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Susan B. Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France*. Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 2009. xii + 249. Notes, bibliography and index. \$24.94 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8223-4613-5

Review by Robert Lewis, Gettysburg College .

In the aftermath of World War I, political actors across Europe turned to youth, in rhetoric and in practice, to rebuild their shattered nations. Susan Whitney's new monograph, *Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France*, persuasively demonstrates that a wide range of French organizations engaged in intense efforts to win the support of adolescents and young adults during the 1920s and 1930s. Whitney's work argues that French Communists and Catholics came to view youth as central to their own political efforts, as a demographic base for support, a source of energy and dynamism and as a symbolic manifestation of their commitment to renewing and regenerating France. Their respective youth organizations, the Jeunesse Communiste (JC) and the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne (JOC), emerged as the two largest such movements in France by the end of the Popular Front period, each boasting (at least on paper) approximately 100,000 members.

*Mobilizing Youth*, on one level, thus offers a nuanced and detailed history of the JOC, the JC and their respective female branches, the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne Féminine (JOFC) and the Union des Jeunes Filles de France (UJFF). It also analyzes broader connections between the two movements, as the JC and JOC continually positioned themselves in relation to each other and came to share certain characteristics by the end of the 1930s, when Communists and Catholics alike promoted cultural opportunities for youth, staged large festivals and demonstrations and showcased similar visions of gender relations and the working-class family. Indeed, Whitney makes a convincing case for the growing "normalization" of French communism through an analysis of its gender politics by the end of the 1930s. If Whitney's analysis works slightly better as an analysis of the way young people were mobilized (and manipulated) by various adult actors than as a comprehensive history of the youth movement experience, it nonetheless makes an indispensable case for the centrality of youth as a demographic group and as a symbolic political battleground within interwar French politics and society.

Whitney's first four chapters analyze the JC and JOC before they became genuine mass organizations in the mid-1930s. In the case of the Communists, generational identities functioned at the heart of their political rhetoric and practice from the inception of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) in December 1920 onward. Many of the early Communist militants were noticeably younger than those who remained within the Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière (SFIO); their relative youth symbolized, at least in their own eyes, the PCF's break with the past. The official Young Communist movement quickly positioned itself as the intransigent vanguard of the new revolutionary party. Yet, as Whitney demonstrates, the JC's radical ambitions were quickly tamed by Moscow. While the Comintern sporadically used the Jeunesse Communiste to push the PCF farther to the left at key moments throughout the 1920s, the JC (and youth in general) remained subordinated to the bolshevized party.

Class concerns and the rhetoric of revolution thus dominated the JC in the 1920s and early 1930s. While the Jeunesse Communiste was often hampered by severe police repression, its appeal was also

constrained by its own policies, most notably its refusal to prioritize the specific concerns of youth workers in strike situations. Moreover, the JC's efforts to attract the working class outside of the factory were limited; its embrace of cultural and leisure pursuits, for instance, was tempered by its ferocious critique of "bourgeois" sporting events like the Tour de France and a relentless politicization of worker sport as a means of defending the Soviet Union. Given these priorities, Whitney argues, it is hardly surprising that the JC's membership was numerically limited and almost entirely male. The few women who joined the JC were expected to comport themselves as if they were men, participating fully in demonstrations and strikes. In short, the JC promoted an image of revolutionary, masculine virility that limited its appeal to a small portion of the French working class until the mid-1930s.

In contrast to the Communists, who attempted to mobilize youth for the revolutionary class struggle, the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne emerged in the 1920s with the aim of enlisting young workers to carry out a "peaceful revolution of the spirit" (81). The Catholic Church had, of course, sought to counter the claims of the Third Republic on youth in a variety of ways prior to World War I, notably through the creation of sporting associations (*patronages*) and the establishment of *colonies de vacances*. After the war, however, a younger generation of chaplains envisioned a more direct relationship between the Church and the working masses. From the founding moment of its French sections in 1926, the JOC targeted young workers only, not young Catholics more broadly. Concerned with the moral and religious dangers that adolescent employees faced in the workplace, and the perceived attraction of communism, the JOC sought to "transform every aspect" of the life and values of the young worker through study and discussion (p. 93). *Jocistes*, as they were called, were also encouraged to avoid politicized strike activity, respect women, and remain vigilant against immorality.

Unlike the Communists, the JOC also actively courted young working women, as evidenced by the birth of the JOCF in 1928. In one of the most compelling portions of her narrative, Whitney demonstrates that this organization was marked by a profound contradiction. On one hand, it envisioned women as the complementary helpers to the male *Jocistes*, and promoted a political activism rooted in traditionally female devotional practices. The young JOCF adherent was encouraged to defend herself from moral corruption in the workplace, prepare herself for marriage, and avoid work that might negatively impact her moral and reproductive life. Yet, on the other hand, the movement also promoted a sense of gender equality, by asserting the "spiritual dignity and equality" of women as workers (p. 131). Membership in the JOCF provided young women with a forum for public activism, and trained them to run meetings, give speeches, and defend their rights in public. Even those young female Catholics who later migrated to the Left credited the organization for its formative role in their development. The members of the JOCF, according to Whitney, thus did not passively follow the dictates of their leaders, but extracted what they found useful and ignored or minimized elements of their organization's doctrine that did not suit them.

Until the early 1930s, however, Catholic and Communist youth movements alike struggled to gain numerical traction within the working class. Yet the twin shocks of the National Socialist takeover in Germany and the economic struggles during the Depression transformed the JC and JOC into mass organizations. Whitney painstakingly traces the ideological shifts within the French Communist Party after 1933, leading to its eventual participation in the anti-fascist Popular Front coalition and a changed approach to youth mobilization. The JC now sought to expand its appeal by championing the demands of young students and farmers, and by promoting demands for access to culture, education and leisure. When the Popular Front gained a parliamentary majority in 1936, the JC staged large demonstrations within Parisian stadiums and supported the efforts of Léon Blum's government to promote heightened youth access to cultural opportunities and leisure, from subsidized train travel to the beaches and the mountains to flying clubs that sought to democratize aviation. Moreover, the Popular Front incarnation of the Jeunesse Communiste also adopted more mainstream attitudes towards family politics and gender roles. For one, the JC demanded aid for young couples hoping to start a family. For another, the UJFF – the newly-founded female branch of the young Communist movement – promoted conventional visions

of femininity. As Whitney argues, the UJFF defined young women through marriage and motherhood, in ways that directly resembled the JOCF.

The Communist youth makeover under the Popular Front ushered in a brief period of staggering success, and posed a substantial challenge to the JOC, which itself had risen in popularity thanks to a more prominently public role during the Depression. The JOC now vocally defended workers' rights and mitigated the effects of unemployment through its own job center. This public defense of workers helped the organization gain support from youth who might have (in a previous decade) mocked its moral and religious dimensions. During the Popular Front era, the JOC resisted Communist attempts to woo Catholic militants by insisting on political neutrality, promoting leisure and cultural activities, and resolutely championing relief for the unemployed. Nonetheless, the young Catholics also rivaled the JC in staging large-scale political festivity. The 1937 open-air demonstration and mass in conjunction with the tenth anniversary of the JOC, Whitney maintains, were designed to simultaneously heighten the commitment of its militants, and project the image of a powerful and disciplined movement of working-class Catholics to the rest of the nation (p. 241).

*Mobilizing Youth* thus offers an invaluable assessment of the place of youth in interwar France. It fills a needed void in the existing historiography, which has concentrated on youth in interwar Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union. While the Third Republic itself did not heavily promote youth affairs like its totalitarian neighbors, Whitney's work demonstrates that non-governmental actors, namely Communists and Catholics, made young men and women a central part of the political discourse. On one level, this fundamental insight pushes historians to think critically about a key cultural space for the development of mass politics in interwar France. On another level, it allows scholars to think about the history of French Communism and French Catholicism in tandem throughout this period, rather than treating the two as separate and unrelated entities. By clearly proving the reciprocal influence of the JOC and the JC upon each other, Whitney makes the case for particular points of convergence between the two organizations (her analysis of shared visions of working-class gender relations is especially revelatory). What emerges, in short, is a portrait of common overarching themes and obsessions surrounding youth in interwar French politics, a valuable counterweight to the standard narrative of political polarization and fracture under the late Third Republic.

At the same time, Whitney's comparison of young Catholics and young Communists also reveals the effective limits of youth mobilization in the interwar period. Even as Catholics and Communists alike trumpeted their commitment to *jeunesse*, both the JC and JOC reserved ultimate authority for the adults who ran these organizations and dictated their strategy. Whitney's work, in this domain, proves that youth themselves did not really enjoy much institutional power within either the JC or JOC. The irony of the 1920s and 1930s, then, was that the largest youth movements ultimately promoted the interests of their parent organizations more than any particular agenda driven by the needs of adolescents and young adults.

While it devotes much of its attention to the process of mobilizing youth, and the aspirations of JOC and JC leaders concerning their young charges, Whitney's work also grapples with the social experience of the participants in these organizations. In this regard, *Mobilizing Youth* is most successful in its chapters on the experience of young women; Whitney draws on published memoirs and personal interviews with former JOCF and UJFF activists to great effect. Her sections on the young male experience in the JOC and JC, in contrast, are less comprehensive, perhaps due to source limitations or a lack of comparable oral histories. While the reader is left to assume that young male Catholic workers and young male Communists also responded to the wishes of their leaders somewhat selectively, akin to the JOCF militants, Whitney's narrative would have been even richer had it been able to look more evenly at all the youth groups under examination here.

Whitney's work also provokes questions about the overall significance of interwar youth movements that merit future consideration. While the JOC and JC may have been the most significant organizations of their kind in interwar France in numerical terms, at least by the end of the Popular Front, they were clearly functioning alongside a wide variety of other youth movements. Whitney briefly acknowledges the influence of fascist youth movements on the JC, but this reader, at least, wanted more of an analysis of how Communist and Catholic approaches to mobilizing young people, in turn, might have impacted and shaped other similarly-minded groups. In terms of chronological scope, too, Whitney's work ends a bit abruptly: the conclusion briefly mentions developments under Vichy, where the JOC tentatively supported the new regime (at least until 1942) and the JC was marginalized and its leaders arrested. *Mobilizing Youth* does not clearly indicate what happened to either organization after the war. Yet, as Richard Jobs has demonstrated, the politics of youth did not disappear after 1945; the idea of "youthfulness" resided at the heart of the Fourth Republic's strategies to regenerate the nation.[1] While it would be unrealistic to ask Whitney to extend her study into the postwar era, her work's claim for the importance of youth movements in the interwar period would be clearer if the links with the 1940s and 1950s were more fully developed.

Overall, *Mobilizing Youth* offers a compelling and long-overdue analysis of the two most numerically significant youth movements in interwar France. It demonstrates that while young people were contested and mobilized by different actors, the politics of youth also represented a point of convergence across the political spectrum, with the JOC and JC increasingly resembling each other by the end of the interwar era. Whitney's work convincingly reminds historians that the attempts to speak the "fresh and lively language of youth" (to quote from a 1935 Communist directive) were at the heart of interwar French politics and society.

#### NOTE

[1] Richard Ivan Jobs, *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 3

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