
H-France Review Vol. 20 (February 2020), No. 41

Sun-Young Park, *Ideals of the Body: Architecture, Urbanism, and Hygiene in Postrevolutionary Paris*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018. xi + 384 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780822945284.

Review by Sean M. Quinlan, University of Idaho.

In the early 1800s, Dr. Jacques-André Millot, an obstetrician and former royal physician, published a well-known series of books on health and sexual well-being for lay readers. Impoverished by the French Revolution, and hoping to supplement his medical income, Millot conceived a comprehensive program of child hygiene that spanned the nuptial bed to early adulthood and everything in between. He even offered salacious advice on what love-making positions to take in order to conceive a male offspring. While his ideas were mostly derivative, drawn from enlightened “how-to” manuals, he also offered his readers some startling novelties. In one example, Millot urged the Napoleonic government to build recreational swimming pools along the Seine river in which young people could exercise their bodies and thereby improve the nation’s health and beauty. He even provided an engraving to illustrate his plan, showing a kind of aquatic amphitheater rising above the riverbank and populated with young people, all enjoying themselves and making themselves fit and good-looking in the process.[1]

Millot’s plans point to a new and wide-ranging discourse on hygiene, leisure time, and the urban experience in post-revolutionary France. Here contemporaries connected ideas about the built environment with ideological visions of physical and moral regeneration, creating an incipient modernity in Paris between roughly 1800 and 1850. Such visions fit uneasily with our standard narrative about public health in modern Europe, which often emphasizes the story of hospital building, sanitation, epidemiology, and vaccination campaigns. Instead, these discourses raise complex, more culturally specific questions about the body and society, especially in how contemporaries envisioned the relationship between the individual and the social body as a site of control and contestation.

These themes constitute the basis of Sun-Young Park’s superb new book on hygiene and urbanism in Paris in the decades following the French Revolution, a time in which the capital nearly doubled its population and underwent substantial architectural transformations. Beautifully written and illustrated, her study effectively juxtaposes insightful textual and visual analysis and provides incisive readings of medical texts, pedagogical treatises, and architectural plans. She reconstructs an entire world of lived experience, one in which ideals of health and beauty did not simply reify hegemonic norms and structures, but instead served as a springboard for individual desires, leisure opportunities, and mass consumption. As she writes, “This book

ultimately emphasizes the ways in which what initially appear to be discourses of control are elided when practiced by actual subjects.” These subjects, she continues, “did not passively absorb politicized ideals, but rather, constantly challenged, misused, and reformulated these prescriptions” (p. 23).

The book ranges by subject-matter and chronology, spanning from the imperial collapse to the barricades of 1848. The chapters present tightly integrated case studies that focus upon key themes and figures, including soldiers, schoolboys, schoolgirls [*demoiselles*], fashionable female dandies [*lionnes*], and the new urban sportsman and woman. All the while, Park provides fascinating glimpses of the new edifices created for hygienic purposes, such as schoolyards, gymnasiums, gardens and parks, swimming pools, and even proto-rollercoasters.

Park begins with the end of the Napoleonic wars. After the national defeat and collapse, contemporaries revived older fears about degeneracy and depopulation that had gripped old regime and revolutionary reformers.[2] Starting in the 1810s, hygienic crusaders introduced sport and gymnastics—former aristocratic hobbies—into male education, as seen with the works of Francisco Amoros and the first public gymnasium that appeared on the Champs de Mars in 1820. By contrasting the warrior ideal to fashionable aristocratic and romantic sensibilities, Amoros’s new form of physical education—public and universal—inculcated beliefs about individual autonomy and self-discipline, promoting more democratic and liberal ideals among young men. Contemporaries then applied these ideas, in more concrete ways, to school architecture and curricular reform, especially in the building of enclosed gardens, gyms, and promenades, all in which educators sought to protect young students from urban pathologies. Examples include Louis-Alphonse Cibot’s new school in Passy or the renovations for Louis-le-Grand in the 1830s. Health, education, architecture, and martial ideals blended and “unwittingly helped to form a new breed of politicized subjects” (p. 128).

These discourses influenced female experiences, as well, and this analysis constitutes one of the most important and innovative aspects of Park’s book. Not surprisingly, social commentators hoped that hygiene and physical fitness could reify ideals of motherhood and male domestic authority amongst young women. In part, these writers were reacting to more sentimental and romantic paragons of beauty and behavior, in which overly sensible women were overwhelmed by feeling and passion with grave consequences to follow. In response, hygienic reformers sought to instill a stronger, more tough-minded independence amongst female students by using exercise and sport. Presumably, for them, tougher muscles meant tougher nerves and sentiments. Again, as with young schoolboys, actual behavior amongst female adolescents, once they had internalized it, undermined prevailing ideals and controlling agendas. By emphasizing health and fitness, reformers encouraged a kind of subversive, gender-bending athleticism and created a “modern model of active, publicly engaged feminists” (p. 149). Most notably, these ideals informed how George Sand educated her daughter Solange and inspired Saint-Simonian activists such as Josephine Bachelly.

Shifting from schoolyards and gymnasiums, Park traces hygienic ideals into the new gardens of post-revolutionary Paris, notably the Tivoli and Beaujon parks, and she documents the female dandies—the *lionnes*—who filled these leisured spaces. In these spaces, Parisians whiled away their free time in bicycling, doing sport and gymnastics, and enjoying amusement rides such as the *montagnes russes* (early forms of roller coasters), all of which integrated health, play, and nature into the changing urban environment. A final chapter looks at the new edifices built for

equestrian sports, boxing, gymnastics, and, most fascinating of all, public swimming. In each of these examples, Park shows how ideals of health intersected with individual desires, leisure time, and new sites for pleasure and consumption, suggesting how emancipatory and playful desires also informed modern discourses on the individual body.

Park has written a significant and engaging book. Though historians sometimes treat the decades after the French Revolution as a cultural and intellectual backwater, preferring instead to focus upon political and socioeconomic trends, Park has uncovered a deep structure of discourses and practices that render this period as culturally significant. Two points seem essential. Whereas historiography has underscored the conservative or even reactionary nature of post-revolutionary gender politics, seeing the period as a heyday of paternal authority and domestic ideology, Park has identified a more ambiguous and contradictory web of values and behavior. She underscores the underlying tensions between patriarchal laws and mores and the more emancipatory and subversive impulses found within daily life, not least amongst the ideals applied to men and women.[3] Secondly, Park dramatically enhances how we understand the origins of urban modernity. She situates many of the hallmarks of city living associated with post-Haussmann society—spectacle, mass consumption, and social fragmentation—in an earlier period, highlighting the developments under the Restoration and the July Monarchy.[4] Her connection between health and leisure in the changing cityscape, particularly in its design and material realities, is genuinely innovative and exciting. For all these reasons, Park has contributed significantly to our understanding of health, subjectivity, and urban experience in modern France, and her book constitutes essential reading for scholars interested in the broader cultural and intellectual world of the post-revolutionary period. It is a magnificent achievement.

NOTES

[1] J.-A. Millot, *L'art d'améliorer et perfectionner les hommes au moral comme au physique* (2 vols., Paris, Year X [1801]). I have discussed this book in my *The Great Nation in Decline: Sex, Modernity, and Health Crises in Revolutionary France, Ca. 1750–1850* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

[2] On this earlier history, see Leslie Tuttle, *Conceiving the Old Regime: Pronatalism and the Politics of Reproduction in Early Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[3] For a recent reappraisal, see especially Deborah Gutermann-Jacquet, *Les équivoques du genre: devenir homme et femme à l'âge romantique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2012). On this background, see the foundational studies by Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Denise Z. Davidson, *France After Revolution: Urban Life, Gender, and the New Social Order* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[4] See, most famously, T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). The essential starting point, of course, remains Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland, et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006). An excellent study of this early period is Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, foreword by Richard Sennett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Sean M. Quinlan
University of Idaho
quinlan@uidaho.edu

Copyright © 2020 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172