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**Laura Lee Downs**, *Childhood in the Promised Land: Working-Class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880-1960*. Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2002. xv + 411 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8223-2928-x; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-8223-2944-1.

Review by Stephen L. Harp, University of Akron.

Laura Lee Downs' superb new book is a study of the emergence and evolution of *colonies de vacances*, those weeks-long stays in the country that were once part of a good many working-class children's summers. As Downs points out, the *colonies* became a veritable *lieu de mémoire* for generations of French men and women. In describing the *colonies*, she examines in careful detail the "question of working-class childhood, and the institutions, practices, and beliefs that have shaped such childhoods in France since the end of the nineteenth century" (p. xiv).

Downs begins with an overview of the founding of *colonies de vacances* in the early Third Republic. The first European *colonies de vacances* were the brainchild of Swiss pastor Wilhelm Bion, who took sixty-eight poor children from his parish in Zurich to spend three weeks in mountain villages above the city. By the early 1880s, Protestant evangelicals, citing the unhygienic conditions in which working-class children lived, were placing urban children in peasant households for much of the summer. The number of children participating grew quickly; the two largest Protestant groups each sponsored well over one thousand children by the turn of the century. Above all, the Protestant activists relied on a "pedagogy of *liberté*" (p. 33), believing that the most important objective was to be sure that children were well-fed and got the fresh air that served as an antidote to the damp, tuberculosis-ridden conditions of their urban apartments. By the mid-1880s, municipally subsidized *colonies scolaires* had emerged with even more focus on hygiene, not to mention the tanning and fattening up of children. These *colonies*, run mostly by teachers and subsidized by the *caisse des écoles* of the XI<sup>e</sup> *arrondissement*, did not enroll as many children but served as an early precursor to other later state-subsidized *colonies*.

The secularization of public school instruction also spurred catholic groups to found *colonies*. As Downs argues, working-class parents were the least able to afford private school tuition in the wake of the Ferry laws. As a response to the disappearance of religious instruction in public schools, catholics established catholic *patronages*, "after-school programs that organized children's leisure activities while providing them with basic religious instruction" (p. 68). In the late 1890s, catholic *colonies* developed out of the network of *patronages*. In the heyday of French clerical/secular conflict in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, *colonies* gave catholic associations the opportunity to offer children the catholic instruction that public primary schools lacked. Their *colonies* also expanded quickly, while paying much less attention to hygiene as the essential *raison d'être*. Instead, the objective was pedagogical: children, housed mostly in group settings, attended mass, participated in religious offices generally, and went on hikes with prayer breaks intended to strengthen youngsters' spirits as well as their bodies.

At the heart of *Childhood in the Promised Land* are case studies of the socialist municipal *colonie* established by Suresnes and the communist municipal *colonie* founded by Ivry-sur-Seine. Suresnes, located on the western edge of Paris, elected its first socialist mayor, Henri Sellier, just after the First World War. Sellier, building on a wartime initiative, established a *colonie* in the Nièvre, that bastion of leftist politics, as part of the wide array of social services developed by the socialist municipality. Here Downs provides an interesting analysis of leftist ruralism, a forgotten if less important counterpart of the better-known right-wing "return to the land." She also shows a fascinating continuity of what she refers to as *élevage humain* in the Nièvre from early nineteenth-century wetnursing and adoption of Parisian children to the establishment of *colonies* for young Parisians in the interwar years. Interestingly, the socialist *colonie* expected the children to be well-behaved, lice-free, clean, wearing well-cared-for clothing, in effect serving as veritable ambassadors from Suresnes to the villages of the Nièvre.

In 1925, voters in Ivry-sur-Seine, at the southeastern edge of Paris, elected their first communist city council. Within four years, the municipality sponsored its own *colonie* of Les Mathes, on the Atlantic coast. With about a dozen monitors for several hundred children, Ivry focused on inculcating children's sense of self-government. Les Mathes became a veritable children's democracy, modelled on the government of Ivry itself. As in the case of the catholic *colonies*, there was a strong pedagogical function both in developing children's sense of democratic government and in using overt propaganda, directed at both children and locals, in favor of communist, including Soviet, causes. Of course, unlike the catholics who fared reasonably well in the French national government's move to the right in the 1940s and 1950s, Ivry first lost its government subsidies, then was forced to remove the overt communist propaganda to avoid the threatened ban of the *colonie* altogether.

Although Downs focuses on the years before the Second World War, she does briefly cover what she calls the "trickle up movement" (p. xiv) of the *colonies* to the middle class, suggesting the ways in which social welfare policies more generally crept up from, rather than trickled down to, the working class in France. After World War II, *colonies de vacances* became a fixture for French children across social class until they seemed a veritable entitlement, enrolling by 1962 some 1,350,000 children for a period of four to six weeks. In an epilogue, Downs sketches the decline of the *colonies* since 1960 as a result of the advent of an era of individualism and longer family vacations, a development that may have left the poorest fifth of French children, still concentrated in the *banlieux*, less well served than was the case nearly a century ago.

This brief summary does little justice to the rich detail of *Childhood in the Promised Land*. For example, Downs offers a very nuanced portrayal of gender-specific activities in catholic *colonies* versus the *mixité* that reigned at communist Les Mathes. In the catholic *colonies*, boys did military drills and games, while girls sewed and did needlework. At Les Mathes, activities were nearly identical, but Downs notes that though Les Mathes was, of course, far more egalitarian and progressive, it was the elimination of class difference—not gender equality for its own sake—that motivated the municipal government of Ivry.

Downs uses a wide array of sources, including records of the municipal colonies, newspaper accounts, interviews, and children's journals. Such a strong source base allows her to differentiate the social control often intended by the adults in charge of *colonies* from the actual experiences of children. At several points, Downs explicitly rejects a Foucauldian interpretation of "*colonies*" as mere centers of quiet discipline, though she never goes so far as to take the hoary proclamations of *colonie* organizers at face value either.

In the end, this book is an accessible way to learn how catholicism, socialism, and communism actually affected people's, and particularly children's, lives. One can at several junctures see ideology as defined

by *colonie* organizers reaching into people's everyday lives, as well as popular responses and adaptations of institutional initiatives.

Given recent interest in the French empire, I was left hungry for more information on the term "*colonie de vacances*." As Downs notes, it is a direct translation of Wilhelm Bion's own *Ferienkolonie*. Bion claimed that these urban children would be "colonized with the peasants" (p. 21). Although Downs quotes Bion, she does not really pursue the implications of this intriguing quotation. On at least one occasion, Downs also writes that these children were referred to as "Apaches", but it is left unexplored (p. 83). In general, the champions of the *colonies* seem to refer to the "civilizing" of the children. I wonder if the image ever went in the opposite direction; that is, did organizers ever refer to the *colonies* as "civilizing" rural folk, much as the communist children of Ivry spread propaganda among the locals near Les Mathes? If organizers always assumed that only the children were getting the *civilisation* they needed, I would have liked Downs to reinforce that point, as it would be a counter-argument to Eugen Weber and Ann Stoler's suggestions that there were real continuities between what French colonials wanted to do overseas and what French urbanites wanted to do in the country. In short, given that the heyday of the French empire coincided with that of the *colonies de vacances*, it would be good to know more about this term *colonie*. I suspect that this book was completed before the recent re-emergence of the French empire as a thriving subfield of French history, and I hope that Downs or someone else might have additional materials in order to consider the meanings of *colonie*.

Although this book is about childhood, and not just pedagogy, Downs provides several background pages on pedagogical norms in nineteenth and early twentieth-century France. I am not sure that I agree with her portrayal of Napoleonic pedagogical norms as dominant in nineteenth-century France. There is a well-developed literature on the history of French education in the nineteenth century that would have nuanced some of Downs' background sections. In the end, of course, this is not an altogether fair criticism; there is only so much that a single book—even one as excellent as this one—can do.

*Childhood in the Promised Land* is, without question, one of the best books on the history of childhood in France to appear in a very long time. It is well-researched, well-argued, and well-written, utterly bereft of the typographical errors that too often mar books published by even the best presses.

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