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Gender and machine-breaking: violence and mechanization at the dawn of the industrial age (England and France 1750-1850)

Le genre des bris de machines : violence et mécanisation à l'aube de l'ère industrielle (Angleterre-France, 1750-1850)

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Gender and machine-breaking: violence and mechanization at the dawn of the industrial age (England and France 1750-1850)

François JARRIGE

In July 1837, a mill owner in Chalabre, a small industrial town in the Aude département in south-west France, announced his intention of installing a mule-jenny, in order to increase production. In this small cloth-manufacturing centre of 3,500 residents, where more than half the population was employed in the woollen mills, the news provoked consternation. The workers immediately gathered in front of the workshops, calling for “the departure of the workman installing the machine, and the destruction of the machine”. In the following days there were further assemblies, and the authorities feared that the unrest would spread to the surrounding villages. Although the forces of order were mobilized, the machine was finally smashed during a riot on 22 July. The authorities immediately issued a gendered interpretation of the conflict. According to the mayor, it was women who had urged the workmen to break “the mechanism”. The involvement of women also impressed the editor of the local newspaper, *L'Aude*, who reported that they “made themselves conspicuous by their fury and violence”, and “had shown themselves to be the most determined in this operation of senseless destruction”.¹ When the conflict was over, one woman spinner was indeed sacked, because “she boasted of having been actively involved in breaking the machines”.²

¹ *L'Aude, Journal des progrès*, 1, 29 November 1837

² Archives départementales (AD) Aude 5 M 26: report on the events in Chalabre of 20-22 July 1837.

This event provides evidence of women's involvement in opposition to the machines which would deprive them of income in the early industrial age. As opposed to the usual image of machine-breaking as a predominantly male activity, there are many signs that women were present in force. Machine-breaking corresponds to a widespread and ambivalent practice, affecting many groups in the period from the late eighteenth century to mid-nineteenth century.³ This form of industrial violence, a recurrent feature in England and France during the industrial revolution, has essentially been depicted as carried out by men, implying the predominance of a virile conception of social relations and labour conflicts.⁴ Women long remained invisible in accounts of popular protest, being seen as active principally in bread riots and confined to their roles as providers of nourishment for the family, with primarily domestic preoccupations.⁵ But far from being marginal or invisible, gender played a decisive role in these outbreaks of industrial violence: in fact it was a determining feature of social relations, and shaped representations of the conflict and the strategy of protest. In the 1970s, Michelle Perrot was the first historian to insist on women's presence "in the movement against machines". She saw them in a dual role: an "auxiliary" one as "housewives", defending the family's standard of living, but also as fully-engaged actors, rebelling against "the machine which was to destroy the domestic mode of production to which they were particularly attached."⁶ The place of women in this type of incident is ambiguous, because the descriptions given by the authorities were themselves shaped by the prejudices and stereotyping characteristic of the male gaze. The image of the woman of the people as wild and violent, driving her husband to acts of disorder, is linked to the naturalization of woman as an instinctive being.

In this re-examination of the topic of machine-breaking in the trans-national area of France and England within which machines,

³ Jarrige 2009.

⁴ In Eric Hobsbawm's pioneering work on machine-breaking, including the 1952 article, the question of gender is not raised.

⁵ The literature in both France and Britain is enormous: see Cardé & Prouvost 2012.

⁶ Perrot 1978.

people and experiments circulated, we shall question the role of gender identities in the construction of the industrialist consensus of the early nineteenth century. For women, industrialization was not a smooth process towards modernity. Contrary to a tenacious myth, which Michelle Perrot long ago demolished, the machines introduced in the nineteenth century were not always helpful to women: they did not automatically “open up to them a promised land of wage-labour and thus of equality and advancement”.⁷ Studying gender and machine-breaking means reflecting at several levels: it is necessary to look at the social effects of automation, but also at the various local interactions during the troubles. When they rioted, women workers were seeking to defend their jobs. They did not intervene solely as “home-makers”, preoccupied with the cost of living, but as full-time “workers”, who were just as threatened as the men with unemployment. To acquire legitimacy and volume for their protests, since their voices were excluded from the political arena, they had to enlist the support of other groups and take the men along with them.

**The first mechanized machines:
cotton-spinning in the late eighteenth century**

The place of women in the early days of the industrial economy has been much discussed and is the subject of a copious literature.⁸ Their situations were both varied and changeable, depending on sector, region and period, consequently being so diverse as to warn us against any rapid generalizations. We also know that their relationship to machines was socially constructed, so that women were employed in the early days on looms, and later on sewing machines, on account of so-called feminine nature, the dexterity of women’s fingers, and their supposed affinity with “soft” materials.⁹ Overall, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mechanization tended to reinforce this division of labour and women’s subordination. Whereas complex machines requiring skill to operate them were usually

⁷ Perrot 1998 [first published 1983]: 177.

⁸ Schweitzer 2002; Tilly & Scott 1987.

⁹ Chabaud-Richter & Gardey 2002.

assigned to men, those used for repetitive tasks under supervision were handled by female labour.

Machine-breaking first appeared in cotton manufacture, which was the earliest sector to be mechanized in the late eighteenth century. Cotton-spinning was a new activity in Europe, and it spread through the countryside, fitting into the rhythms of agricultural labour, outside the system of guilds and regulation. The vogue for *indiennes* (printed calicoes = cotton fabric in bright colours) was a stimulus for new forms of organizing production.¹⁰ Growth in demand prompted innovation.¹¹ The traditional spinning wheel still in operation had changed little, and it took four spinners to provide enough work for a single weaver. British manufacturers of printed cotton sought to increase productivity at the point where mechanization would be easiest, in order to compete in American markets with textiles from India.

It was in this context that the famous early spinning machines appeared.¹² In 1764, James Hargreaves perfected his spinning jenny, the first machine to work eight spools of thread at the same time, by turning a handle (fig. 1).¹³ The first jennies were intended for domestic or family production, and would not greatly interfere with the proto-industrial organization of spinning thread. Nevertheless on 14 June 1769, a number of workmen, anxious about competition and the lower price of products made in this fashion, broke up jennies in a riot which has remained famous in Lancashire. About fifty people armed with cudgels destroyed five machines at Turton, and one in Bolton, while another machine was destroyed at Bury in the days that followed.¹⁴ Several workmen were arrested, but they were not given heavy sentences.

¹⁰ Chapman & Chassagne 1981: 215.

¹¹ Verley 1997: 160-189; Griffiths, Hunt & O'Brien 1992: 881-906, and 1996.

¹² Timmins 1996.

¹³ The figure shows a reconstruction of the process perfected by Hargreaves, based on data from the 1770 patent. See Aspin & Chapman 1964.

¹⁴ Rose 1963-1964: 67.

Figure 1: Reconstruction of Hargreaves's spinning jenny.

Until about the 1780s, it was women who spun thread, either with spinning wheels or using primitive jennies.¹⁵ And the first machines were in fact specifically intended for female labour, since women were considered as more docile and less likely to protest.¹⁶ Later, when the increased number of bobbins required greater strength from the operative, men entered the cotton mills, using the more complex machines known as mule-jennies, while women continued to use the smaller jennies.¹⁷ Cotton-spinning gradually became men's work, with spinners being considered skilled workers.¹⁸ In the space of a

¹⁵ Wadsworth 1965: 403-404.

¹⁶ Berg 1987; Honeyman 2000: 44.

¹⁷ Pinchbeck 1930: 148; Busfield 1988: 72. Often known simply as mules in England, the mule-jennies as they were known in France, combined the original jenny with the powered waterframe.

¹⁸ Boot 1995.

generation, the new cotton-spinners, coming from the ranks of men who had previously been artisans, had transferred into the cotton mills the norms of skilled labour: higher wages, greater autonomy, and being in control of a team (since a cotton-spinner on a machine would hire and pay his own assistants.) Far from leading to de-skilling and a loss of autonomy, the first generation of mechanized spinning machines rather favoured the emergence of a new male labour aristocracy. Writing in 1835 about the technical changes in spinning, Andrew Ure commented that “a man is no longer deemed to be deserving of contempt for exercising the functions of a spinner”.¹⁹ The rapid disappearance of resistance to the spread of mechanized spinning is explained in part by this process of re-skilling and masculinization which accompanied the new methods of manufacture.

In France, pressure for mechanization was less determined, and cotton manufacture long continued to be dominated by proto-industrial labour in the countryside.²⁰ And at first the adoption of jennies which could be fitted into traditional work structures did not cause problems.²¹ But in 1788-1789, a combination of the widespread social crisis, the events in Paris during the outbreak of the Revolution, and increased imports of the new English processes changed the situation. In autumn 1788, the workforce employed at a manual spinning mill in the Falaise region (Calvados *département*, Normandy) blamed the machines for the crisis. On 11 November 1788, a crowd of women even announced its intention of burning a spinning machine which had recently been installed in Falaise. While the royal prosecutor tried to calm the protesting women, 2,000 male workers armed with sticks attacked the machine and set it alight. In early December, the women spinners of Argentan, a small textile centre some twenty kilometres to the south-east, “saw with distress the installation of machines for spinning cotton.”²²

¹⁹ Ure 1835: 105.

²⁰ The specificities of the French market made competition concentrate on the quality of the product rather than its price, Verley 1999: 176-177.

²¹ The earliest model of a jenny was smuggled into France by the English engineer John Holker in 1771; by 1786, there were 600, Ballot 1923: 40, 47-49; Reddy 1981: 51.

²² Archives nationales Paris (AN), H1 1420: list of alms distributed 14 December 1788.

In the spring of 1789, as the crisis deepened, hostility to machines was once more expressed in the drawing up of the *cabiers de doléances* (grievance registers). During the rest of that year, agitation against machines in France was inseparable from the revolutionary context, the hopes it aroused, and the Great Fear in the summer.²³ The question of the effect of machines on female labour was at the heart of the debate. One tract published in Caen denounced “the English spinning machines that people are trying to get established in France”, since they “have paralysed the worker’s arm and dealt a death-blow to the industry of the women spinners.”²⁴ Over the summer, riots broke out in Rouen on 14 and 20 July, and again in August, before the city’s unrest was quelled. Violent protest vanished from Rouen thereafter, but broke out elsewhere, such as in Troyes, where the women spinners rioted in 1791 after manufacturers tried to install jennies there, forcing the authorities to move the machines out into the countryside. In Falaise on the other hand, protests by women continued for longer. In 1794, another riot greeted the arrival of a carding machine.²⁵ In Germinal year XII (March 1804) a crowd made up of women and young people threatened to destroy a machine installed in the suburb of Guibray.²⁶ By attacking the new procedures for spinning cotton, the spinners were also protesting against the cut in wages decided by the mill owners. To justify the measure, the employers had insisted that they needed to reduce their labour costs in order to remain competitive with the workshops already equipped with machines.²⁷ In 1806, the authorities once more feared the outbreak of unrest: “the competition from the spinning machines has made the price of hand-spinning fall so low that a very competent spinner sitting at her wheel for 15 or 16 hours a day can hardly earn 5 francs,” the prefect reported.²⁸

²³ Alline 1981; Horn 2006: 116-117.

²⁴ Vœu des six sergenteries, faubourgs et banlieue de la ville de Caen pour la suppression des mécaniques de filature, Caen, 1789, quoted by Levasseur 1901: 769.

²⁵ Désert 1965: 761-786.

²⁶ AD Calvados, Z 1324, no 4229: report by the police commissioner, 3 Germinal Year XII.

²⁷ AD Calvados, Z 1324, no 1324, no 4239: 5 Germinal Year XII.

²⁸ AD Calvados, M 8619: “État des manufactures existant dans la ville de Falaise et son arrondissement” 1806.

As in England, women workers deprived of their occupation gradually turned towards weaving, during the first half of the new century. Mills powered by hydraulic energy and equipped with mule-jennies had spelt the end of domestic spinning by women, but by the same token, they made it possible to increase demand for domestic weaving. This change can be seen from the statistics: whereas they were virtually excluded from weaving in the eighteenth century, women sometimes formed the majority of weavers by mid-nineteenth century.²⁹

The world of craft:

gender and mechanization in the nineteenth century

Long considered a specifically female activity, cotton-spinning was the focus for the most substantial mobilization by women. But their protests can also be found in other sectors in the early nineteenth century, as mechanization spread to many social spheres. Thought to be more docile, and often confined to unskilled work, women could be replaced by machines more easily than men. That is why, without ever being in the majority, their protests against machines were a recurrent phenomenon during the first half of the century. Such protests took many forms, of which violence was only the most obvious. Domestic outworkers for example often resisted the machines in silence, by intensifying their manual production, or by appealing to eminent local men. In Brittany in the 1830s, one mayor described how he had been addressed by women workers:

I was out hunting, when I went past a farm, and was called in by some women spinners who were in a cowshed where the warmth enabled them to work in comfort. One of them said to me:

“Is it true, monsieur le maire, that la Mère Canique [= *la mécanique*] who can spin 7 *doités* [local term for bobbins] at a time is coming here? We will not be challenged if we strangle her, will we? For she will be taking the bread from our mouths and that of our children.”³⁰

By spinning flax, these women were providing a supplement to agricultural incomes. Their dispersal through the region and their lack

²⁹ Gullickson 1986: 110; Désert 1988.

³⁰ Enquête sur les fils et tissus de lin et de chanvre, Paris, Imprimerie royale, 1838, 1 vol (XLVIII + 326 p.): 73.

of organization prevented them from making a public protest against the coming of spinning machines, but they were equally concerned about the consequences of their introduction.

The place and role of women in this dispute often depended on their position within the work process, and thus varied by trade. In the woollen industry, longer-established and better organized than cotton, but also more slowly changed by mechanization, machine breaking seems to have been predominantly a male phenomenon. The croppers (cloth dressers) for example, who prepared cloth, were well-paid men, proud of their skill and competence (fig. 2).³¹

Figure 2: Croppers (cloth-dressers) in an all-male workshop.

In England as in France, they worked in teams in small, exclusively male workshops, where apprenticeship with all its rituals plus the physical strength required to do the work fashioned a virile worker's identity. Protesting against the arrival of the new shearing frames in the first third of the nineteenth century, they were defending the masculine world in which they worked. And indeed, manufacturers of

³¹ Roland de la Platière, *Encyclopédie méthodique. Manufactures, arts et métiers*, Paris, Panckoucke 1784-1790.

the new machines claimed that thanks to their new methods the proud croppers, reputed for their insubordination, could be replaced by “a couple of boys or women”.³² In woollen production, women were recruited into disputes at first as back-up troops, supporting male demands. This was the case in England in 1811-1812, during the famous Luddite riots in Yorkshire, where the croppers placed themselves under the mythical leadership of Ned Ludd, in order to destroy the new mechanical processes.³³ The same was true in France under the Restoration, in the riots affecting cloth centres in the south, like Lodève and Bédarieux; at Salvage in the Tarn, a few years later, women workers incited the men to destroy the shearing machine, calling them “cowards and making a lot of noise.”³⁴

Among craftsmen and the world of urban trades, the sexual division of labour was shaped by the legacy of the guilds and craft practices such as apprenticeship and *compagnonnages*. Craftsmen sometimes protested against machines, which were blamed for the feminization of the workforce: one example was that of the compositors in the printing trade in both England and France, who complained about the typesetting machines introduced from the 1840s on, in which they saw a strategy to weaken them by using women workers who were less well paid.³⁵ In craft-dominated trades, women were often relegated to tasks like cutting or stitching, which were the easiest to mechanize. Machines which replaced women workers cutting shawls started to appear for instance towards the end of the 1830s, provoking riots among women workers in Paris and a riotous assembly in Lyon in 1831.³⁶ In hat-making, mechanization arrived on the initiative of the French Society for the Encouragement of National Industry, which launched a competition, won by an engineer from Boston in the United States.³⁷ The machine in question (for cutting the fur from animal skins) was fairly simple: a frame made of wood or metal topped by a transmission

³² Notice sur une nouvelle machine à tondre les draps appelée tondeuse ou Forces Hélicoïdes, Paris, Vve Courcier, n.d.; see Jarrige 2012.

³³ Thompson 1968: 608 ff.

³⁴ AN BB 18 1398: report by the general prosecutor, Toulouse, 15 October 1841.

³⁵ Jarrige 2007.

³⁶ Jarrige 2009; Rude 1969: 345.

³⁷ Prize announcement in *Bulletin de la société d'encouragement pour l'industrie nationale* in 1829.

shaft equipped with cutting blades. These helicoidal blades were moved by a wheel turning against a vertical fixed knife.³⁸ Using this machine, a workman could accomplish the work previously done by three women. But its introduction led to a series of protests. In 1841, in Bordeaux, one factory owner tried to bring one into his workshop: the workers protested, the firm was boycotted, and anyone who went on working there was fined.³⁹ In Paris, according to Barberet, some women workers even attacked the engineer who had naturalized the machine in France:

Each one of these cutting machines replaced a dozen female fur-cutters who, being exasperated at finding themselves without work, assembled not only to destroy the machines but also to kill the engineer. For several weeks they followed him about, armed with their scissors, and he had to take every precaution necessary in such case not to be a victim of the progress which he had contributed so much to bring about.⁴⁰

In March 1848, a petition by “two or three fur-cutters” in Paris once more denounced the “machines which have been adopted by the richest masters... which stay the arms of the women workers, aggravate their wretched condition, and take the bread from their mouths.”⁴¹

Figure 3: Fur-cutting machine.

³⁸ Julia de Fontenelle 1830: 77.

³⁹ Vial 1941: 45.

⁴⁰ Barberet 1886: 51.

⁴¹ AN, F 12 4898: petition from the women cutters of rabbit fur to have the machines abolished, 13 March 1848.

Fur-cutting rapidly became separated from hat-making, and the women workers were the victims of the change.⁴²

There were several riots by women in the Normandy textile industry in mid-nineteenth century, when machines were brought in to do tasks traditionally handled by women: one such was in Elbeuf, when a machine was introduced to speed up the sorting [*trriage*] of raw wool, and in La Ferté-Macé (Orne) in 1853 when an automatic cotton spooling machine was installed. Both these tasks were considered specifically as women's work. On Friday 22 May at about 8 p.m., a huge crowd of workers, men and women, gathered in front of the factory belonging to the mill owner Aroux in Elbeuf. To cries of "Down with the machines!" the crowd maintained protests for several days, bordering on insurrection, and only the arrival of troops and about a hundred arrests finally brought the disturbances to an end.⁴³ Elbeuf was at the time one of the major centres in France for the production of woollen cloth. Thanks to the newly-popular craze for "novelties" (articles which changed yearly), local industry quickly expanded. The complex organization of production meant that several large factories coexisted alongside a varied number of handicraft workers. Proto-industrial structures were still in place, and only the operations of *trriage* and preparation were concentrated in the town. *Triage* [= lit. sorting] consisted of checking wool for foreign bodies. It was work which required a good acquaintance with the raw material, and a set of technical accomplishments or qualities regarded as typically feminine: dexterity, concentration, attention to detail. In 1846, 59% of the adult women in Elbeuf were employed in textiles, mostly in the preparatory processes of winding, sorting or framing (*bobineuses*, *trieuses*, *trameuses*) or in cloth preparation, burling, lining and patching (*épinceuses*, *doublouses*, *rentrayouses*). Félix Aroux was an important millowner, whose factory employed 400 workers of both

⁴² Julia de Fontenelle 1830: 226 (fig. 3). In the 1860s, a woman operative could cut the fur from 200 skins in a week at most, whereas the machines were now able to cut 1200 skins a day.

⁴³ AD Seine-Maritime 10 M 330: reports on the agitation against the "sorting machines"; *L'Industriel Elbeuvien*, 24, 28, 31 May 1846; Becchia 2000: 521; Largesse 1990.

sexes, not counting temporary recruits. In the 1840s, Elbeuf was becoming a force in transnational trade networks. The raw wool was increasingly imported from Buenos Aires where it was cheaper, but it was also more difficult to work, because of the vegetable matter which was invariably tangled up in the fleeces. It was to resolve this problem that Aroux bought from England a new machine to speed up the process. According to rumours in the workshops, it would replace the many *ouvrières trieuses* (women who picked matter out of the wool) and increase the poverty which was becoming evident with the deepening crisis in Normandy textile production. This event invites us to ask questions about a little-known group of women, but also to redefine the gendered identities of work. The transformation of working methods in mid-century did in fact lead to the rapid masculinization of the work of sorting. From the end of the Second Empire, in the 1860s, Alcan tells us, sorting was usually handled by men. He puts the exclusion of women down to their “natural weakness” making them ill suited to this type of work.

Their strength is not sufficient to move the bales around... the fatigue caused by constant handling of fleeces all day long prevents them carrying out as much work in the same time as a man, That is doubtless why the first sorting process is almost everywhere reserved for men.⁴⁴

In many sectors, women were the victims of mechanization which drove them out of the workshop, as the figure of the working woman was being marginalized and driven back into the home and domestic life.⁴⁵ Even in the agricultural sector, where women’s labour was ubiquitous yet often invisible,⁴⁶ women were sidelined by the appearance of threshing machines, which appeared early in the century in England and from the 1840s in France. There is no room here to discuss this complex question at length, but previously, at the height of the season when threshing had to be done, the whole family would normally be called upon, since there were many associated jobs to be done, adapted to every level of strength. But threshing machines, by providing fixed work stations, tended to impose a

⁴⁴ Alcan 1866: 342.

⁴⁵ Scott 1987.

⁴⁶ Burnette 2004.

regular structure on the intensity of the labour needed, and thus to exclude women and older men. In his study of machine-breaking in English farming in the 1830s, the famous Captain Swing riots, Carl Griffin demonstrated how women's presence was underestimated by observers and the authorities, to the point of becoming invisible, although they played an active part in the protests and wrote threatening letters.⁴⁷

Violence, collaboration and exchange: the gender of protest

The outbreak of machine-breaking thus touched some very different sectors and mobilized women in a number of ways at the start of the industrial age. The examples mentioned above do not by any means exhaust the question. When they rioted, working women were seeking to defend their jobs: they were not simply intervening as “carers and feeders of the family” but also as workers, threatened just as men were by the new procedures. But strikes by women are rare during this period, and above all were not recognized as legitimate by the elites and authorities who defined the norms of the public arena.⁴⁸ To provide weight and legitimacy for their protest, women therefore had to obtain the support of other groups and persuade male workers to accompany them. That is why working women often appear at first as supporting forces during the troubles. During a riot, different roles fell to men and women. In Vienne (Isère, south-east France) women participated in the unrest, encouraged their husbands, and kept up their ardour by inciting them to violence: during records of interrogations when cases came to court, we can catch occasional glimpses of their role. Marie Berton, a worker aged 28, was accused of saying in public, “Ah, if all the women had been like me, there wouldn't be any machines.”⁴⁹

At times, a rhetorical strategy used by women whose voices were suppressed was to emphasize their role as wife and mother. Thus the women spinners in Châlons (Marne) in 1811 petitioned against the introduction of mule-jennies; they hated the “English machines” and

⁴⁷ Griffin 2012.

⁴⁸ Cohen 2010; Thomis & Grimmet 1982.

⁴⁹ AD Isère, 4 U 97: law file: interrogation of the accused for the court of assize.

claimed that among their own numbers, “there are some who can expect no help from their husbands [...] who are away in the army.”⁵⁰ While the men were away fighting English troops, the women were combatting machines they significantly described as “English”. A priori, machine breaking would seem to originate in a culture of violence and dominant masculinity in which women had little place. And it is true that most of the violent incidents, in England as well as in France, seem to have been carried out by young men who had entered a craft with its traditional institutions, and whose identity had been shaped by their contact with hard physical work, where virility was exalted as a central aspect of craft culture.

Conflict and struggle were also the occasion for some “gender trouble”, that is for the challenging of the traditional frontier between the sexes. The atmosphere of carnival and disguise offered convenient ways to reduce the responsibility of the rioters. In England, witnesses mentioned examples of cross-dressing during the Luddite riots. The uprisings mimed the features of carnival: Luddites breaking machines sometimes disguised themselves as women. In February 1812, several workmen in Yorkshire, dressed as women, destroyed the shearing frames. In April, two weavers dressed as “wives of General Ludd”, led several hundred men to Stockport to smash the power looms.⁵¹ A drawing from the time shows “General Ludd” leading an attack dressed in woman’s clothing (fig. 4).⁵² As well as being a practical way of becoming unrecognizable and hiding whatever one was carrying, adopting a female identity also had a wider symbolic function. It freed men from full responsibility for their actions, by enabling them to blame the alleged “propensity to disorder” of women. This transvestism may also have its origins in the *charivari*, a form of protest and punishment enacted against individuals thought to have transgressed the norms of the community.⁵³ It further refers to the desire for protection and

⁵⁰ AD Marne, 187 M 7: petition by the women workers of Châlons, 20 June 1811.

⁵¹ Binfield 2000.

⁵² <http://www.wcml.org.uk>.

⁵³ Thompson 1972.

reassurance on the part of a gendered work culture in crisis, as mechanization threatened working-class identity.

Figure 4: “The Leader of the Luddites” [Working-Class Movement Library]

By this instrumentalization of sexual identities, men could be relieved of responsibility and blame it on women’s natural “disorderliness”.⁵⁴ In France, however, dressing in women’s clothes as a device seems to have been uncommon. In one example, during the revolt against fur-cutting machine in Paris in September 1831, the authorities noted that

In the case of one woman, whose gestures were no less energetic than her speech, people thought that the dress, shawl and hat with which this person was attired were hiding a man, not a woman, so the order was given to arrest her. But the so-called woman took off her borrowed hat and shawl and disappeared into the crowd.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Davis 1975: 124 ff.; Farge 1991.

⁵⁵ *Gazette des tribunaux*, 8 September 1831.

The authorities did not decide to arrest this individual until they finally realized that he was indeed a man.⁵⁶

In 1853 in La Ferté-Macé, the introduction of a winding machine by the mill owner Frédéric Lainé provoked an assembly “composed for the most part of women [...] in front of the manufacturer’s house.” The women threatened by competition from the machine assembled, crying ‘Down with the machine! Destroy it!’⁵⁷ But in this case, it appears that “rival mill owners, who would be unable to compete with Lainé when he installed his machine [had incited] the women winders to riot and smash it.”⁵⁸

The instrumentalization of this riot is as much evidence of the fierce competition between manufacturers, as of the inability of the authorities to envisage autonomous action by women.

Impunity and repression: women’s violence before the courts

In France as in England, the rigour with which offenders were punished varied according to their sex. Even if the debate about the judicial treatment of violence by women is far from being closed, we know that during bread riots, women were often deemed “irresponsible” and punished less severely.⁵⁹ The judicial authorities hesitated to define transgressive acts committed by women as crimes, preferring to treat them as misdemeanours, to be tried in a lower court. The representations which the authorities had of the nature and gravity of offences and the motives assigned to the acts of rioters modified the severity of sentences.

In England, only a few women were sentenced after the Luddite and Swing riots. Repression of machine breakers varied as norms fluctuated. In France too, women were only rarely sentenced for taking part in machine-breaking. In two cases of groups entirely composed of women, Montmartre in Paris in 1831 and La Ferté-Macé in 1853, they were sentenced respectively to one month, then 15 and eight days in prison. The nine women charged in Paris in 1831

⁵⁶ Steinberg 2001.

⁵⁷ AN, BB 18 1526, file no 4019; report of 20 December 1853.

⁵⁸ AN, BB 18, 1526, file no 4019: according to the prosecutor, 24 December 1853.

⁵⁹ Bouton 1990; Dhaussy 2006.

had turned up on the doorstep of the manufacturer, and had been arrested by the officers of the law stationed there to protect the machines. Despite their “somewhat determined resistance”, they were imprisoned as ring-leaders. The writer of the account in the *Gazette des tribunaux* [Journal of law reports] our only source for the incident, was surprised by the rioters’ appearance:

The account of the events contrasted strangely with the attitude of the defendants during the trial. Young and pretty for the most part, they kept their eyes modestly lowered and spoke only with hesitation, none of them presenting those marked male traits, hoarse voices, and overall gestures, voices, expressions and demeanour which had seemed to us to be the attributes of the female rioter.⁶⁰

Expecting to find himself faced with deviant women corresponding to the stereotype of the woman criminal, the reporter discovered young and timid women workers. In masculine discourse, the “female rioter” was par excellence a deviant figure: her body language had to symbolize gender confusion, her features and voice had to be subversive of female identity which, in the nineteenth century, was widely identified with that of the mother caring for her family. Insistence on the excesses of women rioters is frequent in accounts of popular assemblies. In men’s view, rebel women were impulsive, irrational and unruly creatures, naturally inclined to violence.⁶¹

Incitement to violence was a frequent accusation levelled at women during these riots. In Nantes in 1830, the male “sand-fishers” destroyed a machine recently installed to dredge sand out of the Loire. One of the workers who stood trial stated that “the women who were standing on the river bank were shouting at us to hurry up and help the others who were already attacking the machine”.⁶² It was a frequent defence offered by men that women had driven them on. At Chalabre in 1837, women were supposed to have pushed men to break the spinning jennies and according to the mayor, “it was possible that nothing would have happened if a multitude of women,

⁶⁰ *Gazette des tribunaux*, 12 October 1831.

⁶¹ Perrot 1979.

⁶² AD Loire-Atlantique, 7 U 99: interrogation of Alexis Boré, 18 October 1830.

mostly married to the male spinners, had not come to sow disorder by exciting them and driving them to revolt.”⁶³

The nine women cloth cutters in Montmartre were eventually sentenced to one month in prison, their offence being only that of “assembly”, while charges of rebellion and attacks on the forces of order were dropped. The relative leniency of the sentence is explained by the fact that the machine was not in the end broken, and no damage was done to private property. But in this type of affair, sentences were usually quite light. In Elbeuf, 23 women were among the 109 people arrested the day after the riot (21%).⁶⁴ But there was only one woman among the 18 workers who stood trial at the assize court in May (under 2%).⁶⁵ So the repression varied, and the circumstances seem to have dictated the severity of the punishment.

*

If gender is taken into account in relation to machine-breaking, it invites us to reconsider the role and weight of gender identity in modes of popular protest at the dawn of the industrial age. Gender crops up in many ways during these conflicts. Women figure either as victims of an industrial male order or as beneficiaries of an industrialization which was revolutionizing the work process. Their presence during riots against machines varies according to sector and period. Although most often auxiliaries, they were sometimes central figures in the riot. In spite of extremely fluctuating circumstances, and sources and accounts which tend to marginalize them and make them invisible, women did contrive to intervene as agents, fighting in everyday ways to defend their rights and their claims. Technological change was, from the very beginning of the industrial era, changing definitions of social and gendered roles, and as it developed further it

⁶³ AD Aude, 5 M 26: report by the mayor of Chalabre, 21 July 1837.

⁶⁴ AM Elbeuf, J 1335: list of those arrested in 1846 after attack on the factory.

⁶⁵ This was Anne Savignac, a wool sorter aged 25, who was one of the twelve people sentenced: in this case to three months in prison.

shaped, reified and subverted gender relations in workshop and factory. Workers' identities were constructed through a great number of interactions and mediations, especially via technology, which contributed to construct the field of what was possible in the way of working-class emancipation, as well as the forms of domination.

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