

Perceptions, regulations and measurements of surface water quality in France, 1854-1894. Example of the city of Versailles.

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Résumé:

Among a legion of books on water history, very few are focused on the issue of water quality and its perception throughout time, which is nevertheless a rich and complex subject of study.

Water quality depends on physical, chemical and biological conditions. It can be defined according to water's multiple uses: drinking water, bathing, fishing, water for the ecosystems. Water quality has wide ranging impacts on society, and these impacts call for diverse social and political responses to change the causes of its deterioration or to protect people and ecosystems against poor water quality.

The water history of the city of Versailles between 1854 and 1964, is interesting from this point of view. Downstream from Paris, pumping the Seine river waters for drinking purposes using the "Machine de Marly", Versailles was subject to pollution caused by the capital and had, at the same, to manage its own discharges (Gally and Marivel streams gradually transformed into open sewers, pollution of ponds). The issue of water quality, once mainly the concern of local population and administration through the water service and hygiene council, gradually exceeded departmental boundaries to solicit the attention of Paris and of the State.

Using the almost untapped municipal and departmental archives of Versailles and The Yvelines, we studied the perception that people of Versailles had about the quality of their water and how they measured it. A particular attention was paid to the place these measurements occupied in various actors' discussions, and their role in the genesis of local regulations.