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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 Essay by Rachel Mesch, Yeshiva University.

In Michel Houellebecq's 1998 novel *Les Particules élémentaires*, the characters Bruno and Christiane travel to the nudist mecca Cap d'Agde and discover a thriving "sexual social democracy" built on "the same qualities of discipline and respect of a contract that permitted the Germans to conduct two horribly murderous world wars before reconstructing [...] a powerful and export-oriented economy." [1] In his impeccably researched volume on the history of French nudism, Stephen L. Harp explores every dimension of Houellebecq's jam-packed observation (which he indeed quotes): nudism's German roots; the early efforts to design a nudist culture according to strict parameters; and the later evolution of nudism into a largely capitalistic enterprise. While Harp ultimately shows that French nudism differed from the German variety both in its lack of direct political engagement and in its social composition, Houellebecq's comparison to Nazism is not insignificant. Indeed, readers of Harp's engaging study might be surprised to discover that the history of modern French nudism, beginning in the 1920s, is less connected to an embrace of sexual freedom than to a certain notion of discipline linked to a fantasy of a healthier French body that could save the "French race" (p. 9).

As Harp demonstrates, the leaders of early nudist-related movements worked hard to separate the exposed nude body from sexuality, thus providing further evidence to support Michel Foucault's well-known critique of the repressive hypothesis. If one applies Foucault's argument in *The History of Sexuality* to this context, the refusal to acknowledge a connection between nudity and sexuality illustrates the discursive obsession with sex even as it denies that obsession; thus, twentieth-century nudism did not signal the liberation from mechanisms in place to control and monitor sexuality of which it might appear. "Foucault's contribution," writes Harp in introducing his subject, "is that we cannot blindly accept the notion sex or the body was 'liberated' in the twentieth century" (p. 4). Rather, in their efforts to separate the nude body from sexuality, the naturist movements (under which nudism was originally subsumed) created extensive systems and rules regarding everything from what sorts of foods should be eaten and which to avoid, to the recommended ratio of musculature to body fat, to how much of the body should be covered in which recreational circumstances. Early naturist movements required extreme discipline and promised in return not only health but freedom from perceived sexual perversions—whether homosexuality, masturbation or frequent intercourse. Harp's puzzle, then, was how to sketch the line from this early history of a health initiative based on a particular and rather constraining set of regulations to the highly lucrative modern nudism industry in France, which by the 1970s seemed to flout every aspect of the very philosophies that launched the practice in the first place. How was it possible for nudism to be energetically *not* about sexuality in the 1920s and then to become a haven for sexual tourism in the 1970s; to have begun as a way to be closer to nature as against the pressures of mass culture only to emerge inextricably linked to consumerism? Harp thus describes his task as exploring "what changed in France and in Europe between 1927 and the early 1970s: what nudists were doing, why they were doing it, how they understood it, and how their presence wrought change" (p. 13).

The early nudist movement was linked to long-standing fears about French depopulation and a weakening social body dating back to the nineteenth century but reignited by twentieth-century European wars. In his first chapter, Harp explores the role of two doctor brothers, Gaston and André

Durville, who built an early form of nudism out of the existing naturist movement popularized by Dr. Paul Carton and others. Worried about losing credibility with the masses, the Durvilles downplayed the central role of public nudity in their ideology. Nudists at home, they limited mixed-sex nudity at their health center “Physiopolis” on the Île de Médan outside of Paris. They advocated strict nutritional policies (fruit in the morning, limited meat at midday, vegetables in the evening (p. 21)) and abstinence from tobacco and caffeine along with fresh air and exercise, while also practicing hypnosis and other therapies. Linking nudity to exercise was one way they hoped to decouple the practice from sexuality, but their plans for a nude stadium at Physiopolis was ultimately deemed too vulnerable to French codes against indecency and, in particular, Article 330 against *outrage public à la pudeur*—the law that nudist leaders throughout the twentieth century worked around and against.

As Harp recounts, with an impressive attention to detail, the Durvilles’ vision linked physical health to beauty and aesthetics. In their sporting contests, the emphasis was not on athleticism but rather on healthful appearance. Lack of clothing flowed from this: competitors at Physiopolis wore only the *slip* (bikini underwear akin to today’s Speedo) so that judges could clearly view their musculature. By 1935, the Physiopolis *slip* intended for sporting events had shifted at the Durvilles’ new venture, Heliopolis on the Île du Levant, to the *slip minimum*, a version of the string bikini bottom (for women a *cache-seins* was optional). As at the Île de Médan, the Durvilles strictly forbade nudism on this island, but it seemed to thrive there nonetheless, even without the exclusive link to sports. The idyllic setting fostered “a sort of nostalgic and sentimental time travel” (p. 47) allowing visitors to ignore the recent horrors of world warfare.

But the Durvilles’ cautious approach had a flipside, earning them the ridicule of European nudists less squeamish about public nudity and paving the way for rival naturist Marcel Kienné de Mongeot to popularize a more German-inflected model in France. As Harp recounts in chapter two, Kienné de Mongeot and psychiatrist Dr. Marcel Viard linked clothing to degeneration and advocated *nudité integrale*. Like the Durvilles’ ventures, in Kienné de Mongeot’s nudist colonies careful rules were enforced to maintain the separation between sexuality and nudity (disrobing in public was forbidden, as it was seen as potentially eroticizing). It is difficult to take stock of Kienné de Mongeot’s success, however, because of a certain chicken and egg phenomenon. Did shifting fashion trends work in favor of nudism or did nudism influence these trends, since Harp also links the *slip* and the *minimum* to bare-chested sunbathing in the Riviera? While the aristocratic Kienné de Mongeot did not launch a mass movement, he garnered support for nudism among a certain elite, paving the way for the later advocates of the practice.

In chapter three, Harp traces the shift away from ideological nudism in the aftermath of World War II, when the argument of national hygiene gives way to a burgeoning tourist industry fueled by international demand that need not justify itself through collectivist or nationalist discourse. Harp recovers the forgotten Île du Levant as the ground zero of the modern nudism industry, billed explicitly as a place to escape from civilization and its discontents. While there were none of the naturist rules and expectations regarding food and exercise, there was still a need to justify nudism to municipal law by insisting on its separation from sexuality, even when by this time the sexualized atmosphere on the island could no longer be denied.

Chapter four further traces the transition from naturism to nudism through the work of the charismatic Albert Lecocq. Fondly known as Pépé by thousands of supporters, this successor to Kienné de Mongeot unified the movement through the creation of the Fédération Française de Naturisme, or FFN. (Nudist movements were replete with their own acronyms, vocabulary, and aptly named centers like Physiopolis and Heliopolis, whose telling denominations seem to mark their location at the precise crossroads of utopianism and tourist marketing.) Through Lecocq, nudism eased its relationship to the strictures of naturism while retaining the basic connection to health (sexual and otherwise) rather than sexual activity. Harp’s final chapter considers Cap d’Agde and charts the continuation of nudism’s departure

from a coherent ideology to an industry as French indecency laws increasingly bent to accommodate the indisputable economically favorable facts on the ground.

On one level, it is not hard for Harp to answer the question that he asks at the start, which boils down to: how did nudism become so linked to sexuality and industry? It is not unexpected that nudism and sexual tourism go hand-in-hand today or that nudism could become its own industry in the second half of the twentieth century following 1968, the sexual revolution, and the explosion of mass culture. Harp's statement at the end of his introduction signals this self-reinforcing dynamic: "whatever the ideological justifications worked out by [the early French] advocates of nudism, it was above all interest in nudism on the part of French and European nudists that drove the development of nudism in France, a demand to which municipal and national governments responded as they encouraged tourism" (p. 12). Harp seems to be drawing a distinction here that points to the tension at the heart of this deeply informative yet sometimes frustrating study: there was, on the one hand, ideological nudism in the form of naturism in the 1920s-60s, awash with idiosyncratic rules and regulations that conflicted from one sub-movement to the next; and, on the other hand, the gradual development of a nudist industry that sought to separate itself from the strictures of naturism. Harp devotes ample pages to documenting and explaining early naturism, but it is never entirely clear, even by his own admission, how many people who identified as naturists or visited their colonies might really have been simply nudists *avant la lettre*: people wanting to be free of clothing without subscribing to the ideological particulars. As Harp tells us, naturism was often the *only* thing tying groups of otherwise diverse people together: they were Protestant and Catholic, from more than one social class and from various political affiliations. This diversity makes it even more likely that it was the nudity that brought them together rather than the ideology, leaving open the question of how much of that embrace of nudity was also an embrace of sexuality—in other words, the very thing the leaders of the various naturist movements often worked to deny.

In his introduction, Harp promises a social history of nudism "from the bottom up" through its actors: "who said what where, when they did so, and why" (p. 6). And we do hear from and get a fairly strong sense of the cult leaders of naturism—the Durvilles, Kienné de Mongeot, Pépé Lecocq, and a handful of other colorful characters. But Harp also gives us ample reason not to trust what these folks had to say, especially around the question of nudism itself, always wrought by its inevitable link to sexuality. Because the greatest perceived threat to early nudism was the admission of this link, it was imperative at every step to deny this relationship through strict rules and regulations but also through an insistent refusal to acknowledge or memorialize the presence of sex. The many publications quoted frequently in Harp's study—treatises, brochures, journals, magazines, and books—while certainly fascinating and important, are not entirely reliable sources for recovering genuine historical voices from the ground. Indeed, one has the sense that naturist and nudist movements worked efficiently to erase many traces of one of their own driving psychological forces, thus providing a particular challenge to the historian.

But perhaps those naturists of convenience, those who did not subscribe to the particular strictures and ideologies of a given movement, might be the ones who could really give us insight into what it meant to want to not wear clothes, then and now. Harp offers many of these provocative voices of dissonance throughout. He quotes a letter published in 1938 in *Vivre d'Abord*, Kienné de Mongeot's journal, by a nudist who argued that "complete nudism cannot really have health as its principal goal; this thesis is developed ad nauseum, without any proof, and it cannot be taken seriously" (p. 83). To make sense of references like these, which Harp does not shy away from including, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* might have been harnessed to greater effect. In critiquing the repressive hypothesis, Foucault notes the widespread notion that modern societies have "taken such care to feign ignorance of the thing they prohibited, as if they were determined to have nothing to do with it." That thing, of course, is sexuality. But he goes on to say that in fact, "never have there existed more centers of power; never more attention manifested and verbalized, never more circular contacts and linkages; never more sites where the intensity of pleasures and the persistency of power catch hold."² This extensive discursive

construction of sex as taboo within power structures that also exploit that taboo defines modern society according to Foucault and seems to be just what Harp is documenting in certain French naturist movements. Acknowledging that sex might be present precisely where it was deemed to be absent—and exploring the complex nature of its presence further—could have allowed Harp a framework through which to examine the internal contradictions of his very rich subject and, thus, exploit to fuller effect many of the actual voices recovered here.

Instead, some of Harp's more troubling anecdotes are left without sufficient scrutiny. To take one recurring example, beauty contests—a consistent feature at nudist colonies from early on—raise a host of troubling issues. While the Durvilles crowned both male and female adults and children, the focus was on women. Georges Rousseau held contests at the Île du Levant for “Miss Levant,” and while initially contestants wore the *minimum*, they soon appeared nude. What's more, women and girls were recruited by men to join the contest, not always of their own accord (p. 115). Harp is appropriately cautious with his analysis here, recognizing the “manipulation, even exploitation, of the women themselves,” confirmed by a troubling testimony about the photographs taken of a contest winner, despite rules to the contrary: “About a hundred people whipped out cameras [...] I'm afraid her photograph will appear in many publications all over the world” notes an attendee named “Hal” in 1955 (pp. 117-118).

Here, then, is one of those voices of dissent and contradiction, pointing provocatively toward the ways in which the refusal of nudist authorities to recognize the clear presence of sexualized and gendered power dynamics left certain groups of people vulnerable. When Harp notes that this contest “caused remarkably little controversy among nudists” (p. 116), one wonders which voices allow him to come to such a conclusion. He follows this paragraph with a discussion of the relative freedom of the island, noting the discrepancy between certain rules and actual practice, while affirming Mayor Joseph Clotis's statements that liberty was not linked to *libertinage* (p. 119). “In short,” Harp concludes, “nudists exposed their bodies to sun, air, water and to others' gaze, but they did not necessarily sexualize their bodies in the process—at least not any more than other postwar beachgoers” (p. 119). This unsatisfying conclusion seems to ignore significant evidence that the author has just presented, while relying on a decidedly non-Foucauldian notion of sexuality as something that could simply be turned on or off. Similarly, in a later chapter, we learn of beauty contests that involved nude teenage girls on family vacations through the voice of the contented parents interviewed for a local paper (p. 183). In this area, however, nudist behavior might be more critically analyzed by looking beyond the industry's own self-enclosed and increasingly self-denying publications. It would have been useful, for example, to examine these events through a broader cultural historical lens willing to acknowledge the contradictions that have always accompanied changing notions of the body, gender roles, and sexuality.^[3] In the same way, the phenomenon of nudist family vacations documented here and throughout Harp's study would benefit from contextualization in relationship to scholarly histories of private life or studies of modesty.^[4] While Harp frequently refers to these sorts of critical sources in his footnotes, he does not use them to provide an overarching critical framework that could make sense of the rich array of provocative detail provided.

More explicitly acknowledging the internal contradictions of nudism through the study's own Foucauldian framework would have helped Harp avoid a certain recourse to the binaristic structures that plagued early nudism's cautious relationship to sexuality. In such a system, sexuality was coded negative and therefore had to be denied, and nudism was defined either through its denial or acceptance of its relationship to sexuality. But as Harp shows throughout his study, it is hardly ever an either/or proposition for these movements or for those who vacationed in their colonies. If one follows this binary logic, contemporary nudism's relationship to sex tourism or swinging suggests a failure of early naturist movements. Yet such a diagnosis is based on a moral compass that has dramatically shifted in the past fifty years. As a result, in tracking the differences between naturism and modern nudism, Harp's analysis sometimes appears to be underpinned by moral judgments that seem outdated today, including the

characterization of sexual tourism and swinging as “perversions” (p. 186), sexual expression as a “problem” and the increased association between sexuality and nudism as “negative” (p. 204). Certainly this rhetoric helps mark the contrast between earlier and later movements, but it muddles the ability to perceive nudism in its relationship to wider cultural shifts as well as to identify what is enduring about the desire to vacation without clothing. To be sure, the developments at the Cap d’Agde were in tension with the written rules of early naturism, but the reader is left wondering whether they were truly in tension with the spirit of many early nudists and whether sexual freedom was also at least an aspect of what was being sought. Might swinging be on a continuum with what the naturist of 1927 was looking for, simply redefined with respect to an evolving culture’s relationship to sexuality? Indeed, Harp notes in his conclusion that sexuality had “always been the elephant in the room,” (p. 208) just as nudism was always present in naturism. What changes seems to be the willingness to acknowledge it.

In the article that the fictional Bruno writes about visiting the Cap d’Agde in *Les Particules élémentaires*, he describes his unexpected discovery of a fairly gentle sexual economy based on goodwill. “Far from wildly exacerbating fantasies,” the nudist ethos “even[s] out the sexual odds” and eliminates any violent undertones associated with pornography, for example.[5] In modern nudism, then, we are not so far from where we started: sexual tourism turns out to offer the sort of sexual health benefits and calming effects that early naturist movements linked to nudity. When returning to the question of what has changed in France between 1927 and 2014, the answer seems to be precisely what Harp suggested in his introduction: a new comfort with bodily exposure through the advent of the exposed body, rather than that of the sexed body, which was not actually new (p. 5). But framing the book through a question of change might actually obscure its most interesting contribution, which is to highlight the contested ways in which nudism and sexuality have been related but not identical vehicles through which to express the human condition throughout the twentieth century. In the end, Harp’s study dramatically brings to light what is really a kind of *plus ça change* phenomenon: something that looks very different in modern form seems to be preoccupied with many questions about the body, society, and individual freedom that have been there all along.

Au Naturel is brimming with fascinating charts, lists, maps, anecdotes, and images (there are over twenty-five photos included in a center section). The numerous suggestive *pistes de recherche* introduced through this study signal the originality of the topic, the openness with which the author has approached it, and its potential relationship to a host of scholarly fields and cultural conversations. As one avenue for future research, some of the authentic voices that Harp was seeking could perhaps be evoked through further attention to the many texts, novels, and films mentioned[6] or through closer visual study of the many nudist journals and magazines mentioned by the author; deeper attention to the representational practices in which nudism was expressed and constructed could offer another helpful dimension to this history, akin to what literary and visual scholars have contributed to the history of French sexuality.[7] Harp’s history also invites further analysis of the relationship of naturist movements to other planned communities and French utopian thinking, from Charles Fourier and Saint-Simon (often cited in Houellebecq studies but surprisingly absent here), on the one hand, to socialism, fascism and Nazism, on the other.[8] Finally, while Harp offers a culturally specific story about France, albeit in a European context, this specificity points to fascinating comparative lines of inquiry for American culture as well only hinted at in his conclusion through a passing reference to American puritanism: what are the codes that govern nudism and sexuality and their relationship on our own soil, who determines them, and how have they changed—or not—over time? The length and diverse nature of his bibliographical references suggest that he is well aware of all of these scholarly paths and provides an open invitation to scholars to continue to explore them.

Notes

[1] Michel Houellebecq, *The Elementary Particles*, trans. Frank Wynne. (New York: Random House, 2000). Quoted in Harp, 185.

[2] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I: *An Introduction*. (New York: Random House, 1980), 49.

[3] See for example, Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917-1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Mary Lynn Stewart, *For Health and Beauty: Physical Culture for Frenchwomen, 1880s-1930s* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Rebecca Pulju, *Women and Mass Consumer Society in Postwar France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Sian Reynolds, *France Between the Wars: Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1996); and Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), which Harp notes in his acknowledgements came out too late for him to use here.

[4] Anne Marie Sohn, *Du Premier baiser à l'alcôve: La Sexualité des Français au quotidien (1850-1950)* (Paris: Aubier, 2006); and Marcela Iacub, *Par le trou de la serrure: Une histoire de la pudeur publique, XIXe au XXIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

[5] Houellebecq, 181-182.

[6] One might begin with Marcel Kienné de Mangeot's intriguing satirical novel *Ma tante chez les nudistes*, which Harp mentions in his fourth chapter and in which "a young male character found the cure for his latent homosexuality when nudism 'normalized' his sexual instincts" (Harp, 160).

[7] See, for example Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Peter Cryle, *The Telling of the Act: Sexuality as Narrative in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century France* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001); Peter Cryle and Lisa Downing, eds. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Special Issue on 'Feminine Sexual Pathologies,' 18:1 (2009); Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Seduction and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006); Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-de-Siècle France* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998); and Patricia Mainardi, *Husbands, Wives and Lovers: Marriage and Its Discontents in Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[8] Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Keith Tester, eds. *Utopia: Social Theory and the Future* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012); Elizabeth Russell, ed. *Trans/Forming Utopia: Looking Forward to the End*, Volume I (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009). Jerry Andrew Varsava, "Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq's *Elementary Particles* and the Problem of Scientific Communitarianism." *College Literature* 32:4 (2005): 145-167.

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