

Supporting Working-Class Reform:
Manipulation of Fin-de-Siècle Discourses and Anxieties

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“Language is an important force in shaping the political.”

– Daniel T. Rodgers, *American Historian*

Politicians have long recognized the importance of their language and discourse in harnessing public support and positive public opinion. They recognize how to motivate their constituents, often manipulating rhetoric or conflating ideas to serve their own purposes and support their platforms. Without delving into the morality of this cooptation, it is clear that this technique works, especially when politicians choose to delve into and prey on the anxieties and fears of their electorate. This political strategy is one reason that Donald Trump consistently referred to Joe Biden, the Democratic Party candidate, as a socialist, even though neither Joe Biden nor the Democratic Party espouse socialism in their official platform.¹ Trump recognized that he could manipulate this anxiety-ridden and politically-loaded term to garner votes from his conservative electorate. Although Trump lost the 2020 United States’ presidential election, he nevertheless received about ten million more votes in 2020 than he received in the 2016 election presumably, at least in part, due to the effectiveness of this rhetorical technique.² While this kind of rhetoric may seem new, the strategy is simply more visible today due to extensive and readily available televised and print media sources. In fact, politicians and reformers have historically played with the discourses and anxieties of their time to support their positions and to convince others to do the same.

¹ Laurence Arnold, “How Trump Runs Against Socialism Without a Socialist Opponent,” *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2020.

² Britni De La Cretaz, “Trump Got 10 Million More Votes This Election. Where Did They Come From?” *Refinery29*, November 18, 2020.

In his 1906 monograph entitled *Les Habitations à Bon Marché: le Rôle de l'ouvrier dans la Société, les Logements Insalubres, la Maison Collective, la Maison Individuelle, l'Ouvrier Propriétaire, État Actuel de la Question en France et à l'Étranger*, E. Jourdet, a social investigator, employs this rhetorical technique to enhance his advocacy for working-class housing reform in early 20th-century Paris.³ His argument openly manipulates anxieties surrounding modernity that were pervasive throughout the citizenry of fin-de-siècle European cities. By drawing on prevalent discourses from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jourdet connects with his readers' fears about the modern city while also employing them to advance his argument for reform within such a city. He advocates for urban reform by artfully melding the prevalent fin-de-siècle discourses of degeneration theory and nationalism along with modern scientific rhetoric, revealing that improvements to the working-class condition will resolve the concerns that are at the root of these discourses.

Paris has long struggled to provide housing for the lower class within the city. When Napoleon III commissioned Baron Georges Haussmann to renovate and modernize the city of Paris beginning in 1852, part of the construction project included creating wide boulevards, designed to improve circulation, and, importantly, “demolish slums.”⁴ Although Haussmann made drastic improvements to the city, his project actually worsened the problem of “insufficient and unsanitary housing” for the working class by moving the poor into the outskirts of the city where conditions were poor and improvements were infrequent.⁵ In the 1880s, it became clear

³ E. Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché: Le Rôle De L'Ouvrier Dans La Société, Les Logements Insalubres, La Maison Collective, La Maison Individuelle, L'Ouvrier Propriétaire, État Actuel De La Question En France et à L'Étranger* (Paris: 1906).

⁴ Ann-Louise Shapiro, “Housing Reform in Paris: Social Space and Social Control,” *French Historical Studies* 12, no. 4 (1982): 486.

⁵ Shapiro, “Housing Reform,” 487; Ann-Louise Shapiro, “Working Class Housing and Public Health in Paris, 1850-1902,” Dissertation, (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1980), 39, 52.

that Paris needed to build more affordable housing, and social reformers of the period sought to address questions regarding the location, style, and architecture of such housing, publishing their theories in various journals and monographs.⁶

Between 1861 and 1896, the population of the ten outer arrondissements, inhabited mostly by the working class, grew by 103%, while the population of the central ten arrondissements grew by only 7.1%.⁷ This drastically disparate population growth created stark divisions between the “comfortable west and [the] impoverished east” of Paris.⁸ By the beginning of the Third Republic, a lack of adequate working-class housing became “the most pressing urban problem” of the period.⁹ In addition, between 1879 and 1899, the Opportunist faction of the Republican movement, a group with a moderate leftist agenda who believed in laissez-faire economic policy, controlled the French government, compounding the growing economic disparities between social classes.¹⁰ Although they sought to assist the working classes, Opportunists did not believe in socialism, and the government struck down a series of labor strikes in the 1880s, making the new republic appear more middle-class centered. As a result, working class discontent increased even more during the Third Republic.¹¹

During the 1880s, socialists across the ideological spectrum attempted to solve the Parisian housing crisis.¹² Government authorities grew concerned, especially as rumors spread about new types of organized rent strikes against landlords, and fears of revolt mounted. In

⁶ Shapiro, “Housing Reform,” 490.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 487.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 489.

¹⁰ Patricia Tilburg, “Boulangier and Dreyfus: Mass Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Paris,” Class Lecture, Davidson College, February 12, 2021; “France,” In *Britannica*, 2021.

¹¹ Tilburg, “Boulangier and Dreyfus.”

¹² Shapiro, “Housing Reform,” 494.

reality, however, there was little cohesion among the socialists working on the housing shortage, either in theory or in practice.¹³ It became increasingly difficult to ignore the rising discontent of the working class, and eventually, conservative politicians determined that building working-class housing would be the “best defense against socialism.”¹⁴ Through the efforts of Jules Siegfried and other conservatives concerned with working-class housing, Paris enacted the 1894 law on *habitations à bon marché*. The goal of this legislation included “[making] credit available to construction societies, [favoring] low-cost housing with tax exemptions, and [promoting] the integral transfer of property to an heir on the death of the primary owner.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, loopholes and other stipulations in the law, combined with an unwillingness among the French to invest in working-class housing, made this law ineffective, and working-class housing continued to be a major crisis in the city.¹⁶

Eventually, the Municipal Council stopped promoting efforts to build working-class housing, and by the 1890s, the idea that the housing crisis should be solved by the government no longer prevailed.¹⁷ Social anxieties and stigmas about the working class also inhibited public support for needed housing reforms.¹⁸ By the close of the century, “the goal remained elusive,” and the housing crisis persisted.¹⁹ In *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, E. Jourdet wished to bring attention back to the issue in 1906, as it remained a significant problem in Paris with serious implications for both the working class and for the French population as a whole. In advocating for effective reform, Jourdet draws on previous ideas about what reform should look like,

¹³ Shapiro, “Housing Reform,” 495.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 496.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 497.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 502, 504.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 505.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 507.

especially those of Frédéric Le Play. He also uses strong rhetoric and descriptive language to persuade his readers that reforming working-class housing would alleviate many of their fears about modernity and would benefit his readers at least as much as it would help the working class.²⁰

Historians have studied and analyzed many aspects of the Parisian housing crisis and calls for reform during this period, including the origins, attempted reforms, and political theories about the issue. Ann-Louise Shapiro has studied this subject extensively and covers a broad array of information, particularly the broader social context of the working-class housing crisis and reform efforts in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Paris.²¹ Although not a direct study of the housing crisis, James Gavan analyzes the evolving rhetoric of middle-class social observers toward the working class and the “social question,” concluding that the movement to post-war welfare democracy was not as simple and easy as some historians previously determined due to the overlap of both scientific discourse and traditional discourse surrounding social reform.²² Craig Calhoun analyzes nationalistic discourse in Europe during the late 19th century and into the 20th century, noting the inherent contradictions of an ideology centered around singular, unified identities in a modern, heterogeneous world.²³ W.F. Bynum studies the prevalence of degeneration theory, especially the concerns surrounding alcohol, and provides information about the decline of this widely-held belief.²⁴ Although each of these authors

²⁰ Shapiro, “Housing Reform,” 490.

²¹ Shapiro, “Housing Reform;” Shapiro, “Working Class.”

²² James R. Gavan, “Toward a Provident Working Class: French and English Social Reform Rhetoric, 1880-1914,” Thesis, (Master's Theses, 2000), 99.

²³ Craig Calhoun, “Nationalism and the Contradictions of Modernity,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 42 (1997): 1–30.

²⁴ W. F. Bynum, “Alcoholism and Degeneration in 19th Century European Medicine and Psychiatry,” *British Journal of Addiction* 79 (1984): 59–70.

provides relevant and intriguing theories in their respective studies, this essay seeks to build upon their research, revealing the connections among the housing crisis, fin-de-siècle anxieties, and the rhetoric used in descriptions and discussions about the working class. Specifically, this research seeks to illuminate how authors at the time used and manipulated fin-de-siècle discourses to further their arguments and generate support for an otherwise unpopular cause.

Although the concept of degeneration was not new during the nineteenth century, the 1850's work of Bénédict-Augustin Morel developed the theory of degeneration further than that of previous scholars.²⁵ Morel stood apart from past theorists by incorporating the concept of the "progressiveness" of mental illnesses, meaning he believed that the mental condition of each successive generation worsened.²⁶ He also noted that degeneration could be caused and sustained by external material influences, in particular by "intoxications," such as alcohol and drugs.²⁷ Many degenerationists viewed alcoholism as one of society's biggest concerns because it was "widely prevalent, had easily observed consequences, had a definitive causative agent, and could be susceptible to treatment."²⁸ In the mid-nineteenth century, building upon Morel's theories, physiologists and clinicians began to study descendants of alcoholics to evaluate and quantify the progression of degeneration. Data they collected between 1860 and 1890 seemed to support the progressive degenerationist theory regarding the effects of alcohol.²⁹ In addition, many degeneration theorists saw the modern city itself as a poor environment which caused genetic defects to flourish, and therefore, advocated for escapes from the city to serve as a potential cure

²⁵ Daniel Pick, s.v. "Degeneration," In *Europe 1789-1914: Encyclopedia of the Age of Industry and Empire* 2: 636–39.

²⁶ Bynum, "Alcoholism and Degeneration in 19th Century European Medicine and Psychiatry," 61.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 63.

²⁹ Ibid.

or at least a reprieve.³⁰ In Jourdet's monograph, he utilizes language that draws upon degeneration theory, especially degenerationists' concerns regarding alcohol, to support his theory on how working-class housing reform would resolve upper- and middle-class fears about societal deterioration.

In his third chapter, entitled "Consequences in the point of view of hygiene, morality, public fortune and social peace," Jourdet delves into the apprehensions underlying degeneration theory.³¹ First, he describes the nightly routine of working-class fathers, and how they feel "uneasy and oppressed" in their housing, causing them to leave home after dinner and go to a cabaret with friends.³² Jourdet notes how the man drinks there, spending "his money, health and strength, and moving gradually closer to alcoholism, which is the great plague of the working class."³³ In other words, Jourdet opines that the process by which the working class succumbs to alcoholism begins with poor housing, and that without improved living conditions, the cycle will continue for generations. Drawing upon the research scientists conducted during this period, he classifies alcoholism as "the great plague of the working class."³⁴ Although Jourdet does not explicitly detail the specific elements of degeneration, his argument intrinsically embodies the theory, allowing his readers to envision the harsh consequences that French society as a whole will suffer without housing reform for the working class.

³⁰ Tilburg, "Boulangers and Dreyfus."

³¹ Original French title: "Conséquences au point de vue de l'hygiène, de la morale, de la fortune publique et de la paix sociale."

³² Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 19; Original French quote: "mal à l'aise et opprimé."

³³ *Ibid.*, 19-20; Original French quote: "son argent, sa santé et sa force, et s'acheminera peu à peu vers l'alcoolisme qui est le grand fléau de la classe ouvrière."

³⁴ Bynum, "Alcoholism and Degeneration in 19th Century European Medicine and Psychiatry," 63; Jourdet, "Les Habitations à Bon Marché," 20; Original French quote: "le grand fléau de la classe ouvrière."

In the fourth chapter, Jourdet details his recommendation for the specific format that reformed working-class housing should take, noting a preference for individual housing with a small garden.³⁵ While he understands that economic conditions and physical constraints make this type of home nearly impossible to create in an urban environment, he nonetheless posits that this limitation—one that would entail a commute to and from the Paris city center—actually benefits the worker: “the worker who works all day in a city like Paris, will experience a great well-being from resting, the night, in a small house encircled by a garden, in the middle of air less contaminated than that of the Capital.”³⁶ Like the degeneration theorists who believed in the negative effects of the city on health, Jourdet explains that after a day’s work in the city, it is important for the worker to escape from the crowd, “to rest” and to breathe air “less contaminated.”³⁷ He also notes that “children will breathe in purer air there.”³⁸ Through his reformed housing recommendation, Jourdet argues that the next generation will grow up in a healthier environment, away from the city where they otherwise face both physical and mental corruption that would further the degenerative effects of poor housing in the city. Further, Jourdet posits that individual homes would mean “the worker will no longer, or will rarely, go to the cabaret,” preventing the degenerative effects of alcohol from taking hold by removing the father’s need to escape a cramped and dirty home.³⁹

Jourdet also connects his discussion of the degenerative results of alcoholism to the nationalistic discourse of the period. Throughout fin-de-siècle Europe, nationalism grew

³⁵ Bynum, “Alcoholism and Degeneration,” 24.

³⁶ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 26; Original French quote: “l’ouvrier qui a travaillé tout le jour dans une ville comme Paris, éprouvera un grand bien-être à venir se reposer, le soir, dans une maisonnette entourée d’un jardin, au milieu d’air moins vicié que celui de la Capitale.”

³⁷ Ibid.; Original French quotes: “se reposer” and “moins vicié.”

³⁸ Ibid., 30; “les enfants y prendront un air plus pur.”

³⁹ Ibid.; Original French quote: “l’ouvrier n’ira plus, ou presque plus, au cabaret.”

especially strong in influence across the continent, taking a more intense and aggressive form than in prior periods. This new brand of nationalism envisioned individual nations, rather than Europe as a whole, as the “agents and the beneficiaries of potential progress.”⁴⁰ During the late nineteenth century, in a period of rapid and increasing globalization, nationalistic sentiments for one’s individual country intensified and ran counter to any notion of uniting efforts and rewards across borders.⁴¹ During 1890s France, this concept of nationalism culminated in the definition of the “French” as those who live in France, emphasizing unity of the population and civic nationalism.⁴² Jourdet manipulates nationalistic sentiment throughout his monograph to support his argument emphasizing the importance of housing reform for the future of France.

Building on degeneration theory, Jourdet connects alcoholism to public anxiety about the future of society and characterizes alcoholism as a threat to the nationalistic values of the time. He describes how “the health and strength of the worker constitutes a resource, not only for himself, but also for the society for which he works.”⁴³ In Jourdet’s view, alcohol drains a worker’s strength and health; therefore, alcoholism can weaken a country’s capital and power, a fate especially concerning during this period of intense nationalism. Jourdet furthers this point by explaining how alcoholism creates economic loss “to the detriment of the entire country that cannot live nor prosper without work.”⁴⁴ In other words, Jourdet believes that the nation’s prosperity will decline from alcohol dependency within its workforce. Therefore, by playing upon the worries of French nationalists, Jourdet implicitly argues that housing reform and

⁴⁰ Calhoun, “Nationalism and the Contradictions of Modernity,” 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁴³ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 20; Original French quote: “la santé et la force de l’ouvrier constituent un capital, non seulement pour lui-même, mais encore pour la société pour laquelle il travaille.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; Original French quote: “au préjudice du pays tout entier qui ne vit et ne prospère que par le travail.”

improved working-class conditions will stop this deterioration, allowing France to maintain its international economic strength.

Nationalistic discourse is pervasive throughout Jourdet's entire study. At the beginning of his monograph, Jourdet effectively coopts nationalistic values of the era to further his argument in favor of housing reform for the working class. At the end of the first chapter, Jourdet reminds his readers that the problems of housing, food, unemployment, strikes, and old age are relevant not only for workers but also for the future of society at large: "They arise for those who are concerned about not only the fate of the worker himself, but also for the future of the entire society that only exists and subsists because of the worker."⁴⁵ He explicitly links the fate of workers to the fate of French society by pointing out that society "only exists and subsists because of the worker," meaning that any harm done to or by the working class will be harm done to France itself.⁴⁶ By defining this threat to France, one posed by the poor working-class conditions, Jourdet encourages his readers to work toward discovering and implementing the proposed solutions to the problem. Because of the prominence of nationalism during this period, he is able to demonstrate the critical nature of the situation to his audience. His readers—primarily the wealthier classes—do not want to risk the decline or death of the country in which they live, thereby allowing other European nations to become more powerful in the absence of a strong French state.

Jourdet draws further on nationalistic discourse to support his cause throughout his third chapter in his discussion about the consequences of unsanitary working-class housing. To appeal

⁴⁵ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 5; Original French quote: "Ils se posent à ceux que le sort de l'ouvrier préoccupe non seulement pour lui-même, mais aussi pour l'avenir de la société tout entière qui n'existe et ne subsiste que par l'ouvrier."

⁴⁶ Ibid; Original French quote: "n'existe et ne subsiste que par l'ouvrier."

to his readers' empathy, he points out: "Everything that is necessary for life: air, sun, space, is missing from this housing."⁴⁷ Although not directly tied to nationalistic sentiment, this statement importantly evokes the truth that workers live in a space that is by definition "unlivable," and therefore, leads to an inability to thrive or to live a long life, ultimately threatening the size of the French population. Describing the poor state of affairs within working-class lodgings, Jourdet also notes, "Epidemics are born here and develop here as if by magic, and these miserable slums become homes of infection that threaten the entire population."⁴⁸ By describing the origin of epidemics as coming from within the workers' living conditions, Jourdet reveals the intrinsic connection between the wealthy and the poor of Paris, a connection that is inescapable despite separate lifestyles and living conditions. Diseases are equal opportunity killers, especially during this time period, and Jourdet uses the threat of sickness and death that affects "the entire population" to motivate his wealthy audience.⁴⁹ Although the wealthy felt concern about the working class' presence within the city, Jourdet capitalizes upon nationalistic desires to keep France strong and powerful to garner upper-class support for help dedicated to the working class.⁵⁰ Jourdet recognizes that an epidemic in Paris, the capital, would severely weaken France, and he utilizes this threat to convince his audience to support working-class housing reform.

Using concrete scientific data, Jourdet also explicitly points out that the arrondissements of Paris with poor, unhealthy housing are the locations at which the mortality rate is highest: "The arrondissements of Paris containing the most unsanitary housing are exactly those where

⁴⁷ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 16; Original French quote: "Tout ce qui est nécessaire à la vie: l'air, le soleil, l'espace, manque à ces logements."

⁴⁸ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 16; Original French quote: "Les épidémies y prennent naissance et s'y développent comme par enchantement, et ces misérables taudis deviennent des foyers d'infection qui menacent la population tout entière."

⁴⁹ Ibid.; Original French quote: "la population tout entière."

⁵⁰ Shapiro, "Housing Reform," 505.

the mortality rate is the highest.”⁵¹ He then provides statistics regarding the mortality rate in different Parisian neighborhoods, comparing the difference between arrondissements with varying numbers of poorly-housed inhabitants. In comparing the 8th and 9th arrondissements to the 19th and 20th arrondissements, he notes that the mortality rate is “more than double” in the 19th and 20th arrondissements where “2,007 to 2,275 inhabitants out of 10,000 are poorly housed.”⁵² In doing so, Jourdet demonstrates that, although the wealthy areas have a lower mortality rate, the high mortality rate of working-class neighborhoods and their poor living conditions affect the power of France by depleting the number of workers who contribute to the industrial and economic strength of the country. Jourdet infers that improving the sanitation of working-class lodgings to a level closer to that of the wealthy neighborhoods would reduce the high mortality rate to rates more like those found in cleaner arrondissements. With fewer working-class deaths, the nation will actually be *strengthened*, improving France’s ability to compete on a global scale with other powerful nations.

Jourdet further manipulates upper-class fears of the time to support his views, posing an ominous statement: “When you think about it, we ask how [the worker] can live in these unhealthy slums of the highest degree, and we are surprised that he does not revolt against this fate more...or against the Society who let him exhaust himself and his family in such hovels!”⁵³ The word “revolt” serves as a triggering term for those who desire a stable, strong Republic, because an uprising of the working class would lead to the exact opposite: instability, violence,

⁵¹ Jourdet, 16; Original French quote: “Les arrondissements de Paris renfermant les logements les plus insalubres sont précisément ceux où la mortalité est la plus élevée.”

⁵² Ibid., 17; Original French quotes: “plus du double” and “2,007 à 2,275 habitants [sont] mal logés sur 10,000.”

⁵³ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 17; Original French quote: “Quand on y songe, on se demande comment [l’ouvrier] peut vivre dans ces taudis malsains au suprême degré, et l’on s’étonne qu’il ne se révolte pas davantage contre le sort...ou contre la Société qui le laisse s’épuiser, lui et les siens, dans de tels bouges.”

and destruction.⁵⁴ Although Jourdet seems truly empathetic toward the working class, his language also reflects an understanding that an effective strategy to advocate for housing reform is to demonstrate how better housing can encourage social-control that benefits society as a whole. Architecture meant to reestablish control was not a phenomenon new to Paris: public authorities in the nineteenth century built public urinals throughout the city to “reestablish order in a city always threatening to escape firm control.”⁵⁵ It was no guarantee that new working-class housing (or urinals) would create stability within Paris, but its construction could still assuage fears of revolt motivated by poor and unequal conditions. By provoking those anxieties in his monograph, Jourdet aspires to inspire his readers to support his cause both for themselves and for their beloved nation.

Beginning in the 1870s, science became the dominant way to view the cause and effect of social ills, such as poverty, working conditions and hygiene; sociology and social economy became the main sources of political authority, rather than Catholicism, paternalism, and birthright.⁵⁶ Reformers started to use statistics to describe social problems, a technique present in Jourdet’s monograph, and the scientific study of poverty increased during the Third Republic.⁵⁷ Many social investigators realized that they could no longer blame the working class or the unemployed for being poor, instead classifying the issue as endemic.⁵⁸ Jourdet’s argument for housing reform falls into this category of scientific discourse, placing fault on French society, not on the working class, for their condition.

⁵⁴ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 17; Original French quote: “révolte.”

⁵⁵ Andrew Ross, “Dirty Desire: The Uses and Misuses of Public Urinals in Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 53 (2009): 68.

⁵⁶ Gavan, “Toward a Provident Working Class,” 16.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

After establishing the value of workers to wealthier classes, Jourdet sets out to paint the working class in a more positive light and to appeal to the emotions of the wealthy. Although many wealthier Parisians worried about the working class' supposed immorality and debauchery due to depictions by numerous social investigators, Jourdet seeks to counteract this traditional belief through descriptive and emotional language.⁵⁹ He reveals the difficulty workers face in providing for their families due to their low wages, which forces laborers to “impose real deprivations on housing and food.”⁶⁰ In other words, rather than blaming the working class for their troubles, as was common among many traditional thinkers across Europe, Jourdet shifts the source of the problem away from the individual faults of workers, showing its endemic nature.⁶¹ He rhetorically creates the idea of a cyclical, societal issue: the wages provided to workers are too low to provide fully for both housing and food, leading to poor housing and a lack of proper food. It is not the immorality and the carelessness of the working class that puts them in such a position, but the society itself, which does not provide enough resources to these essential workers.⁶² He describes the conditions of workers as “a social injustice,” clearly blaming French society for putting its lower-class citizens in this untenable situation.⁶³

Throughout his monograph, Jourdet uses scientifically descriptive language to illustrate the negative state of affairs that pervades the working class. For example, in the second chapter,

⁵⁹ Shapiro, “Housing Reform,” 488-489.

⁶⁰ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 5; Original French quote: “[s]’impose] de véritables privations sur le logement et la nourriture.”

⁶¹ For example, in London during the 1860s, Octavia Hill, a middle-class woman who worked with the lower classes, saw poverty as a moral issue that could be solved by developing close relationships between the wealthy and the poor. Her ideology was common among many female philanthropists until the 1880s when some adjusted their stance, viewing poverty as a structural problem that the state could help resolve. See Judith Walkowitz, “Contested Terrain: New Social Actors,” *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992): 54-55.

⁶² Gavan, “Toward a Provident Working Class,” 19.

⁶³ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 21; Original French quote: “une injustice sociale.”

he depicts the working-class slums thoroughly and uses descriptions from various social investigators, such as Georges Picot, a rhetorical technique common among reformers of this period.⁶⁴ After imagery-filled language, Jourdet includes statistical details regarding the number of “unsanitary housing” in France: “the statistic counts 46,835, of which 24,633 have only one room [and] 4,430 have three rooms.”⁶⁵ Instead of relying simply on descriptions of the horrific conditions, Jourdet chooses to also include hard numbers to further his point, emphasizing objective data to make the magnitude of the problem very clear to his readers.

In the third chapter, Jourdet invokes social science to describe the inappropriate upbringing of children in the inadequate working-class lodgings: “the cramped housing, especially those of one room, gives rise, between parents and children, to a promiscuity from which the most elementary laws of decency and modesty suffer.”⁶⁶ Jourdet asserts that working-class children learn adult language, gestures, and intimacy at a younger age than they should because of the lack of space and privacy in their housing, which renders them “insolent and vicious early on.”⁶⁷ Although he describes the working-class children in very negative terms, Jourdet does not attribute the characteristics to the moral failings of working-class families, as many traditionalists of the time would have.⁶⁸ Instead, he aligns the children’s poor traits as the direct result of the housing problem itself. He goes on to describe how mothers must send their children into the streets to get air, yet outside, “they contract from their young age, poor habits

⁶⁴ Gavan, 22.

⁶⁵ Jourdet, 10; Original French quotes: “logements insalubres” and “la statistique en compte 46,835 sur lesquels 24,633 n’ont qu’une seule pièce [et] 4,430 ont trois pièces.”

⁶⁶ Jourdet, *Les Habitations à Bon Marché*, 18; Original French quote: “les logements exigus, surtout ceux d’une pièce, donnent lieu, entre les parents et les enfants, à une promiscuité dont souffrant les lois les plus élémentaires de la décence et de la pudeur.”

⁶⁷ Ibid.; Original French quote: “effrontés et vicieux de bonne heure.”

⁶⁸ Gavan, 19.

and find deplorable examples.”⁶⁹ Again, though Jourdet identifies and acknowledges the fears of the upper class related to the perceived immorality of the working class, he ultimately shows that the poor are not depraved by birth. The living conditions of the children lead to their introduction to “deplorable examples,” and therefore, fixing working-class housing would correct the cycle, eliminating issues that cause the worries of the wealthy.⁷⁰ In addition, although traditional middle-class reformers believed that improving the moral condition of the working class would remedy their living conditions, Jourdet flips this conviction, showing that the opposite is actually true: reformed housing will lead to improved morality.⁷¹

Jourdet’s monograph, though centered around a discussion about Parisian working-class housing reform, reveals both prominent fin-de-siècle anxieties, specifically degeneration theory and nationalism, and positive developments regarding social equality. Although his campaign for housing reform was never actually implemented, Jourdet nonetheless produced a convincing call for reform by utilizing the discourses of his era. His work also endures as a revealing and useful cipher of key anxieties of fin-de-siècle cities, especially in Paris, and it provides insight into how to build a persuasive campaign with prevalent contemporary discourses. His monograph provides an example of how to manipulate societal discourse effectively, using an honest characterization of the problem, rather than conflating terms with an incorrect meaning. In today’s politically polarized world, it is refreshing to see a social reformer harness support for a cause in a direct and sincere way. Perhaps today’s politicians and social justice advocates can learn from Jourdet’s strategy to campaign more accurately, and therefore more effectively, for their objectives.

⁶⁹ Jourdet, 18; Original French quote: “ils contractent dès leur jeune âge, de mauvaises habitudes et trouvent de déplorables exemples.”

⁷⁰ Ibid.; Original French quote: “déplorables exemples.”

⁷¹ Gavan, 19.

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