



Childhood in the Promised Land: Working Class Movements and the Colonies de Vacances in France, 1880-1960. Laura Lee Downs. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. 412 pp.

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Beginning in the late 19th century, *colonies de vacances* were established in rural France as summer retreats for working-class children. The movement, like America's Fresh Air programs, sent urban youngsters to the country to reinvigorate their health and to connect them with the rural environment. The colonies, however, were intended to do much more than simply provide summer days at the seashore or idyllic weeks surrounded by nature. Organizers—Catholics, Socialists, and Communists—each had a distinct social and political agenda based on their diverse visions of what society was, and what it could be. Although the author, Laura Lee Downs, does not explicitly refer to the wide applications of social engineering ideology that began in the late 1800s, the *colonie* movement certainly reflected the belief that children's environments could be manipulated to produce defined and desirable outcomes.

The *colonies de vacances* are examined within the context of rival political and social philosophies, separation of church and state, private and local welfare initiatives, and differing theories related to child development and education. A fascinating thread running through the narrative is the position of the rural peasant class in the movement. Chastised for poor habits of hygiene and suspected of avarice by urban organizers, peasant households were praised, on the other hand, for their familial environment. And, they proved essential during the first phase of *colonie* implementation. Class consciousness and divisions are also discussed in relation to the "trickle up" process that expanded the movement to include middle-class children by the late 1940s. In fact, the author concludes that the *colonie* movement, legitimized by the middle class, was appropriated by the central government to provide the basis for France's modern-day welfare state.

This is a complex study, well presented and documented. The footnotes deserve to be read as a narrative unto themselves, and the inclusion of personal stories in the text adds a child voice amid often contentious adult dialogue and organizers' pronouncements that occasionally bog down in minutia. Given the many social, cultural, and political changes in France between 1880 and 1960, the author faced a daunting task in providing guideposts for readers who might, for example, be unfamiliar with the application of Marxist theory or the social politics of the Popular



Front prior to World War II. For the most part, broad brushes of historical background inform major events while changes on the local level are more elaborately dissected.

Childhood in the Promised Land offers an original, comparative history. A movement that began for the working-class became an expected childhood experience for middle-class children, and only in the recent past did the *colonies de vacances* begin to fade. The intricacies of differing viewpoints among political theorists, educators, and social reformers, as well as shifting cultural expectations over eighty years, may sometimes overwhelm the reader, but this is a story worth pursuing. Certainly Downs strongly reminds us that political ideology and social experimentation are inextricably tied to how societies define and construct childhood experiences.

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