris was poorly provisioned compared to other industrial capitals but better off than most French provincial towns and the countryside.³³ A 1937 survey commissioned by Minister of Public Health Henri Queuille found that of France’s thirty-eight thousand communes, fewer than a third had a reliable system of water distribution. Fewer still had the means to get rid of that water once it was used.³⁴ The engineers and public health doctors who made up the hygiene commissions and led the campaigns against *logements insalubres* (unsanitary housing) focused from their inception on cleaning up the water supply and expanding usage. They considered local requests for money to clean up dirty canals and construct sewer systems, supervised teams of inspectors who looked into complaints about landlords who would not unblock drains or maintain outhouses, counted dirty wells and figured mortality rates by neigh-

³¹ Jean-Pierre Goubert, *La conquête de l'eau: L'avènement de la santé à l'âge industriel* (Paris, 1986), 7–8.

³² M.-E. Cheysson, *Le confort du logement populaire* (Paris, 1905), 3.

³³ Département de la Seine, Ville de Paris, Commission des Logements Insalubres, *Rapport général sur les travaux de la commission pendant les années 1862, 1863, 1864, et 1865*, 8, in AN, Paris, F.⁸ carton 211; and see John Merriman, *The Red City: Limoges and the French Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1985), 100, 272n. For comparisons with London, see Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness*, 180; and Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* (New York, 2003), 128.

³⁴ Henri Dannaud, ed., *Enquête sur l'habitation rurale en France: Enquête entreprise à la demande de la Société des Nations sur la situation économique, sociale, et sanitaire des campagnes au point de vue de logement; Tome I: Considérations générales sur la situation de l'habitation dans le cadre de la vie rurale et de l'aménagement des campagnes avec plans et photographie; Et Tome II: Rapports départementaux . . .* (Lille, 1939), 32–33.

borhood, and recommended policies to reduce the toll of cholera and typhoid fever (see fig. E1, available in the online version of *JMH*).³⁵

Their efforts ran into consistent roadblocks. Some landlords simply resisted the cost of connecting their buildings to water pipes and sewers. Others, willing to bear the initial cost, feared that meters measuring water usage for entire buildings—providing no incentive for inhabitants to economize and no easy way to spread the cost equitably among them—would bankrupt them down the road.³⁶ Local governments balked at the price of public works. Professional hygienists called for the construction of municipal *bains-douches* (shower baths), and some did get built, but not nearly enough. “In these conditions,” sighed one member of the Paris housing commission, “the hygienists’ work looks singularly like that of a certain Sisyphus.”³⁷

These limitations notwithstanding, by the beginning of the twentieth century new public works projects had brought running water to millions of French families. A few simple figures will illustrate the scale of the change. Eugen Weber cites the case of a doctor living in the center of Paris under the Second Empire who paid his water hauler seventy-two francs a year for 14,000 liters of water; by 1906, the same sum paid for 206,000 liters of tap water. By another measure, Jean and Françoise Fourastié estimated that the cubic meter of water that had cost a manual laborer 20 wage hours in 1840 cost him only 0.3 wage hours by 1973.³⁸

As running water became cheaper, household consumption of it increased exponentially and accompanied a secular decline in urban mortality. For all that progress, however, French mortality rates remained consistently above those in much of urban, industrial Europe. Infant mortality in France, to take one key indicator, fell by 64.1 percent between 1901 and 1948—from 142 per 1,000 live births to 51. This represented a smaller decline than that achieved in Holland, England, Denmark, Switzerland, Sweden, the United States, and Finland but a bigger drop than in Italy, Belgium, Norway, and Germany. On the other hand, the real rate of infant mortality in France left it in the middle

³⁵ See the annual volumes of the Préfet du Police, Conseil d’Hygiène Publique et de Salubrité du Département de la Seine, *Rapports sur les travaux des commissions d’hygiène du Département de la Seine, des Communes de Saint-Cloud, Sèvres, et Meudon*, APP. Any of these volumes provides an excellent illustration of the extent of this work.

³⁶ See the discussion in *Revue d’Hygiène et de Police Sanitaire* (1900): 1090–93, APP; see also Paul Breton, ed., *L’art ménager français* (Paris, 1952), 482.

³⁷ Dr. O. Du Mesnil, “La question des courettes de Paris,” in Ville de Paris, Commission des Logements Insalubres, *Rapport général sur les travaux de la commission pendant les années 1890–1891–1892*, Annexe IV, Salubrité des habitations, 64.

³⁸ Eugen Weber, *France: Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 256n; Jean and Françoise Fourastié, *Histoire du confort* (Paris, 1973), 65, 72.

TABLE 1
INFANT MORTALITY SINCE 1900

Country	Mortality per 100,000 (1901)	Mortality per 100,000 (1948)	Percentage of reduction	Index of infant mortality (Sweden 1948 = 100)
France	142	51	64.1	222
Germany	206	77	62.7	335
Italy	166	70	57.8	305
Belgium	140	65	53.5	283
Holland	149	29	80.7	126
England	152	34	77.7	148
Denmark	137	35	74.5	152
Switzerland	134	36	73.3	157
Scotland	129	45	65.1	196
Spain	186	69	63.6	300
Norway	91	35	61.5	152
Sweden	101	23	77.3	100
Czechoslovakia	147	83	43.5	361
United States*	100	32	68.0	139
Canada	98	45	54.0	196
Ireland	99	49	54.5	213
Finland	146	52	64.3	226

SOURCE.—M. Moine, Ch. Candiotti, and F. Allison, “Évolution de la mortalité infantile depuis 1900,” in Ministère de la Santé Publique, *Recueil des travaux de l’Institut National d’Hygiène: Travaux des sections et mémoires originaux, tome IV, vol. 1* (Paris, 1950), 774.

* White and “colored” populations in 1947: the overall rate was 33.7 percent, but the percentage of decline was 31.4 among whites and 52.5 among “people of color.”

of the European pack, with twice the rates of the leaders, Sweden and Holland (see table 1).³⁹

A cold winter or hot summer, an outbreak of typhoid fever or measles might reverse this decline temporarily, while the pace and scale of change varied by geography and social class. Provincial towns and the countryside trailed larger cities. Buildings in rich neighborhoods had better plumbing than those in poor ones. Those who inhabited dilapidated, tightly packed “pigeonholes”—what

³⁹ Ministère de la Santé Publique, “La question des taudis dans les différents pays moyens mis en oeuvre pour y remédier,” in *Recueil des travaux de l’Institut National d’Hygiène: Travaux des sections et mémoires originaux, tome IV, vol. 1* (Paris, 1950), 217, 312–13, 317.

was called “working-class housing”—fell sick and died in disproportionate numbers.⁴⁰

“In all the [working-class] houses we visited,” Dr. Depouilly told his fellow Parisian hygienists in 1900, “dirtiness was invariably tied to the lack of water; and the greater that lack, the higher the mortality.” He compared two working-class buildings in the same quarter, one of which had only a cold-water spigot in the courtyard while the other had running water on every floor. Even though the first was less crowded, it had twice the mortality of the better-equipped building.⁴¹ In the mid-1930s, the mortality rate in the bourgeois quarter of the Porte Dauphine was 38 per 100,000; in the *îlot insalubre* of Saint-Victor-Sorbonne, it reached 508 per 100,000. Other studies found similar conditions in Lyon and Nantes.⁴²

BETTER HOUSING, BETTER HYGIENE

A liberated France, on the doorstep of national renewal, understood the importance of decent living conditions to “the advent of a more productive, prosperous, and united society.”⁴³ Yet its housing stock bore all the marks of thirty years of neglect and perverse public policy. For example, legislation passed in 1914 had frozen rents to prevent French soldiers from being stabbed in the back by rapacious landlords. But postwar governments never dared to reverse a popular law, and the result was to lock up the market in private building construction, since who would build new housing or renovate older buildings if they could not recoup their investment?⁴⁴ The state tried to fill the breach with *Habitations à Bon Marché*, a campaign to build affordable public housing. The level of *conforts* envisioned for these units varied considerably. Planners gave more expensive middle-class flats fuller facilities than those proposed for smaller, cheaper ones meant for the lower rungs of the income

⁴⁰ On the horrors of working-class housing, see G. Heurtaux-Varavaux, *Enquête sur la condition des petits logements dans la ville de Nantes* (Paris, 1888).

⁴¹ Depouilly, “L’eau dans les logements ouvriers,” 1087–89. And see Du Mesnil, *L’hygiène à Paris*, 13–14; and Heurtaux-Varavaux, *Enquête sur la condition des petits logements*, 4–7.

⁴² On Lyon, in particular, see Philippe Dufieux, “À propos de l’hygiène de Lyon (1800–1960),” in *Le confort moderne dans l’habitat*, proceedings of a cycle of conferences, Conseil d’Architecture, d’Urbanisme, et de l’Environnement du Rhône and Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon, January–April 2006 (Lyon, 2007), 16–17.

⁴³ Susanna Magri, “L’émergence du logement social: Objectifs et moyens d’une réforme,” in *Logement et habitat: L’état des saviors*, ed. Marion Segaud, Catherine Nonvalet, and Jacques Brun (Paris, 1998), 37.

⁴⁴ René Souriac and Patrick Cabanal, *Histoire de France, 1750–1995*, vol. 2, *Société, Culture* (Toulouse, 1996), 227.

ladder.⁴⁵ Besides, in the face of dire public finances, nothing much came of these plans, so between the wars France put up only 1.5 million new units, compared to the 3.7 million put up in England and the 4 million in Germany.⁴⁶

The survey carried out by the Vichy government in 1941–42 confirmed this bleak picture of decrepit buildings.⁴⁷ The average age of French housing was fifty-seven years; one building in five had been erected before 1850. Aix-en-Provence had the oldest average, eighty-six years. Lens had the youngest, an average of fifteen years and no buildings older than ninety-five years—the legacy of war and reconstruction. Parisian buildings averaged seventy-three years in age. Only 7 percent had been built since 1921, whereas 27 percent had gone up before the fall of the July Monarchy in 1848. The oldest buildings in the dense, crowded center of the city dated back on average more than a century; three-quarters had gone up before Napoleon III became emperor. Outlying *arrondissements* had newer but often more shoddily built structures. Even in the fashionable western neighborhoods, buildings were on average sixty years old—although only 6 percent dated back to the Second Republic. Rural dwellings were even older—113 years on average outside the war-scarred northeast, with 59 percent more than a century old. In Normandy, the average country house was 137 years old; 84 percent were more than 100 years old.

Marshal Pétain's government also inquired about *conforts* (water, electricity, gas, and a sewer connection) and, unsurprisingly, discovered that the most ancient housing had the fewest. In Aix-en-Provence, with the oldest housing stock in urban France, a quarter of buildings had no *conforts* at all. Across the country, a comfortable majority of buildings had at least water and electricity,⁴⁸ while some 5 percent reported having *tous confort*s (all the above amenities), stretching from 1 percent in many cities to a quarter of the buildings in the resort towns of the Riviera.

The older and more dispersed homes in agricultural areas enjoyed even less access to amenities. Twenty-eight percent had none at all. A mere 14 percent had both water and electricity—the average home sat twenty-eight meters

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Archives de Paris, VD⁵ 1 Salubrité Publique, “Aménagement de l'Îlot insalubre no. 1.”

⁴⁶ Belgium in 1930 had a population of 8,092,000; and the Netherlands, 7,936,000; as against France's 41,835,000 people. Dudley Kirk, *Europe's Population in the Interwar Years* (Geneva, 1946), 258. On the Loucheur law and interwar building, see Ministère de la Santé Publique, “La question des taudis,” 299; Emile Malespine, *L'urbanisme nouveau: L'hygiène et l'habitation* (Paris, 1930), 56; and W. Brian Newsome, *French Urban Planning, 1940–1968: The Construction and Deconstruction of an Authoritarian System* (New York, 2009), 27.

⁴⁷ Lucienne Cahen, “Évolution des conditions de logement en France depuis cent ans,” *Études et Conjonctures* (1957): 1183–86.

⁴⁸ Water to the courtyard or the landing did not mean water in the flat—and certainly not hot water.

from the nearest water—and only 1.2 percent added central heating to that. In the most backward region, Brittany, over half the houses had no *conforts* at all. A slim 1 percent had water plus electricity, and central heating was unknown.⁴⁹ The Vichy survey did not even bother to ask about bathtubs and toilets—presumably, because they were so rare.

By the end of the war, France's housing crisis had worsened considerably, as fighting more extensive than anything the country had seen between 1914 and 1918 or in the spring of 1940 wreaked further devastation on its infrastructure. Brian Newsome estimates that 16 percent of French buildings, over 2 million structures, were damaged between 1940 and 1945, a quarter of them beyond repair. Five million victims of war joined the even larger number of “victims of life,” already condemned to “horrible conditions in the slums [*taudis*] of French cities” (see fig. E2, available in the online version of *JMH*).⁵⁰

The Fourth Republic, new to power and with a full agenda of social reforms, was not blind to the problem but found itself hamstrung by the same old difficulties, above all, the gruesome state of public finances. New laws, in a sop to renters, imposed new restrictions on landlords and builders and introduced new subsidies.⁵¹ Some *taudis* were razed, but most remained. Photographs of the Lyon slums, even into the 1950s, depict dwellings that would not look out of place in the shantytowns of Bogota or Nairobi.⁵² In the ten years following the Liberation, France constructed fewer than half-a-million new *logements*.⁵³

Curiously, the new regime faced little public pressure to improve the situation, perhaps because although housing in France was often substandard, it was also cheap. In August 1948, respondents to a survey conducted by the Institut Français de l'Opinion Publique agreed 46 percent to 22 percent that “the French are badly housed because they pay insufficient rents.” And yet the “housing crisis” did not make the top-ten list of “the most urgent tasks confronting the new National Assembly” in March 1947. In October 1946, only 7 percent named housing as their family's most pressing difficulty; a year later, 2 percent did.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Cahen, “Evolution des conditions de logement,” 1185–87.

⁵⁰ Danièle Voldman, *La reconstruction des villes françaises de 1940 à 1954* (Paris, 1997), 25; Newsome, *French Urban Planning*, 43, 84. And see Catherine Dupuy, “Un logement pour vivre mieux: Enjeux communistes du logement social dans une ville de la banlieue parisienne, Genevilliers (années 50–années 70),” *Cahiers d'Histoire: Revue d'histoire critique* (2006): 27.

⁵¹ Elsbeth Kalf and Lucie Lemaître, *Le logement insalubre et l'hygiénisation de la vie quotidienne: Paris (1830–1990)* (Paris, 2008), 217.

⁵² Dufieux, “À propos de l'hygiène de Lyon,” 8, 26.

⁵³ Anne-Marie Fribourg, “Évolution des politiques du logement depuis 1950,” in Segaud et al., *Logement et habitat*, 223–24; Newsome, *French Urban Planning*, 103.

⁵⁴ Institut Français de l'Opinion Publique, *Sondages* (March 10–16, 1947): 52. Middle-aged men were most likely to feel that rents were generally too low; workers least so. See *Sondages* (December 1, 1947): 250; and *Sondages* (August 1, 1948): 160.

TABLE 2
PERCENTAGE OF INCOME DEVOTED TO RENT

Country	Before 1940	In 1948
England	22–27	15–20
Netherlands	20.5	12.5
Switzerland	20–25	13.5–17
Australia	15–20	...
Denmark	13.4	8.8
France	6–8	1–3
Italy	25	2

SOURCE.—The figures on income spent on housing come from the report by M. Marrane presented to the Congrès International de l’Habitation et de l’Urbanisme, Zurich, June 1948, published in Ministère de la Santé Publique, “La question des taudis dans les différents pays moyens mis en oeuvre pour y remédier,” in *Recueil des travaux de l’Institut National d’Hygiène: Travaux des sections et mémoires originaux, tome IV, vol. 1* (Paris, 1950), 249.

The French did spend less on their housing than other Europeans did: 6–8 percent of their income before 1940 and a mere 1–3 percent in 1948, when the English were paying 15–20 percent of their income for housing; the Dutch, 12.5 percent; and the Danes, 8.8 percent (see table 2). The Institut National d’Hygiène listed with some outrage some of the things the French preferred to pay for: the national outlay of 27 billion francs for housing in 1948 paled next to 107 billion for tobacco, 44 billion for newspapers, and 140 billion for *apéritifs*.⁵⁵ Poverty did not provide a full explanation for the lack of space and *conforts*. The French made choices.

THE STUFF OF HYGIENE

As the country recovered from the trauma of defeat and economic stagnation, however, these choices began to change. Kristin Ross, in her highly speculative book *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, quotes Roland Barthes on the “great yen for cleanliness” that overtook the country in the postwar era.⁵⁶ Whether or not, as Ross asserts, this represented some psychic compensation for the loss of empire, there is no question that the 1950s witnessed a new emphasis on personal hygiene, as the French refashioned their old relationship to water and soap and developed a new sensibility about what constituted acceptable hygienic practice.

⁵⁵ See the report by Eugène Claudius-Petit, the minister of Reconstruction and Urbanism, in Ministère de la Santé Publique, “La question des taudis,” 249. See also Rebecca Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (Cambridge, 2011), 85.

⁵⁶ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 73.

Practice naturally remained tethered to the expense and inconvenience of keeping clean. The hygiene revolution of the 1950s therefore depended on the expansion and improvement of French housing stock. It required the better part of three decades for the supply of decent housing to catch up to demand. Into the early 1950s, the French continued to build only 70,000 or 80,000 new units a year, compared to, say, the 435,000 built in West Germany in 1951 alone. The pace of construction accelerated through the 1950s, and by the 1970s France was building 400,000 to 500,000 *logements* annually—almost exclusively state or state-subsidized housing—fueled by a substantial rise in rents.⁵⁷

A 1951 U.N. report on the proportion of lodgings equipped with bathrooms ranked France, with 6 percent, barely above Spain (3 percent) and Italy (2 percent) and far behind the Swiss (75 percent), the Germans (42 percent), and even the Belgians (14 percent).⁵⁸ Moreover, according to the *Cahiers d'Enseignement Ménager Familial*, even those residents who had bathtubs often did not use them—because heating was so bad and homes so chilly—making baths at least uncomfortable and perhaps dangerous.⁵⁹

The first two postwar censuses, taken in 1946 and 1954, describe the slow but steady advance of amenities (see table 3).⁶⁰ In 1946, of more than 8 million buildings, 37 percent had running water, with the usual social and geographical variations. In rural communes, only 18 percent had it; in Paris, 97 percent; and in all cities of more than 50,000 inhabitants, 84 percent. More relevant to the actual state of popular hygiene is the proportion of individual dwellings

⁵⁷ Nicholas Herpin and Daniel Verger, *La consommation des Français*, vol. 1, *Alimentation, habillement, logement* (Paris, 2000), 89. On the increase in housing construction, see John Ardagh, *France in the 1980s: The Definitive Book* (New York, 1982), 290; Fribourg, “Évolution des politiques,” 224–25; Pierre-René Lemas, “Avant-propos,” in Segaud et al., *Logement et habitat*, 1; and Kalff and Lemaître, *Le logement insalubre*, 207. On the disproportion of state-financed construction, see Newsome, *French Urban Planning*, 103.

⁵⁸ Breton, *L'art ménager français*, 549.

⁵⁹ Albert Laprade [architecte en chef des bâtiments civils et palais nationaux], “Logements, chauffage, et hygiène,” *Cahiers d'Enseignement Ménager Familial* [Union National des Professeurs et Monitrices d'Enseignement Ménager Familial] (January–February 1956), n.p.

⁶⁰ Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (INSEE), *Résultats statistiques du recensement général de la population effectué le 10 mars 1946* (Paris, 1948–53); and INSEE, *Recensement général de la population de mai 1954: Résultats du sondage; Population-Ménages-Logement* (Paris, 1955). Figures are not exactly comparable between the two censuses. For example, the 1946 census asked about “bathrooms” (*salles de bain*), whereas the 1954 census asked about “bathtubs” and “showers.” Also, when the 1946 census asked about running water, it did not distinguish clearly between running water in buildings and running water in individual *logements*.

TABLE 3
COMFORTS IN FRENCH HOUSEHOLDS, 1946 AND 1954

	No. HOUSEHOLDS (Thousands)		RUNNING WATER		SANITARY INSTALLATIONS		WATER CLOSETS	
	1946	1954	1946 % in the Home	1954 % in the Home	1946 % with a Bathroom*	1954 % with a Bathub or Shower	1946 % with One per Family**	1954 % in the Home
Rural communes	5,652.4	5,555.5	12.9	34.3	1.6 (57.8)	4.0 (93.9)	32.4 (31.4)	10.8 (23.5)
Towns of <50,000 inhabitants	3,981.5	4,347.0	46.1	71.4	7.1 (54.0)	12.9 (81.6)	53.0 (10.3)	33.2 (7.7)
Cities of 50,000-100,000 (provinces)	467.3	519.7	57.2	80.4	7.8 (49.1)	15.8 (76.9)	48.7 (6.4)	38.4 (4.8)
Cities of 50,000-100,000 (suburbs)	255.7	369.0	73.4	81.6	12.8 (53.1)	15.8 (76.0)	56.9 (.5)	45.2 (5.6)
Cities of >100,000	1,284.5	1,430.8	65.7	81.8	10.5 (50.0)	16.6 (77.4)	51.9 (5.3)	43.1 (5.0)
Paris	1,030.3	1,179.5	76.5	78.1	16.6 (52.8)	19.4 (70.7)	51.7 (1.0)	45.9 (4.3)
All cities >50,000	3,037.8	3,499.0	68.7	80.4	12.3 (51.1)	17.3 (74.9)	51.8 (3.6)	43.6 (4.7)
France	12,671.7	13,401.5	36.9	58.4	5.1 (55.5)	10.4 (84.7)	43.5 (18.1)	26.6 (13.5)

SOURCE.—*Études et Conjoncture: Revue Mensuelle Évolution des Conditions de Logement en France depuis Cent Ans* (October–November 1957): 1222–23.

NOTE.—Numbers in parentheses indicate percentage of no response. WC = water closet.

* The presence of a bathroom does not necessarily indicate a shower, bathub, or even running water therein.

** Not necessarily in the home.

with *conforts*.⁶¹ Here—to take only the two most crucial conveniences, bathroom and water closet—the 1946 figures tell a less encouraging story. Eleven percent of *logements* had a bathroom, with or without running water; 30 percent had neither. Less than 1 percent had a shower (the 1946 census did not ask about bathtubs).

We should note, perhaps, the striking absence of information about bidets, not only in the 1946 figures but in all the censuses. This is curious simply because the bidet, of all the bathroom fixtures, is surely the one most commonly associated with France and with traditional *toilettes*, which included the regular washing of strategic parts rather than the whole body. It seems obvious, however, that the presence of bidets could not have outpaced the installation of running water.⁶²

Rural households lacked *conforts* in much greater proportion. Thirty-eight percent of the 5.6 million reported having no bathroom—which did not, in any case, necessarily indicate either running water or bathtub. None had a shower. Thirty-two percent had their own water closets, 7 percent shared with other families, 29 percent reported having no water closet at all. It is important to note, moreover, that in these instances “water closet” most often meant a *cabinet d’aisance*, that is, an outhouse. Cities fared a little better. Of more than 3 million households (excluding the 51.1 percent that did not answer the question), more than 70 percent had a bathroom of some sort, although only 1 percent had a shower. Fifty-two percent had their own water closet—again, rarely a flush toilet—while 43 percent shared, and only 1.6 percent had no facilities at all.

Naturally, not all cities offered the same level of hygienic convenience. Strasbourg, whose plumbing still bore its German birthmark, was best equipped: a third of dwellings had bathrooms and almost three-quarters a private water closet. Nice was close behind in bathrooms and ahead in private toilets. Paris occupied the center ground: 16.6 percent of apartments had bathrooms, and just over half had their own water closets. At the other end of the scale were Brest and Calais, where, respectively, 2.5 and 3.3 percent of *logements* had bathrooms. In Brest, 17.5 percent of these rare bathrooms were private, whereas two-thirds of households shared. In Calais, comparable figures were 50.9 percent and 48 percent.

The 1946 census captured the last moments of Old France. The next *recensement général*, in 1954, already gave evidence of the infrastructure changes that laid the groundwork for the hygiene revolution of the next twenty years. By 1954, in the cities, over 80 percent of dwellings had their own

⁶¹ The census figures are presented in Cahen, “Évolution des conditions de logement,” 1222–31.

⁶² Fanny Beaupré and Roger-Henri Gerrand, *Le confidant des dames: Le bidet du XVIIIe au XXe siècle; Histoire d’une intimité* (Paris, 1997), 151–53.

running water. One in six had a bathtub or shower; 44 percent, a toilet. Forty percent of households still shared facilities with other families, but now that more likely meant a toilet on the landing of the stairs and not an outhouse in the courtyard. Strasbourg, where 37.6 percent of dwellings were reported to have a bathtub or shower, remained the cleanest city in the country. In Paris, the figure was 19.4 percent—although in the ritzy Sixteenth Arrondissement, more than half the apartments had them; whereas in the poorer neighborhoods, only about one in ten did. Residents of the *quartiers populaires* were also more likely to use *W.C. collectifs*.

Opportunities for frequent and thorough washing were sparser in the countryside, but signs of progress were beginning to appear. Seventy-two percent of France's seven thousand rural communes still had no running water in 1954. Yet the proportion of dwellings that did have it had tripled in eight years. A slim 4 percent claimed a bathtub or shower, but with almost 94 percent of rural households failing to provide any information on the subject, it is impossible to know precisely.

The French economist Jean Fourastié and the American anthropologist Laurence Wylie leave the abstract world of census numbers to look at conditions on the ground. Fourastié examined the village of Douelle (in the *département* of Le Lot) at two moments—at the beginning and at the end of the *trentes glorieuses*, which transported Douelle from the seventeenth century into the twentieth.⁶³ By 1975, children grew ten centimeters taller and lived ten years longer than they had in 1946. Infant mortality—250 per thousand in the eighteenth century and 85 per thousand in the aftermath of the war—fell to 14 in 1975.

Well into the 1950s, most houses in Douelle had electricity but only one cold-water faucet. With only the most rudimentary facilities for washing, people rarely bothered. And with laundry still a backbreaking matter of boiling and cauldrons, they did not change their clothes very often. A regime of hard work and poor hygiene aged women with particular vengeance.

By 1975, almost half the population of Douelle lived in houses built since 1950, and these were loaded with modern conveniences. The majority had stoves, refrigerators, washing machines, and televisions (automobiles too). They do not seem to have made hygiene their top priority, however: of the 212 households, 210 had refrigerators, and 200 had televisions, but only 150 had indoor flush toilets. And even for 1975, Fourastié did not bother to count bathtubs and showers.

Wylie tells a similar tale of progress in the Vaucluse. When he and his family arrived in Peyrane in 1950, they entered a world of old houses with few

⁶³ Jean Fourastié, *Les trentes glorieuses; ou, La révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris, 1979), *passim*.

modern conveniences.⁶⁴ On the whole, he wrote, the Peyranais displayed an “indifference to modern plumbing.” Thanks to an ambitious mayor before World War I, the village had access to clean running water, but this did not translate into modern standards of hygiene. Many homes had no water closet at all. Instead, inhabitants used three public toilets—concrete outhouses periodically hosed out by the fire brigade. The Wylie family rented one of the rare houses in the village that had *tous comforts* but found they were “not very convenient and comfortable” and had not actually been used by the people who owned the house.

Both economic and cultural considerations, he observed, held the villagers back. Many Peyranais claimed to want modern *comforts* but either could not afford the renovations or feared advertising their prosperity to tax officials. That said, neither of the two richest farmers in the commune had running water in their houses, and one of the wealthiest mine owners lived in a house that lacked both running water and electricity. On the other hand, if Peyrane, like Douelle, still had one foot planted deeply in the past, it likewise serves as a measure of how quickly that past was transformed. When Wylie returned in 1959, he found porcelain sinks, water closets, and even the occasional bathtub, all connected to a modern sewage system.

THE GREAT LEAP FORWARD

The forward march of *propreté* in Douelle and Peyrane, however uneven, suggests that most people wanted cleaner bodies and, over the long term, seized the chance to add *comforts* to their lives. At the same time, it shows that the prospect of bathtubs and water closets did not by itself produce a demand for them—witness the Douellois’ preference for televisions over toilets. That demand had to be cultivated, both by explicit informational campaigns and by the natural effect of envy and imitation. None of this was unique to the 1950s. We have already seen the old but consistently frustrated desire for better housing and noted the continuing efforts of school and army officials and public health professionals to promote more scrupulous hygiene. What distinguished the hygiene offensive of the 1950s, therefore, was not its novelty but its scale and success.

A French Planning Commission survey in 1955 looked at the housing conditions of urban wage earners to see what *comforts* people had and how dissatisfied they were (see table 4). It found that, for most respondents, the *trentes glorieuses* had gotten off to a slow start. Almost twice as many said that their living standards had not improved since 1950 as said that standards

⁶⁴ Laurence Wylie, *Village in the Vaucluse* (Cambridge, MA, 1981), passim, but esp. 25, 47, 51, 139–45, 169–72, 340–41, and 380.

TABLE 4
 CONFORTS AND SATISFACTION AMONG URBAN WAGE EARNERS, 1955

Convenience	Respondents Who Have (%)	Respondents Who Don't Have (%)	Respondents Who Want to Have (Total %)	Respondents Who Want to Have (% of Those Who Don't Currently Have)
Running water in kitchen	79	21	13	62
Hot water (one spigot or more)	24	76	48	63
Shower or bathtub	16	84	50	60
Radio	87	13
Vacuum cleaner	18	82	36	44
Washing machine (hand or motor)	10	90	43	48
Refrigerator	9	91	48	53

SOURCE.—Commissariat Général du Plan, *Enquête sur les tendances de la consommation des salaires urbains: Vous gagnez 20% de plus; Qu'en faites-vous?* (Paris, 1955), 21, 40.

had improved, a sense of stagnation that was highest among older and badly paid workers.

Wage earners in big cities were twice as likely to own vacuum cleaners as those in smaller cities and to have refrigerators, showers, and hot running water. Those in smaller cities, living more often in houses and less in apartments, owned twice as many washing machines. Those who did not have these conveniences wanted them, but not desperately. Over a third of those who lacked hot water, and two-fifths of those who lacked a bathtub, claimed to be just fine without it. Demand for the tools of modern hygiene, like the water trickling out of kitchen faucets, remained tepid.

Dominique Veillon's history of postwar childhood confirms the impression. Veillon points to the rarity of decent washing facilities in most apartments, where the kitchen sink commonly doubled as the bathroom sink. For a more thorough cleanup, the family might move a big basin into the kitchen. Otherwise, adults and children confined themselves to a daily *toilette succincte*, using but one *cuvette* (wash bowl) for washing hands, face, teeth, and legs. Even in the better-equipped apartments of the bourgeoisie, writes Veillon, "The bathroom with shower was tiny."⁶⁵

Responsibility for fostering the habits of modern hygiene in young *Français* therefore fell once again on the schools. The substance of these lessons looked much like what French teachers had been pounding into their pupils for

⁶⁵ Dominique Veillon, *Nous les enfants (1950–1970)* (Paris, 2003), 90, 94, 101–2.

a century: wash your hands, brush your teeth, clean your face and ears every day and your feet and hair at least once a week, wash your body several times a week, and, finally, change your clothes (“several times a week in summer”).⁶⁶ A school manual in 1950 echoed nineteenth-century imperatives:

- a) Use your own personal *objets de toilette* (comb, toothbrush, etc.).
- b) Don’t eat with other people’s implements or drink from their glasses.
- c) Don’t use your saliva to help turn the pages of your books.
- d) Don’t suck on your pencil.
- e) Wash your hands before you eat.
- f) Don’t spit on the floor.
- g) Fill your house with sunlight, a great disinfectant.⁶⁷

Yet the postwar curriculum introduced several new elements as well. It deepened the emphasis on personal comportment and brought science and medicine into the conversation more explicitly. Above all, while nineteenth-century teachers may have had little success in preaching cleanliness to students who had never seen an indoor faucet, even at school, such sermons had more impact on children who, although their own personal circumstances might lag, could see *conforts* spreading all around them.⁶⁸

The state supplemented the schools’ efforts with a host of new organizations committed to explaining the rules of modern hygiene to young homemakers. Jeanne Grillet, president of the Household Organization League of Lyon, instructed “domestic managers,” as she called them, to rent only lodgings with sufficient light, air, and water.⁶⁹ A journal for professors of home economics printed articles on proper housecleaning, the correct installation of bathrooms, and the operation of washing machines, along with advice on breast-feeding infants that was remarkably free of the usual moralisms.⁷⁰ The National Union of Teachers and Instructors of Family and Household Education, committed to “protecting citizens against ignorance . . . and giving them an elementary education in hygiene,” trained agents to go into working-class homes and advise mothers on such matters as doing laundry and teaching appropriate

⁶⁶ Frédéric Zarch, “La caméra sanitaire,” in Nourrison, *Éducation à la santé*, 87.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Marie-Françoise Perrier, “Lire la santé dans les manuels de sciences,” in Nourrison, *À votre santé*, 115.

⁶⁸ *Cahiers d’Hygiène Scolaire* (December 1950): 30–31; this journal is published by the Commission Technique du Syndicat National des Médecins Départementaux d’Hygiène Scolaire et Universitaire.

⁶⁹ Jeanne Grillet, *Hygiène ménagère* (Paris, 1946), 10–14 and 29–32.

⁷⁰ That journal is *L’Enseignement Technique: Le Cours Féminin Professionnel et Ménager; Journal des Professeurs*; for a typical issue, see, e.g., *ibid.*, (April 1952): 152.

personal habits to teenagers.⁷¹ The *Bulletin de la Société Française de Pédagogie* likewise offered an enlightened education that would instill values of democracy and cleanliness in young *Français*. Its editors were particularly concerned that “what the schools accomplish should not be undone in the home.”⁷²

Bernadette, a magazine for young Catholic girls, taught its readers to clean their rooms, open their windows, and brush their teeth after every meal. An article from “Sister Anne” explained why girls needed to keep their undergarments simple and clean and to wash them at least twice a week.⁷³ If *Bernadette* looks like an unlikely source of support for modern ways and “freedom of movement” for girls’ bodies, perhaps it merely illustrates the broad basis of the postwar hygiene offensive.

The media played a crucial role in conveying the message that a strong France required clean, healthy citizens. In the pretelevision era, “media” chiefly meant magazines—and, in particular, the new generation of magazines for women that flourished after the war. *Marie-Claire*, perhaps the strongest voice in this chorus, had been launched in 1937 and, under the editorial guidance of Marcelle Auclair, stressed the organic connection between hygiene and beauty.⁷⁴ The magazine did not endorse cleanliness for its own sake at first or tie it expressly to modernity and national renewal. Nevertheless, its general concern with robust good health and attractiveness produced articles that encouraged women to brush their teeth, swab their gums with Mercurochrome, and scrub their faces clean of makeup every evening. It may have prescribed baths as it prescribed calisthenics: to build beauty from the inside. Yet it directed readers to the tub and bathroom sink with unparalleled enthusiasm.

Closed down by the Liberation because of its publisher’s good relations with the Germans, *Marie-Claire* reappeared at newspaper kiosks in 1954. The literary scholar Susan Weiner regrets that the “once modern” magazine became “a voice for women’s traditional place at home.”⁷⁵ Maybe so, but the home that the magazine imagined for its readers was bright and clean. The *Marie-Claire* woman was a domestic engineer, and *Marie-Claire* was her manual.

⁷¹ *Cahiers d’Enseignement Ménager Familial* (April–June 1956), n.p.

⁷² *Bulletin de la Société Française de Pédagogie* (March 1950): 37.

⁷³ *Bernadette: Illustré Catholique des Fillettes* (May 30, 1948): 334; and see, e.g., *ibid.* (July 4, 1948): 414–15; and *ibid.* (September 12, 1948): 571.

⁷⁴ On the history of *Marie-Claire*, see Michel Phelizon, “Du *Journal des Dames* à *Marie-Claire*,” in “La presse féminine,” special issue, *Informations Sociales* 1–2 (1973): 7. On *Elle*, see Colombe Pringle, *Telles qu’“Elle”*: *Cinquante ans d’histoire des femmes à travers le journal “Elle”* (Paris, 1995). On the broader history of women’s magazines, see Samra-Martine Bonvoisin and Michèle Maignien, *La presse féminine* (Paris, 1986).

⁷⁵ Susan Weiner, *Enfants Terribles: Youth and Femininity in the Mass Media in France, 1945–1986* (Baltimore, 2001), 30, and see, esp., chap. 1, “From *Elle* to *Mademoiselle*,” 21–66.

Its November 1954 issue, for example, featured the work of Équipe 54, the magazine's roving team of domestic experts, helping the Faraut family to renovate the kitchen of their one-bedroom flat in an old building in the working-class suburb of Clichy. Équipe 54 tore down their old kitchen—a miserable affair with a small oven, two electric hotplates, and a bare spigot above a shallow sink—and replaced it with shelves and counter space, a washing machine, ironing board, and double sink with a big faucet, alongside a dinette with a small table.⁷⁶ Several years later, Équipe 58 provided readers—most of whom belonged to the 70 percent of French people who lacked such amenities—with plans for “the smallest possible full bathroom.” In just under four square meters (1.8 by 2.2 meters), it contained a bidet, sink with counter, and bathtub.⁷⁷

Marie-Claire had no monopoly on this matter, and advice for mounting *conforts* in cramped apartments was standard fare in the period's magazines. The 1952 edition of *L'art ménager français*⁷⁸ offered instructions on installing *salles d'eau* (washrooms) that required less than two square meters of precious area and included a *baignoir-sabot*—that is, a short sit-down bath that could also serve for soaking the wash (see fig. 3).⁷⁹ *L'Enseignement Technique* suggested putting the *salle d'eau* in the kitchen. This would both double up on space and take advantage of existing plumbing, which in the absence of a washroom in the home normally ran only into the kitchen.⁸⁰ *Fémina Pratique* topped *Marie-Claire* by giving readers the choice of fitting either a kitchen or a full bathroom into a mere 1.5 square meters of space.⁸¹ A February 1955 article in *Elle*, featuring the new appliances on view at the Arts Ménagers exposition, recommended a portable shower that could be wheeled into the kitchen and attached to the spigot there, then stored in some tight corner of the flat.⁸² And so on.

The tools of *propreté* counted for little, however, if practice remained stuck in the dirty, smelly past, and there is evidence that it did. For example, an article in *La Femme* magazine in 1946 examined *112 Gripes about the French*. This was the title of a US Army publication that aimed to address the dissatisfactions apparently common among the tens of thousands of GIs living in the country they had so recently liberated. Prominent among these complaints was the Americans' view “that the French are dirty, rarely bathe or

⁷⁶ They did not include a refrigerator, however—a comment on lagging French expectations; see *Marie-Claire* (November 1954): 126–33.

⁷⁷ *Marie-Claire* (February 1958): 96–103.

⁷⁸ Paul Breton's *L'art ménager français* comprised photos and stories about the Arts Ménagers, a huge exhibition devoted to household technologies and furnishings.

⁷⁹ Breton, *L'art ménager français*, 538, 543–48.

⁸⁰ *L'Enseignement Technique* (March 1952): 129.

⁸¹ *Fémina Pratique* (November 1953): 73–79; see also *ibid.* (December 1953): 84.

⁸² *Elle* (February 21, 1955): 52–53.



FIG. 3.—*Salle de bain moderne* [The modern bathroom, with a tub for washing bodies and laundry], photograph. *Arts Ménagers* (March 1951): 70–71. Photographer, Émile Savitry. Permission courtesy of Sophie Malexis.

shower” and that, consequently, “the Metro stinks.” Another pamphlet, *Army Talks* (subtitled *What You Should Know about France*), advised soldiers on leave who were looking for a hotel that the promise of “confort moderne—modern comfort” needed to be taken “with a grain of salt.” Particularly galling to *La Femme* was the Americans’ contrasting admiration for the Germans’ standards of cleanliness. In any case, the magazine did not bother to argue the point but only to plead that the high price of hygiene in France explained its low quality.⁸³

A survey conducted by *Elle* magazine in 1951 under the crusading leadership of its editor, Françoise Giroud, suggested that the Americans were on to something.⁸⁴ “Are French Women Clean?” reported respondents’ answers to eleven “disagreeable questions” and painted a far-from-encouraging picture of

⁸³ U.S. Occupation Forces, Information and Education Division, *112 Gripes about the French* (1945; repr., Whitefish, MT, 2004), 36; US Army, *Army Talks: What You Should Know about France*, Army Talks series, vol. 11, no. 32 (August 9, 1944), 6; *La Femme* (February 20, 1946): 8–9. My thanks to Brandon Moblo and Rebecca Pulju for bringing these publications to my attention.

⁸⁴ *Elle* (October 22, 1951): 14–16. There was no indication as to the method of the survey, how many women were questioned, or how they were chosen.

Françaises' personal habits. Sixty percent did not wash their faces every day. Just over half performed a full toilette daily, but 14 percent did so less than once a week. A quarter of the women said they shampooed at least once a fortnight; another quarter did so less than once a month (probably *much* less). Sixty-two percent claimed to make use of a bidet; and 54 percent, to use deodorant. A mere 17 percent claimed to change their underwear every day, and 30 percent changed it only once a week or less. That same 17 percent brushed their teeth twice a day, although another 50 percent brushed them at least once daily. At the other end of the spectrum, 18 percent of the women reported brushing their teeth "from time to time," while 15 percent confessed to never brushing. Once again, the survey did not ask about baths or showers, since so few women had access to these in 1951.

These dreary numbers did not, Giroud noted, imply that French women cared little for their *tenue*. The great majority typically used makeup, even if they did not clean it off at night. Eighty percent of younger women (ages 18–35) wore lipstick, and although only 39 percent washed their hair once a month, almost twice as many put *brillantine* on it every day. Sixty-four percent said they had permanent waves. French women, in sum, knew a lot about beauty; they just did not associate it with being clean.

It would be reasonable to imagine that social class separated cleaner *Françaises* from dirtier ones, but Giroud did not think so: "If a shopgirl in a bakery living in a cold-water flat uses deodorant and brushes her hair morning and evening," she wrote, "we find a law student living with her parents and having a full bathroom, who washes her girdle only every five months[,] . . . a history teacher of thirty-seven who never brushes her teeth in the evening[,] . . . [or] a twenty-eight-year-old employee at a dry-cleaning establishment who never shaves [under her arms] 'because that's part of my charm.'"⁸⁵ This seems unlikely, given that women in bourgeois neighborhoods had much greater access to *conforts* than women living in older, poorer, and more crowded sections of the cities did. But Giroud made her point: even the most fashionable of French women probably needed to clean up.

The call for more meticulous hygiene, alongside advice on how to achieve it, became a consistent feature of *Elle's* articles and how-to columns. But even less hip, less glossy publications repeated this theme. For example, "22 New Year's Resolutions," an article in the January 1954 issue of *Fémina Pratique*, laid out the range of good sanitary habits for women and young girls: weekly baths, twice-daily toothbrushing and face washing, shampooing every ten days, twice-weekly yoga, and biannual visits to the dentist, among others. The magazine offered proof of the need for this advice in its next issue, which pointed to the disturbing fact that the French used less soap than virtually any

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

TABLE 5
NATIONAL SOAP CONSUMPTION

Country	Kilograms per Person per Year
Belgium	13.00
United States	12.00
Great Britain	11.09
Sweden	10.01
Netherlands	9.78
Cuba	8.96
Canada	8.74
Denmark	8.53
West Germany	8.33
Switzerland	6.56
Argentina	6.52
France	6.38

SOURCE.—“Le prix de propreté c’est le prix de santé,” *Fémina Pratique* (March 1954): 106.

other country in the developed world: a mere 6.38 kilograms per person per year—half of what the average Belgian consumed (see table 5).⁸⁶

It made the point once again in a 1957 article about a young couple in North London—a former model who now worked in a pharmacy, her husband (an architect), and their two little girls. The family’s meager income meant they had no television, car, or central heating. They spent a mere one hundred pounds a year on clothes and grew vegetables in their small backyard to save on grocery bills. The wife never visited the hairdresser or bought beauty products. But they did have a bathtub . . . and used it.⁸⁷

It might have come as no surprise to readers that *les anglo-saxons*, whom the French considered fanatics on the subject, paid so much attention to keeping clean. The editors had a larger point to make, however: that dirtiness helped explain France’s high infant mortality rate, which was up to four times that of soapier nations—among which it counted the United States, Holland, Denmark, and Canada. Cleanliness therefore served not only aesthetic ends and individual health; it was also essential to population growth and national strength. If France wanted more babies, it needed to wash them regularly.

Women’s magazines also reminded readers routinely that clean bodies were of a piece with clean homes. *Elle*’s March 1955 issue, for example, taught homemakers “how to aerate, sanitize, and deodorize” their kitchen and featured house-

⁸⁶ “22 New Year’s Resolutions,” *Fémina Pratique* (January 1954): 83; “Le prix de propreté c’est le prix de santé,” *Fémina Pratique* (March 1954): 106; Ministère de la Santé Publique, *Recueil des travaux de l’Institut National d’Hygiène*.

⁸⁷ *Fémina Pratique* (January 1957): 19–20.

hold items available at the Arts Ménagers exposition that made reaching this high standard possible. Its April 1959 number continued its series on a proper “spring cleaning,” adding tips for cleaning the kitchen and bathroom to previous advice on curtains and carpets.⁸⁸ Dozens of similar articles in *Elle* and elsewhere made the same point: French households could use a good scouring.

Meanwhile, multiplying advertisements for health and beauty aids, as well as for household products and appliances, indicate the moment when France discovered the range of offensive odors that Americans had been battling for thirty years:⁸⁹ Colgate toothpaste cleans teeth and eliminates bad breath; Odorono deodorant stops perspiration and odor while protecting clothes; Charmis soap destroys odor-causing bacteria and leaves you “fresh and seductive.” Advertisements warned women of the perils of hairy, sweaty underarms (Mum deodorant and Tacky Eau depilatory) and receding gums (Gibbs dentifrice). Blouses and shirts made from new fabrics such as Cotlon and Ban-Lon were touted as being “easy to wash.” Ads for Sopalin kitchen paper towels assumed that homes would routinely have running water in the kitchen and plenty of counter space to wipe. Images proliferated of happy homemakers with bright boxes of Omo detergent or with washing machines—in electric or gas models—offering both immaculate clothes and release from the hard labor of hand laundering. Vacuum cleaners, electric floor polishers, plastic tablecloths, Lux soap for a clean face, Johnson Wax for a clean floor, Diad makeup remover for nonacidic skin, Boldoflorine herbal tea for the health of liver and intestines, Contrexéville water to get rid of cellulite, Protecta absorbant diapers, Remington electric razors for women, cheap washable *polychinene* underwear—altogether a breathtaking variety of items for keeping homes and bodies unsoiled (see fig. 4).

Indeed, there is reason to believe that all these factors had their effect and that France was becoming a much cleaner country. For one thing, by the early 1960s, women’s magazines seem to have carried fewer and fewer articles on hygiene—suggesting, if not outright victory in the war against dirt, at least an unstoppable advance all along the line. For another, an unprecedented building boom had substantially improved the housing stock by the mid-1970s. From 200,000 new units per year between 1945 and 1964, the figure climbed to 350,000 by 1968, and to 445,000 in 1975.⁹⁰ The proportion of family

⁸⁸ See, e.g., “Nettoyage de printemps,” *Elle* (April 1959): 35–39.

⁸⁹ Listerine was first marketed as a cure for halitosis in 1914, and a copywriter for the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency invented “BO” (body odor) in 1919 as the condition for which his client Odorono deodorant was the cure—at least according to Katherine Ashenburg, *The Dirt on Clean: An Unsantized History* (New York, 2007), 244–48. Geoffrey Jones offers a different story; see his *Renewing Unilever: Transformation and Tradition* (London, 2005), 12.

⁹⁰ Fourastié, *Les trente glorieuses*, 136. Similarly, see Lemas, “Avant-propos,” in Segaud et al., *Logement et habitat*, 1.

SPÉCIAL POUR BOUILLIR

LE BLANC

Tide
Bout plus blanc que tout

Tide bout plus blanc que tout !

Oui, c'est vrai.. des milliers de femmes émerveillées le proclament avec enthousiasme :

Plus blanc que tout, parce que *seul*, Tide est *spécial* pour bouillir le blanc.

Plus blanc que tout, parce que *seul*, Tide donne une *mousse* aussi abondante, riche et active.

Plus blanc que tout, parce que *seul*, Tide contient des éléments *nouveaux* qui absorbent avec douceur les taches les plus tenaces.

Comparez et vous verrez vous-même : si vous faites bouillir votre linge, c'est Tide qu'il vous faut, car Tide bout plus blanc que toutes les lessives ou tous les savons que vous avez pu utiliser jusqu'ici.

FIG. 4.—Tide: *Spécial pour bouillir le blanc* [Tide: Especially for boiling whites], advertisement. Notice the zinc cauldron. *Marie-Claire* (April 1957): 2. Permission courtesy of The Proctor & Gamble Company.

TABLE 6
 CONFORTS IN FRENCH HOMES, 1962–75

Census Year	Households	Toilet Connected to Sewer*	Hot Water inside Home	Indoor Flush Toilet	Bathtub or Shower
1962	14,565,169	1,983,283 (19.0)	. . .	5,343,287 (36.7)	4,211,544 (28.9)
1968	15,778,100	2,846,869 (25.3)	7,902,360 (50.1)	8,174,040 (51.8)	7,500,900 (47.5)
1975	17,743,760	5,319,468 (41.5)	13,429,540 (75.7)	12,760,720 (71.9)	12,460,180 (64.3)

SOURCE.—Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques (INSEE), *Recensement général de la population de 1975: Résultats des sondages au 1/20 et au 15; Logements—Immeubles* (Paris, 1977), 65, 75–77.

NOTE.—Numbers in parentheses are percentages.

* In re buildings, not individual dwellings.

income devoted to housing rose from 3.4 percent to nearly 25 percent, but higher rents left people feeling less “badly housed.”⁹¹

Table 6 illustrates the effect on residents and the implications for hygiene. From the 1962 census (which itself had marked a huge step forward) to that of 1975 the proportion of French people enjoying the amenities of hot running water, indoor toilets, and bath or shower more than doubled. Inevitably, the geography and sociology of *conforts* were more complicated. Big-city apartments remained several times more likely to have them than were small-town or rural households, and they were more likely to be found in more expensive modern buildings than in older ones.⁹²

New housing bred new habits. *Elle* found in a 1959 survey that families who had recently moved into new apartments put more effort into keeping themselves and their homes clean.⁹³ The spread of laborsaving machines made this easier than ever. Between 1950 and 1960, households increased their spending on refrigerators and washing machines tenfold. As more people

⁹¹ Ardagh, *France in the 1980s*, 289; and see INSEE, *Aspects du logement en France en 1963: Éléments tirés de l'enquête nationale sur le logement réalisée en octobre–novembre 1963 par l'INSEE et le CREDOC à la demande du Ministère de la Construction et du Commissariat Général du Plan d'Équipement et de la Productivité* [extract from a statistical report of the minister of construction], 21; CREDOC is the Centre de Recherches et de Documentation sur la Consommation. For an interesting look at the debate on the interior of these new apartments, see Nicole Rudolph, “‘Who Should Be the Author of a Dwelling?’ Architects versus Housewives in 1950s France,” *Gender and History* (2009): 541–59.

⁹² See, e.g., INSEE, *Recensement général de la population de 1962: Résultats du sondage au 1/20; Population—Ménages—Logements—Immeubles—Récapitulation pour la France entière* (Paris, 1964), 30–31.

⁹³ *Elle* (April 27, 1959): 103, 122–23.

TABLE 7
INDEX OF HOUSEHOLD CONSUMPTION FOR HYGIENE AND HEALTH, 1950–1959
(in 1956 francs; 1949 = 100)

	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
Francs	104.3	104.0	115.8	122.5	129.9	139.9	152.8	163.5	164.5	170.1

SOURCE.—Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances, INSEE, *Annuaire statistique de la France, 1966: Résumé rétrospectif* (Paris, 1966), 461.

gained access to consumer credit, modern conveniences penetrated even working-class homes, whose share of appliances grew through the decade.⁹⁴ By 1960 France was the largest continental market for Lever Brothers detergents.⁹⁵ At the same time, spending on children's clothes, perfumes, soap, and the other bric-a-brac of cleaner living continued to climb (from 100 francs per household in 1949; see table 7).⁹⁶

By the end of the *trentes glorieuses*, France had become a much easier place in which to keep clean. Infrastructure is not destiny, however, and hygienic facilities were sometimes more common than daily routines for their use. Millions of *Français* continued to live without *conforts*, either because they could not afford them or because they clung to lingering folk notions about the dangers of washing or the conviction that “men should smell like men.” A well-known survey from 1975 found most people reluctant to confess their most intimate habits. Those who did usually described perfunctory morning efforts: “une toilette de chat” (a cat's toilette). For one twenty-two-year-old rugby player it was a “simple rinse in cold water.” For the young Aline Tarka: “No bath . . . [because it] takes too long to fill up. No shower. You have to wash everywhere, and I always forget to do half and end up getting dressed still half soaking.” No one mentioned taking a morning shower.⁹⁷

The evening's ablutions were less rushed, and those with dirty jobs, like the

⁹⁴ Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society*, 174–76. Pulju's figures are drawn from *Consommation: Annales du CREDOC* 4 (1959): 68; and from UNIMAREL [Union pour l'Étude du Marché de l'Électricité], *La démocratisation de l'équipement ménager* (Paris, 1959), 2. On the rise of household consumption in the 1950s, see Souriac, *Histoire de France, 1750–1995*, 2:226–27. See also Jacques Rouaud, “Les trentes glorieuses de l'équipement ménager,” Conseil d'Architecture, *Le confort moderne*, 65–68; and Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944–1958* (New York, 1987), 372–74.

⁹⁵ D. K. Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas: The Anatomy of a Multinational, 1895–1965* (Stanford, CA, 1978), 164.

⁹⁶ Herpin and Verger, *La consommation des français*, 1:71–77, 90–94; Stewart, *For Health and Beauty*, 68; Veillon, *Nous les enfants*, 259–60.

⁹⁷ Patrick Miler, Patrick Mahé, and Richard Cannavo, *Les français tels qu'ils sont: La fameuse enquête I.F.O.P. France-Soir, le dossier complet* (Paris, 1975), 37.

auto mechanic J.-C. Vincent, often showered when they returned home from work: “a good ten minutes under very hot water.” Yet they were the exceptions. A survey in *Elle* found that only 38 percent of women and 22 percent of men washed “à fond” [thoroughly] every day. More numerous were those who took a bath as a “treat,” spending half an hour two or three times a week in a hot tub with “bubble bath, transistor radio, and cigarette.” The most “incorrigible lazybones” saved their weekly *grande toilette* for Sunday.

Gender, geography, generation, and class bred different practices. Seventy-nine percent of women but only 56 percent of men washed before going to bed; and if seven women out of ten brushed their teeth at night, only one man in two did so. Men shaved in the morning; women put on their makeup. What people care about, wrote the editors, is “appearance.” Twice as many men as women (28 percent of women, compared to 13 percent of men) said they slept in the nude—with the young much more likely to do so than the old, and executives three times more likely than farmers (30 percent versus 9 percent). Only 5 percent of urban professionals still slept with a chamber pot in their bedroom, as against 40 percent of farmers. There is no surprise in these numbers: people in the countryside generally stuck longer to the old ways—for example, the extended Guillou family from Brittany, who preferred the kitchen sink for washing. The farm had a nice bathroom with a shower, but only the granddaughter Thérèse bothered to use it.⁹⁸

CONCLUSION

With one generation at the washbasin and another in the shower, the Guillou family personified the changes in French hygiene wrought in the quarter century following the Second World War. If dirt is, as Mary Douglas put it, “matter out of place,” that place clearly shifted in the 1950s. Depending as it did on a broad reconstruction of French society, from a housing boom to a sharp rise in disposable income to a widespread sense of the need to rebuild the country after a generation of calamities, France’s “rising threshold of disgust” (to borrow a phrase from Elias) was no isolated event. It was, rather, part of a fundamental transformation of French society that had people dressing better, eating more protein, drinking less alcohol, spending more time in school, and moving to the city—the panoply of practices that we might call “modernization.”

One of the criticisms often leveled at “modernization” in its larger context is that it takes the Western model as the One True Way. A similar point could be made in the case at hand, where the term could also stand as a synonym for “Americanization.” Françoise Giroud, the crusading editor of *Elle*, was only

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

the most prominent among those who had done their professional apprenticeships in the United States and returned to France after the war determined to make the Old World more like the New. A more sanitary France, moreover, fit squarely into the universe of multinational production dominated, if not completely controlled, by American corporations such as Proctor & Gamble and Colgate-Palmolive.

Yet while the international culture of hygiene was becoming in many ways more homogenous, substantial national differences remained in both infrastructures and sensibilities. Census figures, along with the practices revealed in the 1975 survey of the French “as they are,” make this abundantly clear. Lynn Payer’s penetrating study of the differences between medical cultures further illustrates the distance that continued to separate American notions of propriety from French ones. The French, she observes, have a greater appreciation of dirt’s shielding qualities. Their focus on “shoring up the *terrain*”—that is, strengthening the body generally as a barrier to disease—means that “the French see a little bit of dirt not as the enemy, but as being good for the *terrain* and worth cultivating.” Sensibilities in France also remained more tolerant of natural body odors. Thus, for example, “when feminine deodorants came out, French consumer groups not only repeated the American argument that they could be dangerous to one’s health but added that the deodorants eliminated smells necessary for sexual attraction.”⁹⁹

All the same, while practices never became identical across European borders, by the end of the century the French had more or less closed the hygiene gap with their neighbors. Surveys in the 1980s indicated that the French still trailed other Europeans in the consumption of health and beauty aids. Payer writes in 1988 that the French used an average of four bars of soap a year, while the English were lathering their way through eight.¹⁰⁰ Unilever estimated that the French consumed half as much toothpaste as the Swiss and half as much deodorant as the British.¹⁰¹ By 1998, however, the *Corpus Christi Caller Times* reported that the French bought just as much soap as their cross-channel rivals and showered 20 percent more often, while spending more on perfume, makeup, deodorants, and face, hand, and sun creams than any other Europeans: \$5.8 billion annually.¹⁰² A 2004 housing survey showed that 98 percent of French homes had a bath or shower, more or less even with Europe’s cleanest households, in Sweden and the Netherlands.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Lynn Payer, *Medicine and Culture: Varieties of Treatment in the United States, England, West Germany, and France* (New York, 1988), 62, 67.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰¹ Cited in Jones, *Renewing Unilever*, 141.

¹⁰² “Study: French Smell Better than Brits,” *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, October 23, 1998, <http://web.caller.com/autoconv/newsworld98/newsworld53.html>.

¹⁰³ National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, Sweden, and Ministry for

Clearly, the revolution in manners that swept over France after World War II calls for a multifaceted explanation. The state, concerned with epidemic disease, public order, and demographic vitality, had been working for a century to clean up urban spaces and sanitize personal habits, principally through the schools and the army. The impact of these efforts was restrained by the available technology and the limits of public finance. They also came up against a long history of practice and sensibility that had accustomed people to a certain level of personal and public hygiene, as well as the simple inability of most people to shoulder the costs of cleaner lives. If this history began to turn decisively in the 1950s, we cannot disentangle the knot of cause and effect with any confidence. Did the availability of apartments with *conforts* and shops with affordable soap push people into new habits? Or, conversely, did a surging desire for cleanliness pull Proctor & Gamble and the Arts Ménagers behind it? We can say only that practice and sensibility advanced alongside plumbing and in step with the rise in disposable income.

Those who doubt the virtues of modernization have sometimes argued that change does not equal progress and that modern standards of hygiene represent above all a dubious process of waste, commodification, and bourgeois cultural hegemony.¹⁰⁴ I would draw a different conclusion from this story. It may well be that civilization is not doomed to an ever more well-scrubbed future. Nonetheless, whatever criticisms might be made of mass consumerism and “unnatural” standards of hygiene, the fact remains that, while individual habits have ranged from the impeccable to the indifferent, once the French got used to being cleaner, they never went back.

Regional Development of the Czech Republic, eds., *Housing Statistics in the European Union, 2004* (Falun, 2005), 40.

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., Taricat and Villars, *Le logement à bon marché*, 15; and Le Goff, *Invention du confort*, 31–36.