

H-France Forum

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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.

Response by Stephen L. Harp, University of Akron

I want to thank all three reviewers. I have found more than one issue of *H-France Forum* useful in the classroom when assigned with the book under review. Given reader response thus far, I believe *Au Naturel* could work well in upper-division undergraduate as well as graduate classes, particularly if accompanied by this forum.

As always in *H-France Forum*, I was most interested in the divergence among reviewers. Instead of exploring each point in a relatively closed and lengthy dialogue with each reviewer, I would like to focus on the methodological issues and on suggestions for future work that should have greater appeal to both students and colleagues. While Neulander and Sonn both raise specific questions, Mesch found *Au Naturel* “deeply informative but sometimes frustrating.” I wonder if her frustration resulted partly from a disciplinary divide between history, on the one hand, and comparative and French literature, on the other.

I am very much a historian’s historian, steeped in social as well as cultural history, and am an admitted archival rat. I found myself dazzled by Mesch’s beautiful prose but curious about her formulations. For example, I agree with Mesch’s point that naturist and nudist movements could sometimes work to “erase many traces of one of their own driving psychological forces, thus providing a particular challenge to the historian.” Yet that does not make nudists in any way unique as it is the norm for historical actors. Although I will personally avoid guessing at any “driving psychological forces” of nudists or anyone else, as it feels like armchair psychoanalysis of (mostly) dead people, I do believe that people in the past, like people in the present, could not possibly always have been fully honest with themselves or with others regarding their motivations. That is why I included abundant evidence of possible chinks in nudists’ armor. Mesch uses that same evidence to imply that nudists had more to hide than did other people in the past. I doubt that. I’d ask whether political leaders have always been honest with themselves, let alone with others, as they serve the public. Similarly, have medical professionals always admitted that their dominance of legal medical practice has been about their own power and status as well as about public health? In other research projects, I have had doubts about the documentary trail from educational officials, textbook authors, and teachers. Because of their profit motive, I have even more doubts about the stated motivations of what a friend calls “my Michelin men,” whether they were selling tires, describing tourist sites across France, or running rubber plantations in Indochina.[1] In the end, I see no reason to be more suspicious of nudists than of others.

Mesch also writes, “the many publications quoted frequently in Harp’s study—treatises, brochures, journals, magazines and books—while certainly fascinating and important documents, are not entirely reliable sources for recovering genuine historical voices from the ground.” Of course. I think most historians would also apply that critique to my important primary sources, which she does not mention: abundant mayoral and prefectural records as well as two dozen interviews with nudists. In fact, most historians would apply her critique to all historical sources. Is there any publication, document, interview, or image that is ever an “entirely reliable source” for “genuine historical voices from the ground”? While I am definitely open to literary works as historical sources, I do not agree with her suggestion, at the end of her review, that films or novels would offer more “authentic voices” than other

sources. Primary sources have to be read in context and alongside many others, not to mention secondary works. All are mediated in one way or another. There is no direct pipeline to the past, whether it is archival or literary.

Students will want to read the chapter on Cap d'Agde and the epilogue in light of Mesch's assertion that at least part of the book is "underpinned by moral judgments that seem outdated today." I believe she quoted me out of context as I described nudists' views. But since Mesch raises the issue, I will clarify: the book does implicitly question whether putting women on leashes or whipping them in public are fully consensual acts. I don't believe that to be a particularly "outdated moral judgment" on my part or that of any other feminist.

I was a little surprised that both Sonn and Mesch refer to Nazism and the Holocaust when they mention Germans, while historians of Germany are trying increasingly to figure out how to write the history of Germany without every research question determined by Nazism and the Shoah. I can assure them both that I would have included even a hint of evidence along the lines they hoped for if my sources had included it. When Germans at Montalivet pointed out the remnants of the Atlantic Wall and when they complained about the dominance of French films about the Resistance in the camp, I reported their observations. Maybe there was something subconscious in the minds of German nudists when they entered France, but we can only speculate what it might have been. Sonn cites anthropologist Uli Linke, who describes interesting connections between postwar German bodies and the Holocaust, and I find her work wonderfully suggestive. But as a historian I wanted evidence in order to draw the kinds of conclusions she does.^[2] By contrast, Neulander suggests that the middle-aged German nudist she saw along the Ardèche simply wanted to take his clothes off—without making a connection to Nazism.

Interestingly, Sonn seems to have wanted the book to isolate a cause for the development of nudism in France. Although *Au Naturel* relays a series of perceived causes put forward by interwar nudists, I hesitate to oversimplify by foregrounding any one or two. Sports, the development of tanning, interest in nude sunbathing on the part of anarchist *libertaires*, naturist health claims, a general response to the Great War, the practice of skinny dipping in some areas, and the example of the German Freie Körper Kultur (FKK) all figured among justifications for nudism. I think one of the contributions of postmodernism for historians has been helping us to track changes in the *Zeitgeist* while avoiding more unidimensional interpretations that relied heavily on causation.

I am skeptical about the "overarching critical framework" that Mesch envisions encompassing the vast terrains of sexualities and nude bodies in modern France and elsewhere. *Au Naturel* focuses on nudism and problematizes widespread assumptions about a modern sexual liberation and a twentieth-century sexualization of the body. I agree that Foucault encourages us to look at what is not said, and I use him to be more vigilant in looking for, and at, the sources I can unearth. But I did not want to do grand speculative work. To my mind, it makes for weak historical scholarship. I avoid formulations such as "perhaps," "maybe," "could have," and "might have." What's the point in muddying the waters if we don't know enough yet? Like any author, a historian who writes well can suggest through choices, through juxtaposition, through quotations, and through the organization of a work. I have used my abundant sources for arguments I believe they can support, and I have included the voices of many who did not accept the dominant narrative of the nudist movement, as Mesch notes. *Au Naturel* analyzes the evidence such that it is, and that's as far as I am willing to go.

At the risk of sounding like a simpleton, for me historiography is like a huge brick wall safeguarding our "reality-based community" from the unclear, misleading, and even erroneous assertions from the likes of Karl Rove, who apparently coined that phrase. *Au Naturel* is one brick among many begging to be picked up and read. But I do not think for a second that the book stands alone, is bigger and better than others, or, to use Mesch's term, needs to claim to be "overarching." Historical understanding becomes clear to each of us, including students, only when we read lots and lots of books. And then each of us

has a slightly different take. My hope is that this book appeals broadly, serving as an *entrée* into the wonderful world of French history and enticing readers to read another book, and another, and another.

Given comments by both Sonn and Mesch about secondary works that I cite but do not use in the ways they would have, I should make clear that I make a conscious choice while writing books as opposed to articles. For the former, I engage and cite secondary sources extensively. Yet while I quote primary sources frequently and intensively, I rarely quote secondary sources in the text. Following the advice of a wise editor many years ago, I try not to drop too many names of colleagues in the text of books, much as I would love to give shout outs to friends and colleagues I deeply admire. I try to put the historiography in the notes. That is a risk in terms of reviews because fellow scholars looking for extended discussions of their own work and of books they know can become irritated. But prose designed for insiders makes for tiresome reading unless the reader is already in the fold. I wanted *Au Naturel* to be both scholarly and accessible to those outside twentieth-century French history, ultimately adding to the fold. If that earns me a few knocks, I deserve them.

I strongly endorse both Mesch's and Neulander's suggestions for further work on the history of nudism, public nudity, the body, and sexuality. Mesch would like more about the United States. In *Au Naturel*, I avoided more than passing reference to the United States. Not only do I believe that French history can be written without constant reference to the United States, but I had also read Brian Hoffman's fascinating forthcoming book on nudism in the United States for the NYU Press before I wrote *Au Naturel*; it would have been far too easy for me to use his observations before he could publish them. Like Hoffman's book, Elizabeth Heineman's work on Beate Uhse in Germany is a reminder that we know comparatively less about the history of pornography and sex toys in France.^[3] In any case, I agree with Mesch that a transnational or comparative study would be interesting. We all have our stories. Before I left to study in Strasbourg in 1984-85, a fellow factory worker asked me to pick up some "French ticklers"—a variant of condoms, themselves once known as "French letters." I never did see them in Strasbourg, though I'll bet they were in the sex shop just across the Rhine in Kehl—that is, in West Germany. Of course, unbeknownst to either of us at the time, had he lived in New York rather than the rural Midwest my friend could have found them near Times Square. As Harvey Levenstein and Chris Endy have pointed out, Americans have long associated France with sex, even if the nightclub shows in New York were as "risqué" (yet another telling term) as those of the Place Pigalle in Paris.^[4] Mary Louise Roberts has nicely historicized that association before and during World War II.^[5] More could be done. For example, it would also be interesting to explore the influence of American pornography in postwar France.^[6]

Given current interest in European imperialism, I'd also like to see explorations of evolving notions of nakedness outside of Europe. Europeans in the empire regularly described non-Europeans as *nackt*, *nu*, or "naked" (but not "nude," to use the distinction that Sonn rightly points out is unique to English), whether or not they were fully naked. Now that increasing numbers of historians use the records of missionary archives, finding scattered commentary about "native" dress and undress, a study that is the sartorial equivalent of Michael Adas' classic book on technology seems overdue.^[7]

I'm less sure about the need for further work on the link between nudism and anarchism, as that ground seems reasonably well-trod already. Sonn is correct that I could have said more about anarchism in the interwar years. I purposely avoided repeating information already nicely covered in the last two chapters of Arnaud Baubérot's superb *Histoire du naturisme*, citing him instead. As Sonn points out, his own book is also quite informative.^[8]

Following Neulander's questions for additional work, anyone interested in the nudity in media should start with Anne-Marie Sohn.^[9] As for topless sunbathing, while difficult to pinpoint a practice that was not normally documented unless prosecuted, I found scattered evidence that some French and foreign women increasingly went topless on beaches after World War II (I hesitate to say "began" doing

so as we know too little about popular norms before the early twentieth century[10]). Certainly the practice only became legal in France in 1964 after the incident of the young woman playing ping pong in Nice in a “monokini” I mentioned in *Au Naturel’s* epilogue.[11]

On a more technical level, since Sonn did not like the illustrations I should clarify a few details regarding the process of publication. Except for a handful, all of the images were originally in black and white, thus “gray and murky” according to Sonn; in fact, *Au Naturel’s* illustrations are amazingly close to their originals, however underwhelming that may seem to twenty-first century viewers accustomed to high-resolution, glossy color images of nude bodies. That fact says much about us, surrounded by representations of exposed bodies, and what has changed since the early twentieth century when many of the book’s images first appeared. In addition, since reviewers and I have all described what else might have been included in the book, I should note that Louisiana State University Press graciously accepted a manuscript more than 27,000 words over the contracted limit. Finally, because students sometimes mistakenly assume that an author actually chose not to include a bibliography or good maps, I need to point out that the Press happily accommodated my demands for custom-made, detailed maps as well as a full bibliography. I am grateful.

In closing I would again like to thank the reviewers. Reading between the lines of their reviews, for tone as well as content, I got the impression that they generally liked reading the book. I hope so. Like others, I spend much time convincing students that historical study can be absolutely fascinating as well as important and serious. I thus sincerely hope that readers enjoy reading *Au Naturel* as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Notes

[1] Stephen L. Harp, *Learning to Be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation Building in Alsace and Lorraine, 1850-1940* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998); *Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); and *A World History of Rubber: Empire, Industry, and the Everyday* (forthcoming with Wiley-Blackwell).

[2] Uli Linke, *German Bodies: Race and Representation after Hitler* (New York: Routledge, 1999). For fascinating evidence on sexuality, Nazism, and postwar Communism, see Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Josie McLellan, *Love in the Time of Communism: Intimacy and Sexuality in the GDR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[3] Brian S. Hoffman, *Naked: A Cultural History of American Nudism* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); and Elizabeth Heineman, *Before Porn Was Legal: The Erotica Empire of Beate Uhse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[4] Harvey Levenstein, *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); *We’ll Always Have Paris: American Tourists in France since 1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Christopher Endy, *Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[5] Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[6] Here I would start with the holdings of the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University and Bernard Joubert, *Dictionnaire des livres et des journaux inédits, par arrêtés ministériels de 1949 à nos jours* (Paris: Éditions du Cercle de la Librairie, 2007).

[7] Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[8] Arnaud Baubérot, *Histoire du naturisme: Le mythe du retour à la nature* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004); and Richard Sonn, *Sex, Violence and the Avant-Garde: Anarchism in Interwar France* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010).

[9] Anne-Marie Sohn, "Le corps sexué," in *Histoire du corps*, vol. 3: *Les mutations du regard: Le XIXe siècle* ed. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello (Paris: Seuil, 2006), pp. 93–161.

[10] There is scattered evidence of bathing with no clothes or no tops in the nineteenth century, but practices were only documented as bourgeois resorts enforced bans: Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World, 1750-1840*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps (New York: Penguin, 1994), pp. 82-84; and Alice Garner, *A Shifting Shore: Locals, Outsiders, and the Transformation of a French Fishing Town, 1823-2000* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. 109-110.

[11] On topless sunbathing, I would start with Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Corps de femmes, regards d'hommes: Sociologie des seins nus* (Paris: Nathan, 1995).

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