

## H-France Forum

Volume 10, Issue 1 (Winter 2015), No. 1

Stephen L. Harp, *Au Naturel: Naturism, Nudism, and Tourism in Twentieth-Century France*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014. xiv + 293 pp. 25 halftone pictures and 4 maps. \$45.00 (cl). ISBN 978-0807155257.

Review essay by Richard Sonn, University of Arkansas

As with many historians, I suspect, I've never been particularly interested in the arbitrary and ephemeral world of fashion. Nudism would seem to be the opposite of fashion, yet the unclothed body has had its fashions too, if one means by that the different meanings attached to public nudity. I had thought nudism appealed primarily to the eye; now I know it is a good concept with which to think as well. The practice of disrobing in public invokes a variety of conceptual oppositions: nude/clothed and male/female for starters, but also fit/unfit, white/nonwhite, innocent/sexual, natural/unnatural, free/repressed, beautiful/ugly, concealment/transparency, young/old, etc. Some of these have remained implicit, others discussed at length by proponents of going nude. Leftists thought that going without clothes would remove social barriers and markers of class; rightists equated nudity with the regeneration of the nation, equating the individual with the social and racially pure body. Bourgeois nudists thought it healthy to expose the skin to the sun, while public nudity would act as an incentive to get that flabby body into shape. The publically naked body contains multiple meanings. Would I be mixing my metaphors to say that Steve Harp has given us much food for thought (skin for speculation)?

A recent book by the art historian Bram Dijkstra, *Naked: The Nude in America*, underscores the fact that linguistically, English speakers have two terms, nude and naked, which overlap but are not identical; the French have only *nu* and the Germans only *nackt*. If Dijkstra's book were to be translated into those languages they would probably retain the English "naked" before translating the subtitle. One more meaning not cited above that strongly connotes France is the artistic nude, which until Manet referred to idealized beauty. If modernism from *Olympia* to *Les Femmes d'Alger* rejected the idealized nude, perhaps modernity was marked by a similar collapsing of the nude into nakedness.

Steve Harp's rationale for considering the rise of public nudity worthy of full-length (full frontal?) treatment is due to France's position of worldwide preeminence. Just as France ranks at or near the top of tourist destinations, so its Mediterranean and southerly Atlantic coasts rank number one in terms of visitors seeking the freedom to remove their clothes in public. Since a large number, half or more, of those enjoying French nude beaches are foreigners, hailing mostly from northern Europe, Harp necessarily goes beyond French borders to consider the history of nudism in a transnational context. This history falls distinctly into two parts: the dawn of nudism in France in the interwar years, more precisely in 1927, and the takeoff of mass nude tourism in the postwar era. Naturism and nudism were embattled and ideologically charged in the 1920s and 1930s; after the war as municipalities realized how profitable nude beaches could be, ideological struggles melted away in the warm and beneficent sun shining down on Montalivet and the Cap d'Agde. Naturist ideals of regeneration and health gave way to ubiquitous nude volleyball, which takes minimal equipment and does well in sand. Harp excels at balancing ideology and practice as he carefully traces the development of resorts catering to nudists, first in the Paris region and then, especially, in the Midi. Excellent maps reinforce his geographical specificity; unfortunately the pictures grouped between chapters three and four are gray and murky, inappropriately so for a pastime promising fun in the sun. Harp argues that a pastime it has become; the more tourism displaced cultural movement, the more economics replaced ideology.

Harp's story begins in the 1920s with the story of two rival organizers: the brothers André and Gaston Durville, on the one hand, and the nudist enthusiast Marcel Kienné de Mongeot, on the other. The Durvilles were physicians who encouraged physical fitness and a healthy diet, the original meaning of naturism. Since they feared jeopardizing their medical practices, they backed away from full support of nudism. This meant in particular not including nude photographs in the periodicals attached to their clubs and sports centers. Their Société Naturiste, founded in 1927, attacked processed foods and red meat, as well as coffee and alcohol, and favored exercise in the open air and an abstemious diet. Their health resort was called Physiopolis, located on the Ile de Médan forty minutes by train from Paris. All of the naturists favored fresh country air as a balm from the unhealthy conditions of the city. As the name Physiopolis suggests, they also favored allusions to Classical Greece, where (male) nudity and fitness were the norms. In 1928 the Durvilles launched a survey to assay support for full nudity, and Harp cites two responses, one from Lucienne Colomès, co-founder of the Cité Naturiste and hence involved in Physiopolis, and one from André Lorulot, director of the monthly *L'Idée Libre*. Both thought that most French people were not ready for full nudity. Yet Harp gives no further context and does not point out that Lorulot was the pen name of André Roulot, an anarchist activist on the individualist end of the anarchist spectrum. By the mid-1920s he was mostly involved in attacking religion in his magazine, but before the war he had been a prominent anarchist naturist. In the 1920s the anarchist journal *Le Néo-Naturien* distinguished between vegetarians and vegans, and a long 1927 article actually connected cigarettes with lung cancer. Lorulot was therefore not some typical French observer; Harp maintains that the Durvilles were not themselves active on the left.

The other and more vociferous advocate of nudity, Kienné de Mongeot, ran the Sparta Club and favored terms based on the Greek "Gymnos" for "naked" to describe his group activities. Like the Durvilles, Kienné de Mongeot was rooted in the naturist desire to improve French health. His father died of tuberculosis when he was two, his sister at three from an infection, and his mother moved the remaining family to the Ardennes for the sake of their health. He fought in the war and then opened an Académie de Culture Physique in 1919. The nudist variant of naturism appeared later in the 1920s with the growth of the cult of health through sunshine and exercise without restrictive clothing. Implicit in nudism was the idea that nudity incentivized health; nudists could not hide physical flaws or fat. Harp points out that these movements ignored the many disabled bodies in their midst in the wake of the First World War. Politically, Kienné de Mongeot leaned toward the left. In 1929, the anarchists Eugène and Jeanne Humbert became contributors to his magazine, *Vivre*. Yet he was apparently a very moderate and elitist leftist, whose nudist resorts in Normandy were too costly for the average worker to visit and who never fashioned a mass movement. His 1930s resort, called Manoir Jan, required exercise but also tolerated smoking and served typical French fare. The Durvilles thus were more on the naturist side of the spectrum and Kienné de Mongeot more on the nudist. Still, by 1939 naturism was strongly identified with nude sunbathing and not primarily diet and exercise.

The elephant in the room, or more likely at poolside, was sex. All of Harp's nudists blamed revealing clothing for heightening sexuality and defended mixed-sex nudity as chaste and non-erotic. Yet they knew that the full-frontal nude photographs that they included in their magazines increased their circulation, as well as the problems they had with the authorities. They also faced the ongoing problem of recruiting enough female practitioners and sometimes banned single males from their clubs. Naturist/nudists were anti-urban and anti-modern and identified sex with the decadence of cities. The unclothed body in nature was declared to be neither immoral nor lascivious. Ignorance and prudery were seen to lead to the evils of homosexuality and masturbation, whose cures were natural openness to the body. Many nudist resorts had such names as Eden and Paradise to play upon back-to-nature and non-shameful imagery. The naturist health theme loomed large in this pre-antibiotic era, when heliotherapy (exposure to the sun) might be touted as a cure for a variety of ailments, much as spas in the nineteenth century had promoted mineral baths. One suspects that in both cases sunshine and warm water provided a good excuse for a vacation, which might indeed decrease stress and provide beneficial relief for the busy bourgeois.

This story of nudism is also a story of France and Germany. Harp makes it clear that French nudists looked to Germany for direction; visits to German nudist resorts were widely publicized in France. In his telling neither the Durvilles nor Kienné de Mongeot were highly political, so he does not adequately explicate the political meanings of public nakedness. These meanings may have been more overt and contested in Weimar Germany, especially on the nationalist right, where nudism signified racial purity and national regeneration, but where the left also had its nudist practitioners who wanted to bring the cult of healthy living to the people. Since much of the French right was connected to the Catholic Church, there wasn't much support for nudism there, and Harp does not pay adequate attention to the role of French anarchists such as the Humberts and E. Armand, though both are mentioned. He lists Henri Barbusse and Victor Margueritte as supporters of Kienné de Mongeot, but only cites Margueritte's most famous book, *La Garçonne*, from 1922, not his even more scandalous book of 1927, *Ton corps est à toi* ("Your body is yours"), in which the muckraking novelist allied himself closely with the anarchist advocates of birth control in defending a woman's control over reproduction.[1] In 1930, Kienné de Mongeot co-authored a book advocating nudism with Charles Auguste Bontemps, another individualist anarchist. Harp doesn't explain why French nudism emerged in the 1920s. He associates it neither with the dramatic changes in women's dress and body type suggested by "flappers" and "Roaring Twenties" nor with the rise of interest in sports in the Twenties. Yet he seems correct in locating *les années folles* as the genesis of French nudism. Searching the Google service NGRAM for the frequency of the word *nudisme* in French book titles reveals a graph that remains flat at or near zero until the mid-20s, when it takes off before declining with the approach of war, with a second smaller peak in the late Sixties and Seventies.

Roughly half the book takes place before 1945, with the rest tracing the establishment of the naked city of Cap d'Agde on the coast of Languedoc and the enormous beach resorts on the Atlantic coast at Montalivet. Though there was some resistance to nudists at first, by the 1950s most of that hesitation was swept away by the prospect of foreign currency. As early as 1951 large numbers of Germans were coming to the French coast for nudist holidays. No longer claiming that their healthy, suntanned bodies would also regenerate the nation, they instead appreciated a French live and let live attitude, markedly lacking in Franco's Spain and other Mediterranean rivals. As tourism boomed and tanned bodies become one more commodity in the consumerist paradise spawned by the *trentes glorieuses*, the political significance of nudism would seem to have declined. The history of the sun tan has a hard time holding its own with the regeneration of the race. The story of nudity as hedonism came to full fruition at Cap d'Agde, where the old naturist claims of chastity give way to sex clubs and even open sex on the beach (separated into hetero- and homo-sexual areas—one can imagine what the old naturist nudists would have thought). Yet one wonders whether the postwar end of ideology and effacement of naturism before nudism was really quite as homogeneous and ideologically neutral as Harp makes it seem. Since nudism as a tourist phenomenon took off in the 1950s, there is little attention paid to the sexual liberation or feminist movements of the 1960s. Yet the postwar era was not all of a piece. In her book *German Bodies: Race and Representation after Hitler*, Uli Linke argues that the meaning of nudity was reshaped by the 68ers, who were as influential in France as in Germany. They began a new cult of nakedness as signifying openness and sexual freedom. She also argues that exposing beautiful firm white bodies had inevitable racial connotations, at least in Germany: "The naked body is a social body. And public nudity is a performance, a staged display, with intense political significance." [2] Presenting nudity in a de-historicized natural setting tends to obscure its meaning. It seems overly simplistic to contrast the ideological interwar era when nudists gravitated to left and right with the consumerist postwar period when Germans still dominated the visitors to Mediterranean beaches. Perhaps calls for *Lebensreform* (life reform) did give way to a simple *Nacktkultur* (nudism), and the power of organized religion to oppose public nudism receded. [3] The fact that nudism is both more popular and fraught with contested images (including the naked bodies of the Holocaust cited by Uli Linke) in the German context makes one suspect that all was not just sandals and sunshine in France.

Contemplating the specter of innocent public nudity in places named Eden conjures images of the millenarian groups described by Norman Cohn in his seminal book *The Pursuit of the Millennium* published a half century ago.[4] Like latter day Brethren of the Free Spirit,[5] nudists believed that they could leave the ordinary world behind. As they discarded their clothing and standards of decorum, they could achieve a sexless innocence. Others, more open to sensuality, remind one of the utopia of Woodstock when, in the eponymous song by Joni Mitchell, “We’ve got to get ourselves back to the garden.”[6] Given this antinomian heritage, best represented in the twentieth century by some branches of anarchism, it seems slightly sad if nudism has become largely emptied of meaning and has devolved into a privileged leisure commodity of the sort described in the novels of Michel Houellebecq (whom Harp cites). Perhaps such a devaluation becomes inevitable when there is scarcely any difference between nude beaches and others or when public nudity becomes normative in the parks of German cities. Yet I suspect that, while Harp accurately identifies contemporary nudist hedonism, at least some practitioners retain a sense of the liberating, if not revolutionary, potential of going unclothed and identify nudism with freedom rather than simply with fun in the sun.

#### Notes

[1] For more on Margueritte and his anarchist affiliation, see Richard Sonn, *Sex, Violence and the Avant Garde: Anarchism in Interwar France*, (University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 2010), especially chapter five, “Your Body is Yours: Anarchism, Birth Control and Eugenics.” Jeanne Humbert, advocate for birth control, also wrote a novel in 1930 advocating nudism called *En pleine vie: Roman précurseur* (see pp. 121-22). Chapter four, “Utopian Bodies: Anarchist Sexual Politics,” discusses Armand and other advocates of free love. I cite Lorulot and the Naturists on pp. 14 ff., in a section of my introduction titled “Purity and Danger.”

[2] Uli Linke, *German Bodies: Race and Representation After Hitler* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 58.

[3] For a complete discussion of German nudism, see Chad Ross, *Naked Germany: Health, Race and the Nation* (Oxford: Berg, 2005).

[4] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Harper, 1961).

[5] See Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, chapters seven and eight, “An Elite of Amoral Supermen,” 1 and 2.

[6] Joni Mitchell, “Woodstock,” *Ladies of the Canyon* (New York: Reprise Records, 1970). Mitchell was not actually present at Woodstock; she heard about it from her boyfriend Graham Nash. The song was also recorded by his group, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young.

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