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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 by Joelle Neulander, The Citadel

As a teenager in the mid-1980s spending some time in France on a summer program, I was paddling a canoe down the gorges of the Ardèche River with a friend when she started laughing and shouting. I turned around to see what had happened, and she pointed to a large boulder at the side of the river. On it, standing proudly and buck naked was a middle-aged man calling to his son in German. Shocked, I realized that camping in France wasn't going to be quite the same as the experiences I had had in summers in the Berkshire Mountains. To my young American psyche, I believed my summer in Europe was going to be something weird and alarming.

But why did that German man feel so comfortable naked in the middle of a well-frequented, well-paddled river gorge? And why did he feel that France was the perfect location for a nude family vacation? Those answers can be found in Stephen Harp's new monograph, *Au Naturel: Naturism, Nudism, and Tourism in Twentieth-Century France*. In it, Harp traces the history of the development of nudism and nudist communities in France from their origins in eugenics and medical practice in the fin de siècle, to the foundation and legalization of nudist communities in the mid-century, to the sexualization of these same locations after the 1960s. He places nudism squarely into the tourist economy, as a maker and savior of certain beach communities, with France ultimately becoming a beacon to nudists across Europe and even across the world. As Harp writes, "France became associated with nude beaches in an almost essentialist way, as if there [were] something fundamentally French about nude beaches" (p.12).

Harp shows us nudism's roots in health practice, as its first promoters came from sickly backgrounds and saw naked living as a means to preserve robust health. Nudism, then, had its roots not in sexual practice but in medicine. It was an early twentieth-century holistic practice, complete with exercise, exposure, and diet. For doctors such as Gaston Durville, that practice required eating from a list of permissible foods to avoid "intoxication" and "suggest[ed] moderate, limited consumption of meat and fish" (p.21). Nudism was one part of a larger fitness regime that would purify the body and avoid the degeneration that came with modern, sedentary living. Harp shows us, then, naturism's origins in the eugenic and racist medicine of the day. It was a practice that its founders believed would cleanse French bodies of any impurity of society and make society healthier as a whole. As such, they saw naked exercise as central to health. The early naturists wanted to make spaces for nudist practice, not at resorts or beaches, but at rustic campgrounds with stadia, where strong French men and women could find room to maintain health and optimal fitness.

Nudity, therefore, was a completely desexualized state, a state that nudists would try desperately to maintain, Harp shows us, with rules and regulations for all men, women, and families who came to nudist colonies. Nakedness required policing by those who would practice it. Where, when, how much, and with whom all became questions that naturists felt impelled to answer. And these rules allowed those who were unclothed to feel comfortable that their nudist colonies were about health and life over sexuality and possible depravity. This could, as Harp shows us, lead to acceptance and even promotion by local non-nudist communities as possible tourist revenue and money for municipal registers in such places as the Ile du Levant, Montalivet, and the Cap d'Agde, which became successful resorts that brought in tax revenue for towns willing to overlook public decency laws on the books.

French naturism was unique, Harp argues, because the indigenous promoters never found a way, or never cared, to make the practice accessible to working-class citizens. Private spaces were necessary, especially as naturism never gained mainstream acceptance, and legalization under the framework of public decency laws was problematic at best. Home practice, at least at first, required, as Doctor Gaston Durville noted, “a nudarium” (p. 22) or large private bathroom in the house for regular naked exercise, something to which only well-to-do families had access in the interwar period. In the same vein, nudist sites were always out of the way, on a Gascon beach or in the woods miles from Paris, always inaccessible by public transportation. The Gascon beach, at Montalivet, required a long trip by train and cars at the train station to get to the resort, (p. 149). Over time, nudist camps became resorts with full-functioning stores, hotels, and pools that attracted tourists from across the continent. Nudism, then, was never accepted by mainstream France even as the nation became a tourist destination for nudists worldwide.

I am left wondering why these nudists, proud of being able to live without clothes, resented onlookers so much. There is a fascinating analysis to be made of the distinctions between public and private. Here was a community set on making nudity a public option but intent on keeping nudist communities completely shielded from the public eye—no photography, no outsiders, no clothed people allowed inside. How was nudism, once removed from its naturist, health-centered restrictions, more than just a kind of relaxed exhibitionism? Why did naked vacationers expect more privacy than clothed ones? And if they were so willing to expose themselves to each other, why not to other passers by? Certainly Harp hints at explanations as the naturists/nudists tried so hard to separate nakedness from sexuality and did not trust that non-nudists would do so as well, but there is more to be said about this strange position between acceptance of the human form, and unwillingness for others outside the community to see it.

While I appreciate the work’s close analysis of those who participated in nudism as a specific and quasi-political practice, I wonder about the larger context of nudity, and its increased presence in the media and on the beaches and poolside generally in France. When were naked bodies visible in media other than in pornographic or nudist magazines? Certainly advertising had naked bodies as early as the interwar, especially in soap and undergarment advertisements. When were the first naked bodies seen on screen? When did the French become more comfortable with mildly covered bodies in bikini bathing suits for women and speedos for men—looks that easily make the traditional nudist “slips” or “minimums” required in the communities off the beach appear positively modest by comparison. When did French women begin tanning topless in public? Was it really about nudity off the beach rather than on it that naturists desired? And what is it that made/makes the French so comfortable with nudity on a beach or on a television or movie screen, but so nervous about it on a street?

Altogether, Harp has done something special with *Au Naturel*. He has placed a marginalized phenomenon that all of us have noticed, maybe even tittered at, and perhaps practiced ourselves squarely into the historian’s eye. He reminds us that bodies are always central to our understanding of the past. A small group’s members’ desire to control their own bodies reflects on larger notions of tourism, commodities, real estate, policing, and morality and points to the ways in which small, often misunderstood, groups might elicit larger changes in society. Certainly the German standing proudly on his rock in the Ardèche River did not expect that a young American would be surprised or shocked by his appearance; he was simply sharing a vacation with his family—just one without clothes. Harp has, with this work, shown me why.

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