
H-France Review Vol. 21 (November 2021), No. 202

Julien Fuchs, *Le temps des jolies colonies de vacances: Au cœur de la construction d'un service public, 1944-1960*. Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses universitaires de Septentrion, 2020. 412 pp. €27.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7574-3027-9; €20.00 (eb). ISBN 978-2-7574-3060-6.

Review by Keith Rathbone, Macquarie University.

Are French *colonies de vacances* still relevant? For all their cultural power in the mid-twentieth century, Julien Fuchs worries that they are now “en crise,” “surannées,” and “vieillottes” (p. 13). Fuchs is Professeur en Sciences et Techniques des Activités Physiques et Sportives (STAPS) in the Faculté des Sciences du Sport et de l'Éducation at the Université de Bretagne Occidentale. He has written extensively on French physical education including on French *scoutisme*, the training of physical education teachers, and the *colonies de vacances*. In this latest publication, Fuchs begins with the question of the continued relevance of the “colos.” How can these venerable institutions be under threat when images of summer camps appear regularly in French and overseas media? *Colos* feature in a range of French films, including most successfully *Nos jours heureux* (2006). What is interesting when comparing these many films, spanning a range of genres, is that their protagonists are almost all counsellors rather than campers. Perhaps that reflects the age of the viewer, but perhaps also the age of the producers and cineastes, too. Most would not remember the *colonies de vacances* at their most popular in the 1950s. Compared to that golden age, Fuchs wonders whether the *colonies* have become naïve and infantilizing (p. 13). Are they sites of nostalgia or are these touchstones still relevant for young people today?

Through a close look at the role of the French state in supporting and shaping *colonies de vacances* after the Second World War, Fuchs addresses why the camps were important to the French state and gestures to why they should remain essential today. Fuchs charts the rise and fall of the *colonies* as a central part of mid-century French experience. He argues that the *colos* succeeded when they did because they formed an integral part of a coherent politics of youth and sport (p. 16). He states that “les pouvoirs publics ont intérêt, dans le contexte de la Libération, à mettre en place une politique volontariste en faveur des colonies de vacances, à la hauteur de l'importance sociale de ce phénomène, à la hauteur surtout des missions de l'État-providence” (p. 19).

Fuchs's analysis focuses on the Fourth Republic—a time when summer camps were a political program designed to improve young people's health, provide political and cultural socialization, and offer joy. They sought to do so along voluntarist lines. Rather than creating a single state agency to completely control all *colonies de vacances* from the top, the French ministry for youth and sport worked with existing stakeholders, including religious groups, municipalities, and working-class political organizations. This was not an easy task: it required an active central

state that dealt with post-war deprivations, budgetary difficulties, and an occasionally recalcitrant population to put into place a system of *colos* that is “encore perceptible aujourd’hui” (p. 20).

In many ways, then, Fuchs’s work is a complement to existing scholarship on youth and physical culture in mid-century France that emphasizes the way that young people responded to the state, or to state institutions like the *colonies de vacances*, or how special interest groups, such as the Catholic Church, worked with the state to produce a range of youth institutions during the interwar and postwar era. Fuchs’s work cites the already extensive historiography on *colonies de vacances*, including Laura Lee Downs’ well-known *Childhood in the Promised Land: Working-Class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880-1960* (2002), and Philippe-Alexandre Rey-Herme’s *Colonies de vacances. Origines et premiers développements* (1954).

Fuchs takes a different and, at times, seemingly old-fashioned approach and uses it to good effect. He centers his analysis on the state and its efforts because, he argues, “dans l’ensemble de ces recherches, françaises comme internationales, la manière dont l’État voit son rôle auprès de ces organismes à surtout été envisagée de façon médiane, indirecte” (p. 19). In other words, we study the state’s role in the *colonies de vacances*, but mostly refractively, and we have done little to understand why the state put so much effort into promoting them. Instead, we take the state’s position as assumed—of course governments want a healthy body politic—and we look to the various reactions to a *dirigiste* state. Some of the best work, particularly Downs, already does address in many ways the role of the state on multiple levels including municipal councils, regional officials, and the central government. In large part, however, Fuchs’s point is well taken and well-illustrated over ten chapters divided into three sections.

The organization of Fuchs’s book straddles the chronological and thematic. He breaks his history into three parts: the first is “Les colonies de vacances, un impératif d’État.” It includes chapters on the organization of a youth and sports bureaucracy after the Second World War, the actors—particularly teachers and officials—involved in the *colonies*, and logics of the state’s investment in the *colos* system. He pays special attention to the state’s efforts to finance the *colonies de vacances*, particularly during the difficult postwar years, when parents and the government needed to carefully ration food and funds. While his focus is on metropolitan France, he has a special subsection on *colos* in Algeria.

The second section—entitled “Un âge d’or?”—considers the middle of the Fourth Republic, especially the early 1950s, the height of the success of the *colonies de vacances*. In the 1950s, the number of young people attending *colos* annually topped one million and Fuchs’s work shows how the state accommodated this massive movement of boys and girls every summer. In this section, he looks at the state’s activities and aims during this period, particularly its shift from a purely hygienic model to a more holistic socio-hygienic pedagogy over time. As the French state emerged from the deprivations of the 1940s, the *colonies de vacances*’s pedagogical purpose broadened. New questions came to the fore: what climates help children learn? what kinds of games are ideal? what soundscapes challenge the learning environment? do kids need to nap? and what kinds of psychological issues could camp life fix? The final chapter in this section details how the formation of teaching cadres also changed as training became more schematic and an increasing number of teachers received their diplomas.

In the third section, Fuchs addresses the difficulties that the French state and the *colonies* had in modernizing their project at the end of the Fourth Republic. The *colonies* were the product of

another era: they faced a range of challenges, some seemingly minor but others more difficult, that undermined their credibility and stability throughout the 1950s and 1960s, even as the *colonies de vacances* movement was at its height. Issues like safety and the sexual politics of *mixité* appeared solvable. Organizers and parents worried about the safety of the children, particularly following dozens of fatal accidents between 1956 and 1958. The *colos*, however, responded by hiring lifeguards and increasingly including physical education and sports as part of their educational mission.

Other problems were less resolvable. How should the state pay for the *colonies de vacances* at a time of growing budgetary difficulty during the Algerian War? In 1958, parallel to the founding of the Fifth Republic, the French state changed its funding model—a move Fuchs clearly views as a fatal decision—and as a result the *colonies de vacances* suffered under a “*bascule du paradigme étatique*” (p. 353). Thus, the golden age of the *colos* ended as the state gradually undermined its own voluntarist agenda: the costs for parents rose, working-class children especially found it difficult to continue to participate, the experience of the *colos* gentrified (p. 324), and consequently it became less egalitarian and less democratic. Maurice Herzog, the Secrétaire d'état à la jeunesse et aux sports in 1958, defended cutting familial subventions by claiming that the change would allow the state to spend more money on the poorest children, but the total amount of funding to *colos* decreased under the new model.

Fuchs's work covers a lot of ground, making it quite difficult to generalize about the book as a whole. It moves forwards and backwards in time in ways that made it difficult to follow, but the largely thematic organization does allow the reader to get a better sense of key issues. Important figures drift in and out of the picture: Étienne Bécart, Gaston Roux, and Auguste Robert appear consistently, but I wished there was more biographic detail, analysis of their personal motivations, and how those motivations changed over time.

One of the major strengths of Fuchs's work is his extensive archival research. As one might expect from someone already very well-known in France for his work on physical culture and sporting life, Fuchs's knowledge of the archives is in evidence. He works primarily with documents from the Archives nationale in Pierrefitte, especially the “Fonds du bureau ‘Colonies de vacances et Auberges de jeunesse’ de la Direction générale de la jeunesse et des sports,” the “Fonds de l'inspection générale de la jeunesse” and the “Fonds du bureau ‘Associations’ de la sous-direction des activités socio-éducatives.” However, he also draws from some regional and municipal archives such as Archives départementales du Val-De-Marne. He includes a very welcome chapter on methods and sources that adds bibliographic information on the *colonies de vacances* not found in other archival finding aids such as Françoise Bosman, Patrick Clastres and Paul Dietschy's extensive and important *Le Sport: De l'archive à l'histoire* (2006).

At the same time, Fuchs's focus on the French state, especially his fine-grained approach to the debate about the ideal pedagogical approach to constructing and running summer camps, elides what happened in the camps themselves. He offers extensive information about the bureaucratic wrangling, budgetary difficulties, and pedagogical debates, but it feels decontextualized from the actual experience of children in the *colonies*. Fuchs's work might have benefitted from a deeper dive into one or another of the *colonies de vacances* themselves—perhaps around Brest where he has already written a municipal sports history. I recognize, however, that such an approach would also have presented problems, not least choosing between myriad different genres of camps. The very voluntarist nature of the French *colos* system—which abjured so completely a *jeunesse unique*

even as it attempted to control camps from the top down—makes any effort to understand the whole system from the ground up very difficult.

Fuchs's reluctance to dig into individual camps explicitly, and especially the experience of young people in the camps, creates some strange elisions. In his section on the sportification of the camps, for example, he never really addresses what debates over the usefulness of sport among sport bureaucrats meant for people in the camps; sport was ostensibly only a small part of the day-to-day of camp life, but it was extremely visible in advertisements, films, and photos of the *colonies*. Were these visual texts just clever promotions aimed at audiences of boys and girls who loved sports? The files of the camp inspectors, from the 1930s to the 1950s, seem to suggest that sports were both a widespread phenomenon and an occasional obstacle to other kinds of activities. From the 1930s through to the 1960s, inspectors' reports detail the frustrations state agents felt when they saw their pupils ignoring their well-organized activities to kick a ball.

Another thing that confused me was Fuchs's reluctance to grapple with the legacy of the Vichy regime. In many of his sections, he traces the origins of the *colonies* back to the Third Republic, particularly linking the *colos* with the efforts of Léo Lagrange's Popular Front sports ministry. However, the Vichy regime continued and intensified the statification of physical education and sports that began during the Popular Front and led directly to the golden age of the *colonies*. The Fourth Republic Direction générale de la jeunesse et des sports's concerns about hygiene and wellness were not *sui generis* but were continuations of the visions of both Léo Lagrange, the Sous-secrétariat d'état aux sports et à l'organisation des loisirs during the Popular Front and Jean Borotra, the Commissaire général à l'éducation physique et aux sports for the Vichy state. One obvious place to look for continuities would be in the impact of Vichy's policies on the expansion of the professional cadre of teachers and coaches that populated the Fourth Republic's earliest *colonies de vacances*.

Finally, while Fuchs's work explains a distinctly French story, the mid-twentieth-century French state was not the only one to try to address the health and well-being of young men and women through a return to the countryside. France's use of the *colonies de vacances* might have sprung from characteristically gallic concerns, and taken root particularly strongly, but at times, to his credit, Fuchs's work hints at the possibilities of a transnational history of summer camps. Fuchs's work will provide a strong basis for the additional work that needs to be done to understand this global movement.

As an aside, and some might find this commentary unnecessary, Fuchs's work is extremely handsome. Published by the Presses universitaires de Septentrion, the paper stock is thick and nice to the touch. The large number of pictures are clear and high quality. In my case, it came with a handy bookmark. More than a few fellow scholars would be envious of the amount of effort that went into the production and marketing for this book.

Although Fuchs's work requires careful reading and familiarity with the existing literature on French physical culture and sports, it is also a deeply rich and useful work. It will be of particular interest to historians of French physical culture and youth and in those sub-fields it should revive interest in the French state's agendas in the mid-twentieth century.

Keith Rathbone
Macquarie University

keith.rathbone@mq.edu.au

Copyright © 2021 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 republication 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