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Julian Jackson, *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics, and Morality in France from the Liberation to AIDS*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009. xiii + 321 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-226-38925-7.

Review by David Caron, University of Michigan.

Ask anyone with some knowledge of Arcadie and chances are they will tell you more or less the same things. It was an assimilationist gay group so concerned with discretion and middle-class propriety that it was basically as homophobic as the society it sought to reform. Its members were all self-hating closet cases and uptight Catholic right-wingers in three-piece suits. It was founded and ruled with an iron fist by a prudish autocrat who tolerated no dissent in his ranks. *Arcadie*, the group's review and mouthpiece, consisted by and large of maudlin love stories between school boys and pseudo academic studies of Greek pederasty and famous homosexuals in history. In other words, when gay liberation arrived, it swept away at long last what, to any self-respecting gay man or lesbian, had become nothing more than an embarrassing relic. Well, think again, Julian Jackson tells us. Things were far more complex than you thought.

To call this book long overdue does not begin to describe it. With *Living in Arcadia*, Jackson is providing us at last with the first detailed, book-length study of Arcadie, the largest and most resilient organization of its kind that, for better and for worse, played a crucial role in defining postwar gay life in France. The book is based on an impressive amount of research, access to correspondence, and rare, original interviews with members of Arcadie, including (what a coup!) a series of talks with its charismatic founder, a man so reclusive (and old) that many people assume he is dead. Putting all this incredibly rich material together, Jackson attempts to do several things at once: reconstruct a narrative history of Arcadie and its members; thanks to attentive readings of the review and other, less public writings, give a more accurate and complex political picture of a movement long derided by post-68 gay liberationists and their followers as hopelessly reactionary; replace it within a specific moment in gay history by outlining its connections with what was then known internationally as the homophile movement; depict what it was like to belong to Arcadie and what the group actually did for its members. This allows Jackson to make several provocative claims that contradict the dominant view of Arcadie: he sees the group's ideology as liberal humanist rather than Catholic conservative, as the consensus would have it; he recasts the so-called dark ages of closeted homosexuality as far more exciting and nurturing to many as one tends to think today through the prism of gay liberation; and he brings out unexpected similarities between Arcadie and its critics. In the end, the book constitutes a precious addition to the growing amount of scholarship on the pre-Stonewall era, while enriching our understanding of the larger moral climate in 1950s and 1960s France. Jackson's work isn't flawless, though, but, as I will explain, its flaws are also virtues, and the book is, without a doubt, an important achievement.

Jackson starts off by giving his readers a concise historical overview of homosexuality in France since the Revolution. While much of this will be familiar to specialists, it is nonetheless useful in establishing the context in which Arcadie appeared and which determined its political bent and social mission. What comes out of this history is something unique to France. While "sodomy" was *legally* decriminalized in 1791 and was never again made illegal as such, French society remained far more *socially* conservative in

the matter than some of its neighbors. The importance of this paradox cannot be overstated, for it explains why Arcadie was confronted with the delicate task of changing not legal texts but social attitudes.

The book then moves on to the specific history of Arcadie, its founding in 1954 by a former seminarian named André Baudry, who remained its leader until he dissolved the organization in 1982, the uneasy links with other homophile organizations in Europe, tensions with the law and cozy relations with the police, unsuccessful attempts at fostering reform and instigating a dialogue with enlightened members of the elites, and so on. This history is valuable in itself, of course, but Jackson uses it in order to debunk what he sees as serious misunderstandings of Arcadie's ideas and influence. While it would be absurd to deny Baudry's obsessive castigation of effeminacy and of the flamboyant excesses of some homosexuals, his writings and those of his close circle outline, if you bother to read them, a more subtle "vision" (Jackson's word) made of openness, self-respect, and a surprisingly modern recognition of homosexual specificity. It will come as a small shock to many, I believe, to read Arcadie's defense of gay male couples as fundamentally different from their heterosexual counterparts, especially when it comes to sexual exclusivity. This and other ideas espoused by "Arcadians," as they called themselves, do not exactly add up to assimilationist politics. Various, often opposing ideas, were freely advocated in the pages of the review, while pedophilia and sadomasochism were considered legitimate subjects of discussion at the group's meetings.

Chapter six, which concludes the section of the book devoted to the years before May '68, depicts, thanks to interviews with former members, what it was like to be part of Arcadie when the group had virtually no competitors, and it is a delightful read. One will discover a unique world of same-sex sociability that provided men with a safe space, a haven, *outside* mainstream society. But most striking--and surprising--of all is the genuine sense of community that emanates from these testimonies. For some of these men, Arcadie represented their entry into homosexuality, with all the trepidation and excitement that this implies (hardly what comes to mind when thinking of Arcadie today); for others it was just one aspect of their rich and multi-layered queer lives. Clearly, the organization had different things to offer to different people and in that way, too, it was far from monolithic--not just in terms of class and age. (Gender was a different matter, as women, while not entirely absent, never made up a significant presence in the organization). Accounts of struggling but daring provincial chapters of the organization are particularly moving and, even in the more open environment of the capital, one gets a sense of the specific services that Arcadie provided, from life-saving tips on public cruising (Arcadie, as it turns out, was not particularly timid about such things) to medical and legal advice (the names of "safe" doctors and lawyers were made available to members in need); from useful reviews to a list of books available to order (try gathering the courage to buy *Jean Paul* at your local bookstore in Alençon in the mid 50s); and, most important perhaps, there was the club. Baudry may have lamented the fact that the club was more popular for its dancing than for its cultural lectures (or his own monthly sermons, for that matter, when he harangued the crowd like a gay Savonarola) and, stern chaperon that he was, he certainly made sure that partiers never engaged in inappropriate behavior on the premises. But what fun it all was and what a great place to pick up guys!

Then came the sexual liberation. As Jackson shows, the close of the 1960s brought a mixed bag of consequences for Arcadie. Several new gay organizations appeared and for the first time there were some competitors to contend with. From the early revolutionary activist groups to later, more rights-oriented movements, all seemed to think Arcadie had overstayed its welcome. The developing commercial scene, with its gay bars and discos and sex venues, made the club look square, what with its quaint *paso-dobles* and no-kissing rules. Who needed that when you could go the meetings of the Front Homosexuel d'Action Revolutionnaire and FUCK! Right there! Baudry's ideal of middle-class respectability and backdoor politics really couldn't hold a candle to Guy Hocquenghem's sexy Maoism and the Gazolines' situationist happenings. As for the review, how could its articles on Verlaine, his life and works, compete with pop culture and naked men in glossy new magazines? Roger Peyrefitte?

Girlfriend, please! Yet when the reader reaches this point in the book, Jackson has done such a good job of making us like Arcadie that one cannot help but feel a sense of injustice at its casual dismissal by young upstarts.

But the 1970s were also quite successful for the old group. Arcadie was finally being heard, it seemed, and Baudry was now a regular presence on radio and television. And even though certain groups seemed more in tune with the times, many gay men still decided to join Arcadie during the period, proving that it continued to fulfill certain needs and “spoke” to certain constituencies in ways other gay groups didn’t. But this was to be its last decade. Baudry, blinded by his hatred for the radicals who denounced him as obsolete and who represented the sort of in-your-face provocation he had always denounced as counterproductive and undignified, failed to realize that the time had come to join forces with other groups in order to achieve the social reforms he had himself championed and win the abolition of discriminatory laws inherited from the Vichy and Gaullist eras. Jackson, however, makes the very interesting observation that the early 1980s didn’t just see the end of Arcadie but pretty much of *all* gay activism soon after the gay-friendly socialists came into power in 1981. At the outset of the AIDS catastrophe, gay activism had basically ceased to exist in France. In 1982, Baudry dissolved Arcadie and left for Naples with his longtime lover. He episodically stayed in touch with former members, gave a few rare interviews, and regretted that Arcadie hadn’t stayed around long enough to play its part in the fight against AIDS, an epidemic that took many of its people.

Living in Arcadia tells a fascinating story that was never before told with such breadth and subtlety. I learned a tremendous amount from it and had to revise quite a few of my own assumptions about Arcadie. And like any good book it has its share of shortcomings. Some of these shortcomings are admittedly of lesser importance, so I’ll start with those. There are a few factual mistakes (Foucault never wrote a book called *L’âge de la folie*) and the copy editing leaves a lot to be desired. The translations are sometimes so literal that certain quotations are likely to remain incomprehensible to non-Francophone readers unable to reconstruct the original. I was also disappointed that, in spite of what the introduction promises, the book does not give us a real portrait of André Baudry. The readers may be expected to piece together the various biographical fragments scattered throughout the story of the group, but those were not exactly unknown.

However, what could arguably be seen as the book’s main weakness—its somewhat cursory analysis—may also represent one of its strengths. If Jackson has interesting ideas about the significance of the facts he gathers, his book isn’t meant to be primarily an analytical one. But this is fine. “Here it is,” Jackson is telling us, and it will be up to others to continue along the path now cleared by this important and timely book. Others will have to answer the question, “What does this all mean?” But that’s what good books do: they start conversations and allow us to conduct them on solid ground. So let me begin.

In the closing section of his study, Jackson reaches a rather convincing conclusion, namely that Arcadie’s main social and political agenda, over its long years, bears a striking resemblance to current gay demands about equal rights, antidiscrimination, or the legalization of same-sex couples. This is one of the many surprises that the book contains, to be sure, but what Jackson makes of it is open to discussion. For him this shows that Arcadie was ahead of its time and far more progressive than we thought. Wouldn’t it be just as easy, though, to conclude from the very same observation that today’s dominant gay movement (or whatever you want to call it) is in fact reactionary? The problem here resides, in my opinion, in Jackson’s turn to ethics, which I find problematic. The argument rests on his earlier observation that gay groups have no intrinsic political identity that may be clearly termed progressive or conservative but, rather, that they always define themselves in relation to the cultural context in which they exist and to which they respond. This allows Jackson to bring out several similarities between Arcadie and the allegedly more radical groups, such as the FHAR, that criticized Baudry and his friends. For example, both “sides” proposed, at some point in their respective histories, strikingly similar denunciations of the so-called ghettos, i.e., both the commercial, pay-for-play scene

and clandestine sex in public places. They also advocated, under different terms, what is known today as “coming out.” These observations are undeniably correct, but they are too often invoked in order not to provide a more detailed analysis of Arcadie’s politics and to favor instead a more ethical vision.

In a way, this echoes the still prevailing view of the aftermath of May ’68—that, when the dust settled, ethics had triumphed and politics lost. This may very well be true, but is it a good thing, as people who make this claim never fail to assert? I for one don’t think so. The idea that today’s gay movement may be rooted in the old homophile philosophy of decades ago is a seductive one for sure. It implies that we owe a lot more to the “dark ages,” and therefore to the very closet we have repudiated, than we feel comfortable admitting. That is very good indeed. But Jackson’s proposition is an exciting one only insofar as it allows us to complicate our vision of the gay past and to tone down our contemporary smugness and condescension. To use this as a reason to rejoice about the current state of affairs is, I’m afraid, a different story. If Arcadie’s more “modern” views are still current today, so are its less savory aspects. The push for normalization and full participation in civic life that Baudry advocated with great courage and openness throughout his long career did not stand in awkward contradiction to, or even apart from, the exclusion of queers who, for one reason or another, didn’t fit certain criteria of acceptability. In fact the two went, and continue to go, together. The same agenda today encourages the same exclusions, and to frame such an agenda as a matter of ethics may be an all too convenient way to mask its problematic politics.

I latched on this point because Jackson ends his book with a coda on gay marriage. My disagreement with his views on this particular issue should not be construed as a disparagement of his work—quite the contrary, in fact. As Ross Chambers often says, perfect books are unreadable. Why? Because they leave no room for their readers to exist and for intellectual work to continue. Julian Jackson’s *Living in Arcadia* is thus an imperfect book in the best sense of the word: it expands our knowledge and it is so exciting that it makes us want to keep going. More important even, it makes us realize how much we miss Arcadie, sometimes without knowing that we do. What else to think of the “Gais musette” or the Sunday tea dances at Le Tango or other uncool and corny events of that kind? As Jackson so beautifully shows, Arcadie wasn’t limited to its politics; it was also something like what today we would call a subculture. Maybe it’s just me, but if the club were still in existence I would run there faster than Lady Gaga changes hats in a single video. *Paso-doble* anyone?

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