

The history of gas : oriented or disoriented ?

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Abstract

On October 25, 2024, Léonard Laborie from the Journal of Energy History / Revue d'histoire de l'énergie interviewed Jean-Pierre Williot, a Professor at Sorbonne University and a specialist in the history of gas, a field that he was one of the very first historians to investigate. Looking back at his career as a researcher, Williot reflects on the lack of an association for the history of gas energy comparable to the Association for the History of Electricity in France, as well as the implications.

1 **Can you tell us about your career as a researcher, and in particular what led you to complete a thesis in contemporary history on gas in Paris? What collective dynamic informed your research? Was there one comparable to that which was developed, for the history of industrial electricity, by the Association for the History of Electricity in France (AHEF) from 1982 onward?**

2 **Jean-Pierre Williot** : I will start from the beginning, which is to say the day I went to see François Caron and told him of my interest in completing a Master's thesis with him on the history of water mills in the Vienne Valley, after attending his undergraduate courses with passionate interest. My approach was highly focused on energy, as well as territory. I naively assumed that in my academic training, this Master's would set me on a path towards museums, especially those with an ethnographic or regional dimension, or focused on science and technology. In the mid-1980s, my approach took its place within the context of industrial archaeology, and this context still allowed being registered on an aptitude list after a Master's degree and museum internship with a view to becoming an assistant curator. I knew the Vienne Valley well, the department it was in, its archives. I also thought I knew the museum curators who had met with me to support my project, notably to join the science and technology museum that was opening in Poitiers.

3 So I went to see François Caron with this idea. He explained to me at the time that research was already being done on the contemporary history of hydraulics, especially by Serge Benoît, pointing out that I would not find anything more interesting if I persisted along this path. It was better to consider another approach. Duly noted! With a talent that I later understood allows university professors to suggest topics that fit their own academic agenda, he told me that there was a fascinating subject to explore—which had not been written—namely the history of gas, and especially that of the company serving Paris in the nineteenth century. It was one of the important companies structuring Parisian networks,

and the subject was beginning to be studied in another context in Nanterre, where Maurice Lévy-Leboyer had supervised a Master's degree on the suburban gas company ECFM. I didn't argue, obviously accepting the subject and starting a Master's thesis on the Parisian Gas Lighting and Heating Company from a little before the Second Empire to the first decade of the Third Republic.

I started to conduct research into my sources. I had the benefit of two advisors to guide my research training. A library curator, Luc Passion, who worked at the Administrative Library of the City of Paris, and Alain Beltran, who was completing his own thesis on the electrification of the Paris region. The scope of my subject quickly became apparent, and I was captivated by the number of reports from municipal councilors, by the city's involvement in gas networks to provide urban lighting, and by the modernity that it reflected. Working on the subject also meant expanding my sources and points of view. I therefore visited the departmental archives of the Seine, the archives of police headquarters, the Historical Library of the City of Paris, and the EDF archives conserved at 6 rue de l'usine à gaz (Gasworks Street)— that is not a joke—as well as the archives of the Parisian company in Blois. I was able to establish a traditional business history for the company.

After completing my Master's degree, I found myself at a crossroads. There were competitive exams to become a teacher, including the Capes in History-Geography and/or the aggregation in history (the museum route was no longer possible after a reform to recruitment methods). It also struck me as interesting to continue this company's history, and to expand it chronologically. A third path emerged when Alain Beltran, now at the CNRS, told me about a project on the history of the public company Gaz de France, which he was leading at the request of President Jacques Fournier, who had just joined the company, the sister company of EDF, whose history had been published by Editions Dunod in 1985. There were therefore three intersecting avenues: professional obligation, interest in research on a

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subject for a PhD thesis; and then this somewhat unexpected opportunity in the history of Gaz de France. I did not choose, and took everything.

- 6 After the Capes competitive examination, my days included teaching, the history of Gaz de France, and the early stages of a PhD thesis on the history of the gas industry in Paris, from the early nineteenth century to the early twentieth, covering both companies that preceded the Parisian Company, and extending the history of the latter to the end of its concession in 1907. Joining the project involving the history of Gaz de France with Alain Beltran was a significant burden, but it was also an extraordinary opportunity to gain access to different archives, situate the history of gas in the long term, and develop a more detailed understanding of the world of gas. This allowed us to conduct interviews, and thereby develop the history of oral archives for gas. This is where I began my interest in oral interviews, of which I have conducted several dozen with very different actors. It was also a way of developing a gas-related rolodex that could be used to contact people for documents, archives, etc. Bridges were built between the thesis on the one hand and the history of GDF on the other. There was practically no one working on gas history in the mid-1980s, apart from the American historian Lenard R. Berlanstein, who was interested in the social history of the Parisian Company¹, and somewhat later Jean-Marie Giraud, who embarked on a history of gas and electricity in Lyon, supervised by Henri Morsel.² Alexandre Fernandez was also studying gas history in Bordeaux, with a focus on that city's public gas company.³ Aside from these three people, that was about it.
- 7 To put things in chronological order: I defended my Master's degree in 1983, my DEA in 1986, and my PhD thesis in 1995. As for the history of Gaz

de France, we started in 1987 and finished it in 1990. It took a relatively long time for the initially planned idea—to publish the history of Gaz de France—to be accepted, because the communications director who had just arrived had a very futuristic vision of gas. At the time there were very scientific advertisements, inspired by space, supporting a long-term vision, in keeping with an interstellar future of sorts as well as science fiction films. He had no interest in the past history of gas; we had to convince him over the course of a year. We managed to get the book published because of its scientific and informational contribution to the history of the French economy, and because it showed what this large public company was in comparison to EDF. This considerably reduces potential criticism of a history at the service of the company. *Le Noir et le Bleu* (The Black and the Blue) was published in 1992.⁴

During this entire period, from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the Association for the History of Electricity in France had obviously already developed conferences, study days, seminars, and other initiatives with clear effects. Nothing like this existed for gas. One could say the equivalent perhaps did not necessarily need to exist right away, because there were already two historians working on a broad range of gas history. The history of the gas industry in Paris, which included the history of one of the largest European companies in the nineteenth century, and the history of Gaz de France, which covered a European leader in gas in the twentieth, offered a fairly broad picture of the production, distribution, transport, and consumption of these gas energies, manufactured gas, and natural gas. Furthermore, there were no intermediaries or motivation for forming an association similar to that of electricity. We will come back to this later, but I think that the managers of Gaz de France, who clearly embodied the dominant company at the time, did not have the mindset that an association was needed, unlike EDF, where this dynamic developed with Maurice Magnien and Marcel Boiteux,

¹ Berlanstein, *Big business and industrial conflict in nineteenth-century France: a social history of the Parisian Gas Company*.

² Giraud, 'Gaz et électricité à Lyon (1829-1946): des origines à la nationalisation'.

³ Fernandez, 'Electricité et politique locale à Bordeaux : 1887-1956'.

⁴ Beltran, Williot, *Le Noir et le Bleu, Quarante années d'histoire du Gaz de France*.

and their interaction with François Caron. The same impetus was not present at Gaz de France. It must also be said that the potential field of gas history did not, at the time, have the scope it has acquired today in connection with new political, environmental, and even historiographical issues, while geopolitical realities put it less in the limelight, despite the important gas partnerships France entered into with independent Algeria and the Soviet Union. Moreover, in the 1980s and 1990s, natural gas was too recent to be seen as a genuine dynamic, even though it had existed in terms of history. With respect to the history of energy, after a limited episode focusing on the history of coal, mining companies, and miners, the shadow cast by electricity remained predominant.

9 **Did this dynamic surrounding electricity stimulate the curiosity of thesis directors such as François Caron and Henri Morsel on subjects such as gas? Or did they already have these subjects in mind before the AHEF opened up other horizons?**

10 **Jean-Pierre Williot** : The work on electricity was launched at the very beginning of the 1980s. I think that these historians were oriented towards working on energy and networks, and in the French context, on electricity in particular. Gas simply served as a comparative element, in the same way as water networks—which have led to numerically limited but important works, such as Philippe Cebon de Lisle’s thesis on water in Paris⁵—or tram networks, which have been studied by Dominique Larroque, from a perspective that also always refers back to electrification.⁶ The only other network that generated comparable synergy between researchers from diverse backgrounds and the professional world are railways, with the creation of the AHICF in 1987. Finally, what would have been the point of multiplying local gas histories? From the perspective of business history, it is obviously always interesting to know how gas developed

within a given prefecture or medium-sized town. But the issues are not renewed. It is more stimulating to approach the same subject from the perspective of political considerations, domestic materiality, urban changes, and today environmental effects. If we must speak of oriented history, then let’s say these were not the historiographical orientations of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when historical work on energy was mainly oriented towards the economic and social history of companies.

Do you think that the absence of an association comparable to AHEF had an impact on the historiography? Did this slow down the development of research, or on the contrary free it to address topics that have been less explored in electricity?

Jean-Pierre Williot : One could have imagined a field as flourishing as electricity. It is true that there have been many local monographs on electricity, which have highlighted forms of industrial development linked to electricity that did not exist—or did not exist to the same extent—for gas. Electricity generated an industrial basin or district, or the transformation of the local or regional economy. There was also, in the case of electricity, the importance of networks that were local, but soon also suburban, regional, transregional, national, and international. The scope of the subject was obvious from a territorial point of view. There was no equivalent for manufactured gas, whose deployment was on a more restricted scale. Local monographs have also emerged around gas, within the framework of academic societies, Master’s or PhD dissertations, but they have shown many similarities, and do not help understand broader dynamics, especially when focusing on companies, and less on social or cultural aspects. There have not been approaches around gas similar to those fostered by AHEF around electricity, for instance on electric toys, women and electricity, electricity and medicine. The invariably local approaches, echoing the structuring of networks, and the focus on companies—coupled with the absence of a structure combining these approaches—have not fostered the breaking down of barriers. The

5 Cebon de Lisle, ‘L’Eau à Paris au dix-neuvième siècle’.

6 Larroque, ‘Les transports en commun dans la région parisienne : enjeux politiques et financiers, 1855-1939’.

AHEF has certainly been an important forum for the circulation of ideas, for intellectual emulation. Cross-cutting topics such as the environmental history of gas, the cultural history of gas with applications in everyday life, addresses to the consumer, representations, the gendered history of gas energy would nevertheless offer vast areas of exploration. However, they are in keeping with the historiographical context of today; this was not truly the case before, and to put it bluntly, gas history seemed marginal, offering little interest. Except for those who were interested in it! Today the subject makes more noise, and garners the attention of historians.

13 An association would obviously have generated impetus among the various university professors to secure scholarships, establish intermediaries, provide material resources. We must not neglect the fact that the AHEF has provided substantial material resources to develop the work of historians. Of course the association is only a framework, but this framework is useful. Moreover, whatever the position of the historians who supervise research, none suspect that the AHEF would seek to influence academic results, since requests for support, Master's or PhD scholarships, and aid for conferences come from all historiographical corners. Today, our critical reading of the company and industrialization—driven by the calling into question of research that had political ends in other subjects—has led to the challenging and even rejection of research supported by an association linking the academic and business worlds. These positions can raise questions about potentially “biased” history. Nevertheless, I do not think that this retrospective reading is valid. The history topics developed in these decades corresponded to a demand for industrial history emanating from the companies themselves, and responded to the strong promotion of economic and social history in French universities during these years. Gaz de France, on the other hand, was not at all in this state of mind, because the company had a history, which we had written with Alain Beltran; that was enough, and proceeding further would have required the company to appreciate that the broader history of gas was a vector of

identity, or even of positioning in the world of energy. The thinking was not at all along these lines, especially with new management at the company, which did not have the same historical streak as engineers. The primary message was instead the following: the future is natural gas, the past is gas factories that we must no longer talk about. It would be as well to remove 150 years of energy history for several cities and millions of inhabitants across the globe, with some seeing the gas lights of cities and the flames of kitchen stoves as a significant improvement in their lifestyles, and others as a disconcerting or dangerous modern industrialized world! For them, there was indeed a sense of transition, a “before” and an “after.” It would not have been a question of taking sides for one or the other, but simply observing the course of history.

To your knowledge, have there been any initiatives to create an association that would have brought together academia and the gas industry in the broad sense? If not, why did this not happen?

Jean-Pierre Williot : The creation of an association proceeding in the same manner as AHEF assumed that senior management in the gas industry got along with each other. The gas companies were Gaz de France of course, in addition to others, especially companies established in Southwestern France, which had a special status, in addition to state-owned companies, and even some working in the field of oil. In the history of the founding of Gaz de France, several companies had been left out. This was so because the natural gas wells that had been identified in the Southwest, in Saint-Marcet and Lacq, were operated by other companies. They did not want to divest themselves of their assets in favor of an all-encompassing Gaz de France. The entire Southwest was left out of nationalization, as were companies “*en régies*”. For them to be included there had to be a link between these gas companies—those belonging to Gaz de France and those in the Southwest—and in the late 1980s this was not at all the prevailing discourse. Contrasting and sometimes opposing cultures persisted. Being part of Gaz de France

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was not the same as being part of SNGSO or Cefem, or the Régie de Strasbourg, although everyone recognized that GDF was indeed a leader in the gas sector. Later, with the companies that joined Total, it would have meant imagining an association where everyone would say: our interest is to develop the history of gas, so let's form an association together. However, a history relayed by an association similar to AHEF was hardly in keeping with the mindset of the management of these companies.

16 At the same time, former Gaz de France senior management interested in the history of gas from a heritage point of view established collections of meters, street lamps, and advertising blotters. They always did so with a focus on “their” historical gas, manufactured gas. Natural gas, with its networks that were presented by companies as the future—as a whole new international gas story—willingly forgot or eliminated the memory of the gas plant's dirty, dusty, and dangerous past. These former employees founded associations, such as Afegaz or MEGE, in connection with collections of objects. While their existence was recognized, it did not equal the scope of the AHEF, for lack of an equivalent number of academics interested in the subject.

17 Until Gaz de France partnered with Suez (together they would form Engie), and the latter asked us to write its gas history, the historiographical direction had remained confined to corporate history, as if to underscore the networks that justified these outcomes. This prompted Alain Beltran and I, as authors and historians known within the gas world, to further expand the historiographical coverage of these companies, by working on distribution and GRDF, then on transport and GRT Gaz. We responded to specific requests on different aspects of gas history, to the point of writing a book on gas civilization. When the merger took place between Suez and Gaz de France, on one side there was Suez, which wanted its history, as well as to appropriate the entire gas heritage. On the other was Gaz de France, which already had its history, but believed its gas legitimacy could not be compared to that of Suez, and therefore marked

its territory by sparking a reflection on a gas civilization, of which Gaz de France had been a central actor. In the 2000s, this went so far as producing two books: one for Suez,⁷ and one for the former Gaz de France⁸ before the completion of the merger. The two books are not exactly the same height, with Gaz de France's exceeding that of Suez by a few millimeters. Coincidental measures? These aspects seem anecdotal, but are revealing of a state of mind. In this context we were able to expand research, but without a collective dynamic comparable to that which prevailed around the AHEF. On the side of associations of former employees, we were seen as competitors for memory, or as the purveyors of a corporate history from the top down, and disdainful of the former gas workers still interested in the Auer burners and meters from a 1920s factory. The trio of managers, former employees, and academics has never really found a synergy.

I will give just one example, but a revealing one. When I was preparing my thesis, there were archives that were kept in a room in a very beautiful building, the hôtel Condorcet in the street of the same name in Paris. It was the headquarters of the Parisian Gas Company, and then was taken over by Gaz de France, before serving as the headquarters of a certain number of services, including the GRDF today. Knowing that I was working on these archives, a former manager practically sealed up the boxes so that I would not consult them. He considered them his property. The relations did not foster a common dynamic to create an association. I think a turning point was missed. A question of people, personal desires, chance encounters?

In Strasbourg the environment with respect to the history of Gaz de France was good. I went to Alsace to interview two senior executives in 1988, and they had a clear interest in the history of Gaz de Strasbourg. They had gathered collections, a small museum of sorts, which served as the nucleus for part of the Afegaz collections today. They were very interested in this

⁷ Beltran, Williot, *Suez, l'Histoire*.

⁸ Beltran, Williot, *Gaz. Deux siècles de culture gazière*.

intersection between an academic perspective and a clearly existing gas identity. They also reissued gas-related books, supported research, and put together a remarkable exhibition for the 150th anniversary of Gaz de Strasbourg. History tread on conquered ground, and I have a fond memory of it, between the lighting of Gutenberg plaza and the operation of the gas Pyrophone.

20 Today the landscape is different. The interested or positive reading of the 1990s or 2000s has given way to a fairly critical reading informed by environmental issues linked to fossil fuels, and awareness of geopolitical issues, especially with respect to Russian gas or liquefied natural gas (LNG). A gas history association in which companies would play a full role co-constructing an academic agenda is no longer conceivable on the model of the AHEF, which is strong in term of its longevity and credibility. It would no longer be in keeping with the state of society, or the issues of today. One may even wonder what the objectives of such an association would be in the controversial debates unfolding across a very wide range of media. Other associations, focusing on products no longer popular with society—especially due to health criteria—have experienced the same problem. This does not mean that the history of gas is not being reinvested. For my part, obviously, I continue to work on this subject, although I have diversified my interests into the history of engineers, railways, and food. But new research is appearing on gas geopolitics, in particular around Russia, American liquefied natural gas, and the environment. Today, if the issues could justify the existence of an association interested in the history of gas, it would no longer be with the same perspective as that of the 1980s for electricity.

21 In the long term, this absence of a gas history association has deprived new approaches of a potential launching pad. This situation reflects a history that is clearly of its time. It is therefore essential to understand that a history written within a given context did not explore subjects that emerged within different and later contexts. This is self-evident, but sometimes forgotten.

The historiography of gas is proof of this. Priority was given to electricity, because there was and still is a preponderance of electrical energy in this country. This is reflected in the origin and influence of technical advisers, project managers, in the Energy Directorate, within the Ministry of Industry when it exists, as well as ministerial offices. The role and voice of EDF is unmatched by that of gas companies. The absence of an association focusing on gas is also a reflection of the distribution of energy in France, and the importance of electricity compared to gas. Actors in gas have been unable to assert their historical importance in the same way as those in electricity. The current revival of work on mines and coal, for example, demonstrates the possibility of a different dynamic. It reflects the environmental and social concerns of the moment. We no longer write the history of mining companies, but are instead interested in environmental history, or a history of hardship, occupational risk, and conflict at work. It would therefore be logical to approach the history of gas by renewing it as well, instead of reproducing what is already known. A company like Engie could have developed the history of gas by creating an association similar to AHEF, because today other aspects of gas history could present, over a relatively long period, the relationship with the environment, or aspects relating to mobility or thermal comfort, among others. This is even less the orientation, since the company is no longer focused on gas, but rather on energy services, which of course includes gas, but not exclusively. The gas heritage escapes it, especially since there is not much left, or it is destroyed in indifference, unlike other countries that know how to value the memory of work and places, in short time.

We could say that the historiography, as it is structured around an association on one side and the absence of an association on the other, reinforces the asymmetry of power between the electricity and gas sectors. If we go to a library, we will find much more on electricity than on gas. Isn't this an unbalanced vision of history?

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24 **Jean-Pierre Williot** : It is not only true of gas. Let us take other energies, such as solar, wind, and wood, or the previously mentioned coal, or even oil, whose historiography has been greatly expanded in recent years: we do not have a bibliography comparable to the one for electricity fostered by an association supporting work across the relevant universities over the last 40 years. These are dozens of Master's theses, PhD theses, conferences, exhibitions. The quantity of work and knowledge indebted to the association is considerable. That being said, the share of electricity in historiography reflects the importance of electricity in our societies. With the announced neo-electrification and expanded uses of electricity, this will only continue to intensify.

25 **What about the situation abroad?**

26 **Jean-Pierre Williot** : Among our European neighbors, some pay more attention to the history of gas than in France. This has been the case in Spain since the late 2010s. Spanish colleagues are interested in gas, precisely at a time when their country is broadly converting to gas energy with new methane terminals, and Spain's entry within the gas market. They are supported by regional programs funded to develop research. There are not just three or four individuals working on gas, but a larger number, motivating young students who do not see gas as a fossil fuel fated to disappear without being studied. There is demand in this country, one that embraces a community of historians interested in other networks, electricity, telephones, etc., or in the local history of gas companies and public policies related to gas. Around Mercedes Fernandez-Paradas, Alberte Martínez-López, Isabel Bartolomé Rodríguez, Jesús Mirás Araujo, and Nuria Rodríguez-Martín there is a whole group of colleagues pushing forward a history of gas in the Mediterranean area,⁹ as we implemented for the first time with

Serge Paquier over 20 years ago across the entire European space.¹⁰ Today, we should take stock of the situation throughout Europe, in order to renew the bridges required for such an association. The ambition could be international and intercontinental, as other historian colleagues are working on gas in India and Iran, for example.

This has not yet led to an international association for the history of gas, although the International Gas Union does exist. There is nothing comparable to what exists in the railway sector in connection with the International Railway History Association, led among others by Andrea Giuntini, who has worked on numerous networks, including gas.

To conclude, what does the absence of an association at both the national and international levels teach us about the AHEF? It reflects the extraordinary importance of electricity in the country's economy and society since at least the 1950s, which has never stopped growing. But beyond that?

29 **Jean-Pierre Williot** : Beyond that, I think that it has given historians and academics as a whole—because there are not just historians but also sociologists and representatives from other disciplines—an extraordinary opportunity to secure the means for developing research, and including it within a framework. This has involved financial means, in the form of research aid to support Master's or PhD theses, in addition to conferences. But this could also include material resources, such as rooms for meetings, sending letters, and publishing conference proceedings. This combines a dearth of means at universities with administrative inefficiency in managing the funds available to researchers, with the results never living up to expectations, and especially to the needs. This entails not putting academics in

⁹ Martínez-López, Mirás Araujo, Rodríguez-Martín, *Economic History of the European Energy Industry. Lighting Up Western Europe 19th to 21st centuries*; Mirás Araujo, Giuntini, *The Gas Industry in Latin Europe. Economic Development During the 19th and 20th Centuries*; Bartolomé Rodríguez, Fernandez-Paradas, Mirás Araujo, *Una energía*

que ilumino el Mundo. Crecimiento, retroceso y reinvencción de la Industria del Gas en perspectiva regional en el sur de Europa (siglos XIX-XX).

¹⁰ Paquier, Williot, *L'industrie du gaz en Europe aux XIXe et XXe siècles. L'innovation entre marchés privés et collectivités publiques.*

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a system of dependency, but of co-production of knowledge and reflections.

- 30 One can take a critical view, by asserting that the association has conditioned the history of electricity. But the historian, in any case, is never neutral. There are always various conditionings that guide the work, be they private, personal, contextual, doctrinal, or even dogmatic. The association may have had a constraining or framing effect, so to speak, effectively orienting work, but these frameworks or orientations also came from the scientific committee's own discussions, which determined the subjects that seemed to be of interest, most likely echoing society's concerns at that time. I believe the association was more of a facilitator for organizing things, like other associations of this type (railways, aluminum, La Poste, etc.).
- 31 If we were to do away with everything that has been done by the AHEF, the AHICF, the Institute for the History of Aluminum, the Committee for the History of La Poste, the Committee for the Economic and Financial History of France, that would leave a great deal of room on the shelves. But would we not also be destroying knowledge that is useful to everyone, and that should be debated based on scientific arguments?

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