

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Helping the Poor Emerge from “Urban Barbarism to Civic Civilization”: Public Bathhouses in America, 1890 – 1915

Perry G. An

Department of Medicine, New York University School of Medicine, New York, New York

In an era when the luxury of private bathrooms had not yet been made widely available to the masses, local charities and municipal governments worked feverishly to construct public bathhouses. Reformers, including city officials, engineers, physicians, and members of the clergy, increased the number of public bath facilities across America from a mere six in 1894 to 49 by 1904. The urban poor took tens of millions of showers at the turn of the century as a result. What the poor may not have realized, however, is that the reformers of the Progressive Era had in mind a form of social engineering. Bathing, they argued, not only assisted in the containment of disease; it also served to instill upper-middle class values of self-respect, morality, and citizenship into the life and practice of the poor.

From 1890 to 1915, local charities and municipal governments across America worked feverishly to construct public bathhouses. The establishment of public bathing in most major cities provided the unwashed masses with the opportunity to bathe at almost no cost, since the vast majority of the tenement population did not possess bathing facilities in the home. (While private bathrooms emerged in the United States in the mid-1800s, they did not become the norm among the lower classes until World War I.) Reformers erected bathhouses to meet the private bath shortage, increasing the number of public bath facilities across the country from a mere six in 1894 to 49 by 1904.

Well over five million baths or showers were taken at these facilities in New York City in 1904, and over four million in Philadelphia the same year [1]. Each bathhouses cost anywhere between \$25,000 and \$300,000 to build in New York City [2], the money coming from charity organizations, individual philanthropists, and city governments [3].

The first indoor public bathhouse in the United States, called “The People’s Baths,” opened on August 17, 1891, in downtown Manhattan. For five cents, patrons received a towel and a bar of soap to accompany their hot (or cold, if preferred) showers. The People’s Baths was a two-story building, containing 23 showers

*To whom all correspondence should be addressed: Perry G. An, New York University School of Medicine, Department of Medicine, 620 East 20th Street, Apartment 7G, New York, NY 10009. E-mail: perryan@post.harvard.edu.

†Abbreviations: AICP, Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor.

and three bathtubs. Each bathing unit was divided into two compartments, a dressing room and a shower room, each measuring three and one-half feet by four feet. By noon of the opening day of the People's Baths, 125 showers had been taken, a number exceeding expectations of the founders. William G. Hamilton, chairman of the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), which had funded the project, claimed, "Few incidents in my life have given me more pleasure than having been instrumental in promoting this work.... We know it will be a success, and we trust that those for whose benefit it is built will use it to its fullest extent." Editors of the *New York Tribune* were equally enthusiastic about the People's Baths and supported the motives of its founders, stating, "The aim of the kind hearted men and women engaged in it is good, and the scheme has been carried out in a thoroughly sensible manner, with careful consideration for the feelings of the people whom it is desired to benefit" [4].

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DIRT AND MORAL DEGRADATION

While polls of the patrons of the People's Baths were not conducted to ascertain their level of satisfaction, the fact that the facility was widely used for over a decade indicates that it met a widespread need. Whether this need, however, included absolving oneself of morally reprehensible behavior or making oneself fit to be a part of the upper classes, is debatable. In the eyes of the bath reformers, which included city officials, engineers, physicians, and prominent members of the clergy, tenement dwellers were obligated to bathe for a multitude of moral and social reasons. Reverend Bishop Potter, in a letter to AICP's Hamilton, wrote, "The connection between dirt and degradation is

more intimate than most people are willing to recognize; and while there is no doubt that children can be happy without being clean, no one who has known any other condition can be subjected to conditions of life in which cleanliness is practically impossible, whether of body or raiment, without a steady and sure deterioration of the whole moral tone." Many pastors even took baths themselves at the public facilities in order to ascertain their value. The AICP published a pamphlet that stated, "We have also had three ministers of the Gospel, two of them well known down town and one a Japanese minister, taking a bath at the same time. Their reasons for coming here was to test the baths before recommending them to their charges" [5].

Non-clergy individuals also espoused the use of public bathhouses for moral reasons. William H. Tolman, a leading bath reformer and secretary of the Mayor's Committee on Public Baths and Public Comfort Stations, emphatically argued that to bathe the masses was to teach a higher standard of morality: "It has never occurred to our cities that it is civic economy to give a person an opportunity to wash; that is it also morally better to give a man an opportunity to wash the outside of his body with water, rather than the inside of his body with whiskey." In addition, stated Tolman, "Clean bodies in cities represent the early stages of an emergence from urban barbarism to civic civilization" [6].

The upper middle-class consistently adopted an attitude of paternalism towards the "filthy poor," as exemplified in the writings of Goodwin Brown. Brown, a successful lawyer who pioneered radical legislation in 1895 requiring the establishment of public bathhouses in first- and second-class cities in the state of New York (at the time, New York City, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Troy, and Utica), wrote:

Though well-bred and cleanly people inevitably shun the ill-bred and uncleanly, it is nevertheless exceedingly surprising that so many of the former will tolerate the presence of servants who are frequently strangers to personal cleanliness, and who are, plainly speaking, unpleasantly offensive. It may safely be asserted that, with few exceptions, people of the so-called better class take little or no pains to see that their servants are given free opportunities for bathing [7].

William Paul Gerhard, a leading consulting engineer for sanitary works in New York City, argued that to wash the unwashed masses was to reduce the amount of crime in American cities: “A few simple and inexpensive, clean and inviting shower baths erected in a well-lighted corner of the basement would give the tenants opportunity to frequent thorough ablution in tepid water, and would have a tendency to lead to increased cleanliness in the tenements, and thereby to an improvement of the morals and a possible reduction in crime and vice” [8]. To bathe the citizenry was suddenly a cookbook method for the building of a safe and orderly city!

The bath reformers, however, did not specify exactly how regular ablutions would lead to changes in one’s behavior and civic reform. The relationship was supposed to be intuitive and obvious. Brown asserted, “Moral precepts and clean bodies should bear the closest relationship....Can it be doubted that most beneficial results would flow from such instruction and from the establishment of such baths?” [7].

Instead of constructing public bathing facilities, the bath reformers could have built private shower facilities in tenement dwellings as a logical solution to the bath shortage in the late-1800s. However, such a radical undertaking was considered to be unrealistic, although for reasons not explicitly detailed: “It was also felt that to require a private bath for each family as a

matter of law, was not practicable and might with difficulty be sustained if attacked in the courts” [9]. David Glassberg argues that the bath reformers felt that public baths would suffice in the time that it was going to take to build private bathing facilities in newer tenement homes [3]. (Legislation passed in 1901—the Tenement House Law—mandated the construction of private toilets in new tenements; builders increasingly included private bathtubs to remain competitive) [10]. Besides, some reformers did not believe that members of the lower classes would properly utilize and maintain private baths. Gerhard noted that it was “probable that the bath tubs [in tenement homes] would not be rightly used, that the waste pipes would soon stop up, that the bath tub would not be properly cleaned, and finally that, being abused in other ways, it would soon become unfit for use” [8].

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DIRT AND PUBLIC HEALTH

The scientific community backed religious and municipal authorities’ efforts to establish public bathhouses. Scores of physicians publicly announced their endorsement of the baths for both moral and medical reasons. Dr. Gouverneur M. Smith, one of the many health authorities present at the opening of the People’s Baths, wrote the following lyrics to celebrate that event:

The man who is clean from his scalp to his toes
Should always be jolly wherever he goes.
To be cleanly without leads to pureness within,
Where lurk germs the vilest of terrible sin.
So hurra! yes, hurra! that this bath-house is built.
At sin and at filth to make a brave tilt,
May the A.I.C.P., by this right royal gift,
Save many a soul now wrecked and adrift [4].

Dr. Alfred L. Loomis, in a letter to the AICP, also cited both moral and medical reasons in favor of the establishment of

public bathhouses: “Your proposition, transmitted to me by Gouverneur M. Smith, MD, to erect a Bath House for the destitute poor of New-York, receives my most hearty approval, both from a moral and from a sanitary standpoint” [5].

An inclusive model for disease etiology in the 1890s provided additional ammunition to bolster the aims of the bath reformers. The germ theory of disease, which began taking hold in the 1890s, in addition to the vaguer miasmatic theory of disease, popular from the 1850s, synergistically captured the American mind. Put together with a host of cholera, smallpox, yellow fever, and influenza epidemics in the latter half of the 1800s, the result was an unprecedented health-conscious and germ-fearing America, and the understanding that all people — both the rich and the poor — stood in equal position to contract deadly germs and their associated diseases. Moreover, malodorous, unhygienic individuals were likely to contaminate their surroundings via “offensive exhalations.” The filthy and the disgusting were not only viscerally repulsive to Victorian Americans; dirty slum dwellers were also considered carriers of deadly microorganisms. Gerhard, a staunch proponent of the miasmatic theory of disease, argued:

The periodical and thorough cleansing of the surface of the human body by bathing and general ablutions is a condition for continued health, and becomes a potent factor in prolonging life. This was recognized at all times, and Hippocrates expressed this view in his well-known requirements relating to purity of soil, of air, of water, of food and of the body. The best way of preventing disease or epidemics consists in removing quickly all manner of dirt and refuse, whether in the streets, in the houses or on the human body. Uncleanliness of the body may lead to skin diseases, and often causes offensive exhalations due to the putrefaction of the dirt on the skin and in the clothing [8].

His conclusion and plea were that “If there is at present too little appreciation of the healthful effects of bathing in the lower classes of population, it is largely on account of the lack of baths in our cities. Let bathing opportunities at reasonable expense be provided, and the people will surely make use of them.”

John Brisben Walker of the magazine *Cosmopolitan* commented on the need for public baths for both medical and economic reasons, citing that an epidemic due to their absence would be extremely costly from a monetary standpoint:

In New York there are about half a million of poor with as few of the comforts as it is possible to conceive....To leave these person in their present condition, is to run the risk of a pestilence among them which would be a great deal more costly to the city than any sanitary relief which could now be provided for them, even on an extravagant scale. It seems advisable, therefore, on economic if not humanitarian grounds, to afford them some immediate relief. A form of relief which has been suggested by the *Cosmopolitan Magazine* is the opening of parks within easy reach of the poor, and the erection in them of public bath-houses” [11].

Perhaps the most formidable medical authority lending support to the establishment of public bathhouses was Dr. Simon Baruch. He was a lifelong proponent of hydrotherapy, contending that applications of water to the body could prevent and cure disease. He served as Professor of Hydrotherapy at the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University. Before moving to New York City in 1881, he served as field surgeon for the Confederate Army during the Civil War. (Baruch was the father of the perhaps more well-known Bernard Baruch, statesman and economic advisor to several American presidents from World War One through to the 1950s.)

Simon Baruch began his crusade for the development of public bathhouses in

America after a trip to Germany in the late 1880s in which he was impressed by the public bath system there. Incidentally, Brown also observed that many European nations possessed a more advanced public bath system than that of the United States, stating rather bitterly, “We are fifty years behind them all” [7]. The design of the People’s Baths was largely influenced by what he learned about German municipal baths [3]. While not as successful as Brown in influencing local governments to pass legislature regarding public baths, Baruch was steadfast in his support of public baths through to his death in 1921. As President of the American Association for the Promotion of Hygiene and Public Baths in 1917, Baruch asserted, “As a physician, I lay great stress upon the refreshing and mentally invigorating action of baths and this particular bath of cold water, its temperature varying from 68° to 75°F, produces such a vitalizing effect” [12].

PUBLIC BATHS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Baruch championed the establishment of baths not only in urban areas, but also in public schools. This was a practice that had been well established in Germany by the 1890s. In fact, a host of bath reformers, in the progressive spirit of that era, pushed for the practical teaching of hygiene in public schools. The time was ripe for such an agenda: curriculum reform was in full swing in the early 1900s, as emphases shifted from the esoteric to the utterly pragmatic and efficient. Students learned not only about geology and zoology, but also about how they as human beings were related to the earth and its various inhabitants. Educators sought to inculcate students with knowledge that would enable them to live as upstanding citizens.

In addition, as the bath reformers recognized, public schools in the early twen-

tieth century adopted the capacity for social control and the dissemination of progressive ideas. Herbert M. Kliebard writes,

In a period when the influence of certain social institutions such as family and church was believed to be in a state of dangerous decline, the functions of schooling had to be restructured radically in order to take up the slack. The scope of the curriculum needed to be broadened beyond the development of intelligence to nothing less than the full scope of life activities, and the content of the curriculum had to be changed so that a taut connection could be maintained between what was taught in school and the adult activities that one would later be called upon to perform....[Schooling was] an opportunity to exercise a direct and desirable form of social control [13].

One prominent educator of the Progressive Era (1900 to 1915) was George W. Hunter, author of the popular high school biology textbook, *A Civic Biology*. Hunter taught biology at the prestigious Dewitt Clinton High School in New York City, where teenage immigrant boys learned how to interact with birds and insects, what to eat and drink, and what to consider sanitary or filthy [14]. “Our courses in biology have decidedly a civic trend, biology being applied in its relation to human welfare and especially to the welfare of the citizen of New York” [15]. More specifically, Hunter believed that secondary school biology included the “teaching of the personal application of the rules of morality and health as codified in the teaching of personal hygiene” [16]. Like the bath reformers, Hunter associated cleanliness and hygiene with morality.

Experiential learning, as embodied in animal dissections and field trips, grew in popularity during the Progressive Era as a means of teaching practical lessons and skills. It not only effectively taught students valuable material; it also engendered in students a general enthusiasm for learning [14]. For example, the annual class-

room visit to the local museum became a part of the public school curriculum in the 1910s. One teacher, noting the increasing role that New York City's American Museum of Natural History played in education, stated, "The Museum is no longer accurately defined as a 'repository'; it is a great living teacher" [17]. Another educator enthusiastically commented on the close relationship between biology and morality as exemplified in museum exhibits: "The moral lessons, much needed for our day and generation, to be learned in the Habitat Groups of Birds are endless — the maternal and paternal love, the happy family life of the young, the joy of living, the beauty of their homes" [18]. One museum, in 1911, even loaned one of its exhibits on hygiene and infectious disease to a local school. The exhibit comprised a series of photographs, one of which showed two female pupils sharing a pencil. The caption under the picture read, "These girls are doing sums with one pencil, which each in turn without thinking puts into her mouth, so that any disease which whether may have will be likely to spread to the other through the transfer of the germs from the mouth" [19].

Like the progressive educators, Baruch, Gerhard, and Tolman firmly believed that 20th century children needed to learn practical skills. The bath reformers were particularly interested in teaching students about hygiene and bathing by establishing shower facilities in public schools. Reading about hygiene was not going to suffice. Only by actually taking showers would students learn about the many benefits of regular bathing, and then go on to enlighten their parents of such lessons. This was a chief agenda on the part of the bath reformers, to thoroughly alter the mindset and behavior of the unwashed masses by reaching their children in schools first. In his treatise entitled "A Plea for Rain-Baths in the Public

Schools," Gerhard wrote, "To a certain extent the bathing of children in public schools will exert a beneficial and wholesome influence in fostering habits of cleanliness among the people generally." In addition, Gerhard emphatically argued, "It is only by educating our poorer classes in cleanliness in early life that we shall make them, as a whole, love it for its own sake, and hate dirt and those habits which tend to make man lower than the beasts of the earth, too often now arising from an acquaintance, an intimate association with dirt and dirty homes among the poor" [20]. Some bath reformers, it seemed, were not afraid to call the unwashed multitude a subhuman species.

Tolman offered public health arguments for the installation of bathing facilities in public schools. He noted that opportunities for daily bathing in public schools were imperative if efforts to control the spread of contagious diseases in schools were to be successful. He cited that in one school where 3,918 children were examined by a medical doctor, almost 10 per cent of the population possessed some form of infectious disease [6]. Tolman felt that such diseases could be contained and eradicated if students bathed regularly.

The bath reformers got their wish with such arguments spanning the moral to the scientific. Many public schools in Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, and New York City incorporated bathing sessions as a part of their curriculum between 1900 and 1915. Baruch contended that principals in New York City "regard schools baths as an invaluable means of character building and social improvement, the good influence of which has reached into the pupils' homes....The bathing habit formed in school between the ages of seven and fourteen continues through life. On the moral side, a child, when clean, has more respect for himself and is more responsive to law and order." Twenty-eight principals

were polled regarding the effectiveness of showers during school hours. Baruch reported this excerpt of the questionnaire:

(1) Do the baths help in discipline? The large majority was in favor.

(2) Do the children profit by the baths in attaining higher standards of cleanliness? The fact that the vote is almost unanimous fully justified the baths.

(3) Do the children help to make higher standards of cleanliness at home as a result of the use of the baths in school? Principals are positive that the children soon convince their parents of the value and hygienic importance of baths.

(4) Do they make the children brighter and quicker in their scholastic work? Nineteen principals vote in favor; nine are doubtful.

(5) Do they tend to character building and social improvement? Three principals are doubtful, but all the others agree.

(6) How many children (approximately) of your school have no bathrooms in their homes? Principals' reports range from 40 per cent to 95 per cent [12].

Some educators opposed the use of public bathing facilities in public schools, citing them as reservoirs for the spread and growth of microorganisms. In response, Gerhard anecdotally wrote that baths strengthen the body instead of weakening it. Laboratory experiments were also conducted to address the issue. In Germany, in 1897, one scientist found 90,000 "germs" per cubic centimeter in a bath used by 200 patrons. This was compared to the discovery of 270,000 "germs" per cubic centimeter in a bath used by 549 people. The conclusion was that "The numbers given may be large, but they do not represent a larger admixture with microbes than has been discovered in many an ice-cream" [21]. To further satisfy opponents of school bathing, Baruch contended that the use of showers as opposed to baths eliminated the possibility of passing germs from one bather to another, since germs were

washed away and drained in the use of the former. This was a generally accepted axiom; as a result, showers, also known as "shower baths" or "rain-baths," were much more prevalent than bathing pools in public bathhouses and in public schools.

FROM PUBLIC TO PRIVATE BATHING

Most new tenement housing beginning in 1900 included private toilets and bathtubs. The result was that by the 1910s, use of public bathing facilities had declined dramatically, although civil engineers and physicians continued to write pamphlets and articles about the importance of bathing regularly. Baruch pled in 1917, "I ask every patriotic and philanthropic person to join us to make the United States of America a bathing nation, excelling ancient Rome, or modern Japan or Germany, a consummation which we are rapidly approaching" [12].

Marilyn Thornton Williams argues that the decline of public bathhouse use by 1915 does not indicate the failure of the bath reformers to meet their aims. Rather than being transformed into lifelong bath patrons, then, the urban poor demanded private bathrooms in their homes [22]. The bath reformers' legacy, according to Williams, lay in the education of the masses about personal hygiene and cleanliness.

It is unclear whether years of condescending propaganda and rhetoric finally convinced the urban poor not only to bathe regularly, but also to demand private bathing facilities in order to do so. Nevertheless, what is clear is that public baths in the mid-1910s were not patronized at any level near their capacity, and that over one-half of poor urban homes had bathtubs and toilets by 1919, up from 23 percent in 1887 [23]. Also apparent is the great fervor with which the bath

reformers exercised a form of social engineering.

While public health arguments formed an important basis for the founding of public baths, hopes of instilling middle-class values in the poor ran even higher among the bath reformers. Activists of medical, governmental, and religious background alike stressed that personal cleanliness would lead to higher standards of morality, self-respect, and citizenship. To reject their standards of hygiene was to remain among the beasts that crawled on the ground.

Such assertions are clearly evidenced in the bath reformers' attempts to bring bathing into the curricula of public schools. Gerhard and Baruch were especially infatuated with the idea of controlling the unwashed masses through the persuasion of their impressionable children. It is possible that the bath reformers were less interested in offering schoolchildren a clean bath once per week, than in radically engineering the habits of their depraved parents.

To be fair, the zeal of the Progressive bath reformers led to tens of millions of showers over a fifteen year period in America's most crowded cities, showers that probably prevented a fair amount of morbidity and mortality. They saw the squalor of the slums and anticipated the birth of new epidemics in a time when unpleasant odors, dirt, and germs were thought to all distinctly contribute to disease. Naturally, they sought to eliminate each of these disease agents by way of the shower. In the process, however, the identity of the culprit — whether it was filthy germs or the poor that harbored them — became a blur, and the prime motive of the reformers shifted from one of social philanthropy to that of social control. The tenement population appeased them by flocking to the baths for over ten years, yet they were not given what they were promised by the bath reformers — a crime-free soci-

ety and entry into the upper echelons of society. Most of them only wound up with bathing facilities in the comfort of their own home.

Acknowledgements: The author is indebted to Joseph Rabatin, MD for his mentorship and for reviewing the manuscript.

REFERENCES

1. Hanger GWW. *Public Baths in the United States*. Bulletin of the Bureau of Labor IX. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office; 1904, p. 1260. Sponsored by U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor.
2. Gerhard WP. *Modern Baths and Bath Houses*. New York: John Wiley and Sons; 1908, p. 107.
3. Glassberg D. The design of reform: the public bath movement in America. *Am Stud* 1979;20:10-492.
4. Bathhouse opens. *New York Tribune*. August 18, 1891; Sect. A.
5. *New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor. A Study on Public Baths*. New York: The Association; 1896, pp. 8-23.
6. Tolman WH. Public baths, or the gospel of cleanliness. *Yale Rev* 1897;6:51-61.
7. Brown G. Public baths. *Charities Rev* 1893;2:144-149.
8. Gerhard WP. *On Bathing and Different Forms of Baths*. New York: William T. Comstock; 1895, pp. 5-24.
9. Veiller L. *Housing Reform: A Hand-book for Practical Use in American Cities*. New York: Charities Publication Committee; 1910, 111.
10. Williams MT. The municipal bath movement in the United States, 1890-1915 [dissertation]. New York: New York University; 1972, p. 218.
11. Walker JB. Public baths for the poor. *Literary Digest* 1890;1: 492.
12. Baruch S. Hygiene and public baths. *Am Phys Ed Rev* 1917;22:64-73.
13. Kliebard HM. *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893-1958*. Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul; 1986, pp. 77-81.
14. Pauly PJ. The development of high school biology. *ISIS* 1991;82:663-675.
15. Hunter GW. Museum and high school united for health and economic welfare. *Am Museum Journal* 1911;11:236.
16. Hunter GW. The methods, content and purpose of biologic science in the secondary schools of the United States. *School Sci Math* 1910;10:111.

17. Finley JH. A word of congratulation from President John H. Finley of the College of the City of New York. *Am Museum J* 1911;11:221.
18. Osborn HF. The museum of the future. *Am Museum J* 1911;11:224.
19. Sage LB. The museum increasingly helpful for ten years. *Am Museum J*. 1911;11:238.
20. Gerhard WP. A plea for rain-baths in the public schools. *New York* 1900;9:14.
21. Infection from public baths. *Literary Digest* 1897;15:26.
22. Williams MT. New York's public baths: a case study in urban progressive reform. *J Urban Hist* 1981;7:75.
23. Williams MT. *Washing "The Great Unwashed": Public Baths in Urban America, 1840-1920*. Columbus, Ohio: State University Press; 1991, pp. 29-137.