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The inventor of the sewing machine and the arthropods

Much has been said about the resistances of French society to major industrial and technological revolutions.

A little book[1] in praise of Barthélémy Thimonnier, the inventor of the sewing machine, given to me by the CEO of the company Thimonnier, is a reminder that fear of change and temptation of inaction can resurface wherever an innovation is likely to upset the order of things.

I felt I should share with you the brilliant lesson in political economy published by Barthélémy Thimonnier in the *Journal de Villefranche* on September 28, 1845 in response to a letter from a reader who had described his invention as a "*public calamity*".

Much has been said about the resistances of French society to major industrial and technological changes, as illustrated by the controversial introduction of the precautionary principle in our Constitution through the incorporation therein of the Charter for the Environment.

And the worst has been avoided! Some of the reports published during the *Grenelle de l'environnement*[2], supposed to establish a framework for the implementation of the precautionary principle, suggested placing R&D activities under supervision: A commission composed equally of scientists and representatives of public authorities on the one hand, and representatives of civil society (in fact, in the mind of the supporters of this suggestion, representatives of associations) on the other hand, would have had the power of life or death on research projects likely to adversely affect humans or the environment.

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Considering the hostility shown by most environmentalists in France towards GMOs, nanotechnologies, chemicals, the nuclear industry, shale gas, relay base stations – just to name a few – it is fortunate that they were not heard.

We have measured the consequences of the resistance, in the first half of the 19th century, of eminent members of the scientific community, academics and politicians to the development of the train as a new mode of transportation, some of them even learnedly asserting at the time that speed could cause the brain of passengers to explode.

The map of the "*désert français*" corresponds to the decisions made by local elected officials deceived by these prominent characters. Wherever the railway network did not extend, large portions of our territory were left on the wayside.

This lesson faded into the mist of history: Today, any major infrastructure project, such as the construction of an international airport in Notre-Dame-des-Landes near Nantes, sparkles violent demonstrations by small groups of activists known as the "zadistes" who claim to act for the defense of the environment and for the protection of arthropods.

Fear of change and temptation of inaction are as old as the world. This is brilliantly recalled in a small book about the life and works of Mr. Barthélémy Thimonnier, the inventor of the sewing machine, given to me by Mrs. Sylvie Guinard, the CEO of the company Thimonnier.

This book describes the hostility expressed towards this innovation by those who considered that it was going to have disastrous consequences for the employment of seamstresses. On January 20, 1831, Barthélémy Thimonnier's workshop was ransacked, eighty machines destroyed and the debris thrown out of the windows. Threatened with death, Barthélémy Thimonnier survived only because he managed to flee.

I cannot resist the pleasure of sharing with you a few selected abstracts of a written correspondence between the inventor of the sewing machine and one of his critics, published in 1845 in the "Letters to the editor" column of *Le Journal de Villefranche*, the newspaper of a small town near Lyon.

As you will see, at that time people knew how to write.

Following the publication of an article praising the invention of Barthélémy Thimonnier, an outraged reader sent a letter to the newspaper, some excerpts of which are reproduced below:

> *"As you say, in truth, this machine is designed to trigger a revolution in the sewing industry, and this is this revolution that I consider as necessarily resulting in the most dire consequences, etc.*
>
> *But, besides, but above the industrial question, there exists a social concern raised by the invention of the sewing machine, and this concern, which relates to far more srious considerations than the more or less perfection and abundance of articles produced by the art of*

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sewing, must be addressed before an inventor can be permitted to touch on the livelihood of women workers.

Amidst all the evils which afflict humanity at the times we are living in, none is greater than the inability of a woman, left to herself, to live by her work. Every day, the stronger sex further invades professions which, due to their specialty, seemed predestinated exclusively for women.

If, as things stand at present, the position of women whose life are devoted to sewing and who are unable to embrace another job, so large a class in cities and towns, ought to be improved for the sake of morality, if every day we see these poor women, disheartened by poverty, succumb to the deceptive promises of seduction, and soon sink into the lowest level of debasement, if those who have the courage to resist the suggestions of hardship can only earn a wage that everyone admit is not enough to make a living, and are so often unemployed because of shortage of available work, what will happen when the sewing machine will deprive five women out six of their only means of existence! Not to mention the orphans without any support, the widows who only have the small profits derived from sewing to raise their young children, the self-sacrificing girls who share the fruits of their labor with their old and sick parents, who will have no other choice but to fall back upon public charity or to get lost in vice to find a resource against the most fatal despair, starvation.

If one considers such consequences, one would, Mr. the Editor, cease to think about fostering principles, the application of which would be so disastrous.

What would a good market and good clothing industry matter to women workers if they ran out of bread?

As in any and all things, even in matters of progress, the good, when it is counterbalanced by a greater evil, must be shunned as a public calamity."

Barthélémy Thimonnier's response is a great political economy lesson. It provides insights, with a great deal of intelligence, into the secular debate between Saint-Simonians and obscurantists. Selected excerpts:

"Firstly, what man and, primarily what worker, family man, would not share the sympathies so nobly expressed in this letter for the improvement and ennobling of the status of women, within the working class?

In depicting, with so aptly colors, the successive encroachments of men, who have become fashion merchants, linen workers, shirt makers, manufacturers of flowers or even corsets, into the women's industrial world, the anonymous author addressed an issue of social economy. But this issue, in its generality, is extraneous to the question of applying mechanics to the art of sewing.

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What would indeed be the reasons for blaming the machines for such an invasion? Let us, by assumption, put aside the forever inimitable qualities devolved to women, the sensitiveness of their taste, of their grace and of the finishing of their work, as a whole and in detail; let us submit, contrary to all expectations, to the power of machines the preparation of flowers, of fashion and lingerie items; would we be better founded to infer from this substitution the shift of labor, and its transfer from one gender to the other?

Does it not seem, on the contrary, that God, by revealing to the wise the secrecy of the agents of nature, by allowing, with the help of machines, to tame one after another all the elements, to overcome all the resistances, and to accomplish wonders even in the smallest things, wished at the same time to substitute the reign of muscular strength with that of intelligence, to reconcile the strong and the weak, and thus, to foster the situation of women with a view to converging with that of men in the industrial world?

From this point of view, should not the modern era of discovery of the machines, era of emancipation of men heretofore slaves of nature, also be the era of emancipation of women, slaves of men, by reasons of their needs, in all times and in all places where physical strength prevailed at work over intelligence? While today human forces fade away before the indomitable strength of the machines, and especially, of steam, who can prevent women, with a less narrow education, from operating, on an equal footing with men, some industries? Who prevents them from sliding, just like the most unintelligent worker, under the mechanical steam powered printing press, the sheet of paper designed to spread thoughts around the world and for the centuries to come? Why would not, for example, a seamstress, with her intelligence and manual dexterity, learn to master a host of other professions? Why, if assigned to the empire and operation of machines which are as obedient to her voice as they are to the voice of men, would they not achieve the same results? A list could also be made of all the industries to which, thanks to the machine, women have already been introduced.

(…)

Let us say, for instance, before printing was invented, what was the number of copyists engaged into the reproduction of books, and what has become now of the number of hands employed in this industry and in the book industry?"

In his excellent book entitled "*On entend l'arbre tomber mais pas la forêt pousser*" *(*literally "We hear the tree fall, but not the forest grow"*)* about the major technological changes that disrupt our societies before transforming them and increasing the well-being of everyone, economist Nicolas Bouzou devotes a whole chapter to the invention of Gutenberg that entailed the loss of tens of thousands of employment positions as copyists across Europe before generating a huge number of jobs while enhancing the free movement of ideas and providing access to such ideas for the largest number of people.

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He may want to devote a few paragraphs to the life and works of Barthélémy Thimonnier in a future new edition of his book. For the anecdote, the inventor of the sewing machine did not end up better than the inventor of the printing press. None of them has been rewarded for the benefits that his invention has provided to mankind. Both experienced failure and wretchedness at the twilight of their life.

The little book given to me by the CEO of the company Thimonnier – that has become a global leading designer and manufacturer of food packaging machines – is in any case refreshing at a time where we are told that e-book readers are going to kill books while they are precisely designed to increase the number of readers, that social networks create new forms of servitude while they are the best safeguard against the dictatorship of thinking and dictatorships in general, that nanotechnologies and biotechnologies are inventions of the devil while the research conducted in these areas, thanks to the ever-increasing computing speed of our computers, will one day help treat diseases considered today as incurable.

[1] "Thimonnier, 1793 – 1857, Inventeur de la Machine à Coudre", Marcel Doyen, Imprimerie Lescuyer.

[2] Sometimes referred to in English as the "*Grenelle Environment Round Table*": an open multi-party debate that was held in France in 2007 to define the key points of public policy on environmental and sustainable development issues for the coming five years.

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