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"What future for social protection in France? The case of the 'colonies de vacances'"

I see this paper as a contribution to the theoretical dimension of yesterday's opening discussion, in particular, to something that I think Patrick Joyce may have been getting at when he spoke about replacing a vision of the social as a fixed, underlying and determinative "framework structure" with a horizontal view that looks across society at a given moment and maps the interconnections among actors, and the distribution of agency across social space. I'd like to do this by looking at the origins and development of France's vast and variegated network of *colonies de vacances* (rural and seaside holiday camps for working class children); an apparently minor object that in fact offers an important window onto French society across time. For the history of the *colonies de vacances* movement has much to tell us about changing understandings of childhood and the needs and rights of children; about children's relationship to and positioning with respect to their families, to society and to the state; about the shifting relationships between rural and urban France across a long twentieth century (1880-2015); and about how processes of human development (physical, social and psychological) have been understood and the broader kinds of social education deemed necessary for that development.

At a methodological level, this research takes as its point of departure a horizontal vision of the social as a series of interactions that can be mapped across space. But I take this insight a step further by refusing to place my object of study in a pre-determined social and national space. Rather, I look at how the object itself – the *colonie de vacances* – constructed a new social space that connected rural and urban, local and national, around the emergent figure of the working class child as a bearer of particular rights: for social protection,

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education and the conditions necessary for her full physical and psychological/emotional development.

The research I will be presenting today develops a notion – that of para-political spaces of social protection – as I first discovered them while working on the *colonies de vacances* movement in France. The *colonies* are holiday camps for working-class children, organized since the late nineteenth century by civil society organizations (both religious and secular) and by municipal associations. These latter consist, partly or entirely of working-class adults from the commune. As such, they constitute an effort to create within the confines of the capitalist and bourgeois Republic a distinctively working-class space for the education and welfare of local children. On this para-political space, actors from divergent spaces in society (Catholics, Communists, anticlerical Republicans) created over time a novel institution, that of the *colonie de vacances* as a space for children's health, leisure and education. They did so via a *jeu d'émulation*, a game that was both competitive and imitative, as they eyed each other's work, trading ideas and models of action, techniques and institutional forms even as they competed for the hearts, minds and bodies of the same working-class children. As is so often the case in a society shaped by republican notions of equality, this institution, created to extend the benefits of long summer holidays to the nation's most needy and disinherited children, gradually trickled upward to the middle class, as the kind of social education that these child collectivities assures came to seem a valuable and vital experience to the parents of those middle-class children.

So the institution of *colonies de vacances* is a kind of collective invention created by women and men hailing from a wide range of political, religious and ideological spaces in the civil society. What they all had in common was close proximity to the poor children whose health and well being the *colonie* was intended to preserve and promote. The problem that the *colonies* were invented to address - namely the poor health of urban working-class children – as well as the solution – long holidays in the countryside or by the sea - were thus identified and defined by non-state actors. Moreover, the *colonie* would never lose its character as an institution of civil society. For if the French state saw the *colonies* as a decisive – indeed,

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strategic – public health intervention, one that spoke directly to the demographic future of the nation, and supported many of them accordingly, it nonetheless chose to leave the organization and operation of these key institutions of children's health and welfare in the hands of private and semi-public (municipal) actors.

What made the existence and shape of France's para-political space come clear for me was my decision to expand the comparative study of *colonies* outward from the republican, Catholic and left-wing initiatives that by 1920 constituted the heart of the *colonie* movement to embrace the extensive network of camps set up by the extreme right-wing, anti-parliamentary and ultra nationalist Croix de feu movement in the mid-1930s. Indeed, it was the concerted effort of the Croix de Feu and its successor, the Parti social français (PSF) to enter onto this para-political space as equal players in the mid-to-late 1930s that laid bare an idea that had clearly underpinned my previous work, but which I had never clearly theorized, and that is the idea that the kind of social service that a *colonie de vacances* represents – assuring the health, well-being, education and leisure of a vulnerable population, in this case, poor and working class children – is addressed in a space where state and civil society groups meet. Approaching things this way thus permits a wider, grassroots approach to what we call the welfare state, something that was constructed as much from the ground up as the other way around.

This is a space that was first opened up in France with the creation of the *caisses des écoles*(funds intended to promote attendance in the public schools) around the Third Republic's nascent national network of secular, obligatory and free primary schools. First created at the end of the Second Empire, the *Caisses* were made obligatory in 1881-2, at the same moment the republican primary schools were created. It would be another seventy years before Catholic schools would gain access to these funds; a fact which reminds us that France's para-political space of social protection, as it first arose around the cause of educating working-class children, was crucially shaped by the "wars of religion" that raged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries between anticlerical, secularizing republicans and a Church that was, initially, quite hostile to such efforts.

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What is interesting to see is how the French solution to the problem of the Church's imposing public presence was *laïcité*, that is, the systematic confinement of all religious activity to the private sphere – no more religious processions, no more catechism in schools, no more teaching orders, and, in some very radical towns, priests could not wear their soutanes (robes) in the streets. But the law that sealed the deal was less the official separation of Church and State (1905-6) than the law on associations of 1901, which opened the way for the creation of intermediary, civil society associations in France, and which lay Catholic groups, especially social Catholic groups, ran with. For we are just eight years after the papal encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1893), Leon XIII's famous declaration that the church had to "go to the people" and ease the sufferings that rampant capitalist industrial development had imposed on them. *Rerum novarum* sent a wave of energy through the lay Catholic world, where a host of initiatives like Marc Sagnier's *Sillon* blossomed overnight. Catholic settlement houses (*centres sociaux*) sprang up in poor neighborhoods across the cities of France, and Catholic parishes in poor districts began organizing *patronages* (after school programs) and *colonies de vacances* in earnest, in order to re-christianize the working-class from the ground up and save children from the republican "schools without God".

Within a few years, socialist municipalities (and, after WWI, communist ones as well) would begin organizing their own municipal colonies, which took their place inside larger, municipal structures of health and welfare provision (social housing, open-air schools for tubercular children, dispensaries, public baths) aimed at preserving the health and well-being of the local population (France's famous *municipalités providences*, which would thrive in the interwar period). The Left thus scrambled onto a para-political space of social protection that was already scored by the fundamental cleavage between Catholics and *laïques*, redoubling the political divisions that cut across this space.

By the mid-1930s, then, France already had a long tradition of ensuring various forms of social protection via different kinds of civil society/state partnerships, in which the initiatives, organization and energies were generated by a range of civil society associations, while the State provided the legal framework, subventions and, on occasion, the designation 'public utility' ('*œuvre reconnue d'utilité publique*'), a label that facilitated fund-raising on

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the part of those organizations and associations that wore it. The *colonies de vacances* are but one vibrant and richly documented example. The *caisses des écoles*, created in the second half of the nineteenth century in order to assist poor children in fulfilling their *obligation scolaire* via distribution of shoes, clothing, textbooks, and provision of school lunches and summer holidays, are another; the *Secours national*, first organized in August of 1914 to coordinate charitable assistance to civilian populations in time of war, is yet another. All of these organizations arose and took root in a space that lies at the confluence of public and private. Many, like the *colonies*, were the fruit of private and semi-public initiative; others, like the *caisses des écoles* and *Secours national*, were born of a state initiative but depended on the energetic participation of private citizens and associations.

Over time, initiatives coming from both civil society and the state have together defined France's para-political space of social protection which, to this day, teems with associations that deliver vital health, educational and cultural services. Curious, then that this 'French' way of doing welfare, one that blends private initiative with public support, has for so long travelled unseen by welfare state specialists, who too often see in the French welfare state merely another incarnation of that nation's long-standing propensity for hyper-centralization and top-down initiatives.[1]

This manner of providing social protection carries great benefits, for it is grounded in the mobilization of civil society around the education, health and welfare of vulnerable

[1] See, for example, Peter Baldwin's otherwise excellent *The Politics of Social Solidarity. Class Bases of the European Welfare States, 1875-1975*, Cambridge 1990; François Ewald, *L'état providence*, Paris 1986; John Ambler, *The French Welfare State: Surviving Social and Ideological Change*, New York 1991; Henri Hatzfeld, *Du paupérisme à la sécuritésociale: 1850-1940*, 2e ed., Nancy 1989; Pierre Rosanvallon, *L'Etat en France de 1789 à nos jours*, Paris 1990. Even Paul Dutton's important book on the pre-1945 welfare state, which emphasizes the role of mutuelles and family associations in shaping France's unique blend of public and private in organizing welfare, seems to ignore the role of associations in delivering social services. Paul Dutton, *Origins of the French Welfare State: The Struggle for Social Reform in France 1914-1947*, Cambridge 2002. By focusing on municipal provision in the city of Lyon, Axelle Brodiez-Dolino, *Combattre la pauvreté. Vulnérabilités sociales et sanitaires de 1880 à nos jours*, Paris 2013; and Timothy Smith, *Creating the Welfare State in France, 1880-1940*, Montréal 2003, see more readily the role of associations in creating and delivering social services, though neither goes so far as to speak of a para-political space of social protection. This space resembles what would later (in the 1980s) come to be called the 'mixed economy of welfare,' in which the state, the voluntary sector, the family and the market all play roles. Jane Lewis, 'The Voluntary Sector in the Mixed Economy of Welfare,' in David Gladstone (ed.), *Before Beveridge: Welfare Before the Welfare State*, London 1999, 10-17; and Lewis, *The Voluntary Sector, the State and Social Work in Britain: The Charity Organisation Society/Family Welfare Association since 1869*, Aldershot 1995.

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populations. As such, it contributes to building social solidarity. But it also carries certain costs, notably the gradual (perhaps inevitable) politicization of social action that tends to accompany such mobilizations. One can go even further and argue that such politicization actually reshaped the entire domain of social protection. Hence, what had, in the nineteenth century been understood as a distinct sphere of public life, in which bourgeois women and men engaged in a moralizing and charitable activity on behalf of poor and vulnerable populations, was gradually integrated over the first half of the twentieth century into a broadened understanding of what politics was fundamentally about. If actors on the Left were the first to articulate and act on the principle that organizing social welfare and ensuring the delivery of public services is a part of what a government should do for its citizens, social Catholics and actors on the nationalist Right would soon appropriate this idea as well.

But the annexation of social services to political movements was not solely a means of winning votes (though this, too, was important); it was also the enactment of a prefigurative politics in which the ideal community envisioned by the movement in question was meant to be created and lived via engagement in social and educative action. For in an age of mass politics, women and men on both Left and Right, whether animated by secularist perspectives or by religious faith, shared a common conviction that civil society could not be left to its own devices; it had to be shaped, directed, mobilized through active engagement in a range of services – social protection, cultural activities, sport, *education populaire* – that would build social solidarity according to the particular political or ideological vision held by the party or association in question.

This was most visible in the divergent material and pedagogical structures set in place by the different *oeuvres de colonies* in order to shape the long summer holidays of their children - a *république enfantine* for the communists, a *cité de Dieu* for the Catholics, a hierarchically-ordered national community, bound together by a common cult of the flag in the case of the extreme right.

But this same prefigurative politics also shaped the experiences of those young men and women who were drawn via a social engagement to work as educators (*moniteurs)* in the various *oeuvres de colonies.* This kind of social engagement could well (and often did) lead to

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their political engagement as well: 'Although I had lived among militants all my life in Ivry, it was working at the *colo des Mathes* that led me to join the Party,' recalled Lucien Laborie in 1998, looking back over a lifetime of work with the children of the communist city of Ivry. "I was first invited to work at the *colonie* in 1949, and that experience triggered my decision, because I saw then what the Communists had done <for the children>... I threw myself wholeheartedly into the life of the <Communist>association *Vacances Populaires Enfantines*, the kermesse for the benefit of the *colonie*, the tombola. Every Sunday morning we stood in the marketplace and sold tickets <for the tombola>. It was this militant activity on behalf of the *amicale des moniteurs*, and the children of Ivry, that broadened my horizons."[2]

The point was thus not merely the delivery of social services, but, crucially, the mobilization of working and middle-class activists in the creation and delivery of those services. In this way, an inert population might be transformed into an active one, but one that had been activated in the right kind of way, a *social* way that builds horizontal and/or vertical ties of solidarity, depending on the overarching political vision of the group in question. For the republican centre, welfare provisions of various kinds were seen as the responsibility of good government, for such provisions would enable citizens to freely exercise their liberties within the republican system.[3] For municipal socialists and communists, by contrast, the creation of locally-controlled institutions of health, education and welfare was a part of the larger goal of creating local forms of socialism/social solidarity that could be lived in the here and now; whereas on the Catholic and nationalist Right, provision of social services went along with missions to re-christianize and renationalize the pagan and/or 'muscovite' working classes. At the same time, the construction and staffing of such services was also part of a

[2] Interview with the author, 18 June 1998, Ivry-sur-Seine. Created in 1948 in order to assure pedagogical continuity in the colonie, the amicale grouped all young adults who worked for the city's child-care centers (Les Mathes, and the municipal patronage) in an organization that combined militant activism "in defense of childhood" with intensive pedagogical discussion (based on lectures, and on participants' practical experiences working with children) and a certain amount of socializing as well (the amicale met every Friday night, and the evening's activities often terminated in a small verre d'amitié).

[3] Ashford, *Emergence of Welfare States*, 308. See also Colette Bec, *Assistance et République. La recherche d'un nouveau contrat social sous la Troisième République*, Paris 1994; Colette Bec, *L'assistance en démocratie. Les politiques assistantielles dans la France des XIXe et XXe siècles*, Paris 1998) ; and Yannick Marec, *Vers une République sociale ? Un itinéraire d'historien. Culture, politique, patrimoine et protection sociale au XIXe et XXe siècles*, Rouen 2010.

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larger strategy for mobilizing bourgeois youth on behalf of a social and national ideal that would move them beyond the blinkered concerns of their bourgeois milieu towards a personal understanding of the needs of poor and working-class families.

France's para-political space of social protection is thus intricately bound up with the political and ideological fault-lines that cut across civil society. This is both a strength and a weakness. A strength because, as mentioned above, it facilitates civil society mobilizations among like-minded people around the cause of working-class childhood. A weakness because it can lead to the fragmentation of this vital sector along sectarian lines.

This tendency toward sharp ideological cleavage among the different *colonies de vacances* organizations was particularly in evidence from the 1890s through to the end of the Third Republic, in the summer of 1940. But it persisted in reduced form under Vichy, with the range of social service provision being significantly narrowed by the elimination of communist social services (and eventually those of the non-communist left, as well as Jewish associations, in the early 1940s). Sharper divisions would then re-emerge with the restoration of democratic politics in the early years of the Fourth Republic before gradually waning in the first decade of the Cold War, as the ideologically divergent actors in the *colonie de vacances* movement arrived gradually at a consensus around a single model. This model was collective (the last colonies that operated by family placement in peasant households, already in sharp decline during the 1930s, would disappear by the mid-1950s) and informed by a vaguely leftist pedagogical approach, rooted in the 'active', child-centred techniques of the 'new education movement.' (These latter were borne by the different networks- Catholic, *laïque* and Leftist (a fourth, extreme right-wing 'éducation-natalité' *filière*, very active in the 1930s and 40s, died out by 1960) - that trained *moniteurs* (camp councillors) and directors and disseminated programs of theatre, music, crafts, field-trips and sport across the *colonies de vacances* movement. Here, the CEMEA network, born of the Popular front and firmly anchored on the non-communist left, played a key role.)

Yet even in this period of convergence on a single model, the calming of political conflict *within* the sector did not signal the end of its politicization, which continues (to this day) to express itself by other means; notably, by the notion that the *moniteur* (today called an

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animateur) is a militant on behalf of working-class childhood: "The *moniteur* must at every moment be with his children and at every moment feel himself to be a militant," declared popular education activist Pierre Felzin 1952 as he addressed his fellow, working-class *moniteurs*on the subject of their work with the children of the communist municipality of Ivry. "He must become a militant in the cause of childhood…<and> come to view the *colo<nie de vacances>* in the larger context of social and political problems."[4] At the opposite end of the political spectrum, the right-wing nationalist social action leaders of the Croix de feu and Parti social français saw in the recruitment of bourgeois youth to their movement's social centres and *colonies de vacances* an opportunity to mobilize youth in service of an ideal, training them in 'self-sacrifice' while offering them a means to serve the nation by reaching out to its poorest members.[5]

An engagement in social action thus remained (and remains to this day) a way of living one's political convictions. For both the preliminary training that movement youth received in socio-educative techniques as well as the work with the children itself constituted a kind of political education, a stretching of horizons toward other, more vulnerable populations whose care was often conceived in political terms.

After the Second World War, the kind of political engagement that social action in the *colonie de vacances* sector represented was borne less frequently by the smaller, neighbourhood and parish-level associations that had created *colonies de vacances* in the interwar period, as these smaller, more local organisms began to have difficulty competing with the larger structures that increasingly dominated this sector after 1945. This became particularly obvious with the arrival of a new actor on the scene, the *comités d'entreprise.* Fruit of the Liberation-era welfare reforms, the *comités d'entreprise* rapidly became central players in the vast enterprise that was the postwar organization of working-class children's vacations/leisure. In these first, desperate years after the war, with housing and food, clothing

[4] Archives municipales d'Ivry, 22Z/6, Dossier 'V.P.E. Rapports, 1951-2,'Pierre Feltz, Responsable du Camp 'Valmy', Colonie des Mathes, 1952, 2, 9-10. For more on left-wing engagement via social action see Laura Lee Downs, « De la colonie 'politique' à la colonie 'educative'. Le cas de la colonie communiste d'Ivry-sur-Seine, 1925-1960 », in Luc Greffier (ed.), *Les vacances et l'animation. Espace de pratiques et représentations sociales*, Paris 2011, 131-44.

[5] AN 451 AP 131, 'Les colonies de vacances PSF,' 1938, 25-6.

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and medicine in critically short supply, the *colonie de vacances* - always a strategic site of investment for the French Republic since the institution first saw the light of day, at the end of the nineteenth century - acquired an ever-more acute centrality with the crises in public health, food and housing (malnourishment, a sharp rise in tuberculosis rates and general ill-health) that would dog the country for the next five to ten years (and arguably 20-25 years, in the case of housing). One vital element in a series of stopgap solutions for feeding and sheltering malnourished and ill-housed children while the country rebuilt itself, the *colonie de vacances* was a first step toward rebuilding the health of the nation from the ground up, by nourishing and sheltering the children of a war-torn land.[6]

The CE thus arrived on the scene at a critical moment. Alongside left-wing municipalities and the *caisses des écoles*, they would gather hundreds of thousands of children who had previously left with smaller and/or municipal colonies into well-funded company *colonies* whose pedagogical structures were organized around the kinds of leftist and progressive techniques promoted by the CEMEA and the *laïque*, left-Republican UFOVAL. One can thus hypothesize that the concentration of colonies in the hands of larger structures during the decade and a half after WWII may have played an important role in the gradual calming of sectarian political conflict on this para-political space of social protection.

But let us not forget that in the tense years following the end of the war, the national state, too, played an active role in the depoliticization of *colonies de vacances* (and of the society at large, more broadly): First in the immediate postwar years (1944-46), by its determined efforts to stabilize turbulent, near-civil war conditions by ridding the landscape of all extremist movements on both right and left (Croix de feu and PSF, the Trotskyist revolutionary party, etc.). Second, in the early years of the Cold War, when the newly restored Fourth Republic, fearing a reprise of the kinds of political polarization that had

[6] This can be judged by the sudden jump in the level of national subventions to local colonie organizations, which shot up from covering about 10% of all costs before the war to over 50% during the crucial 1945-49 period. Over the next six years, state funding to individual oeuvres de colonies would return to prewar levels, reaching 10% once again by 1956, as the state redirected funds away from individual organisms and toward the different networks (CEMEA, JPA, UFCV, UFOVAL) that organized the training of moniteurs and directeurs. In the meantime, family allocation funds, comités d'entreprises and municipalities picked up the slack, sending children whose families could not afford to pay the (generally scant) fees demanded for their child's six-to-eight-week sojourn with the local colonie.

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rendered social and political life so very conflictual in the mid-to-late 1930s France, took explicit aim at a host of Communist *colonies* on the grounds that the proletarian 'counter-education' (*contre-enseignement prolétarien*) being offered in these camps constituted an 'infringement' on children's 'moral liberty'[7](dormitories and tents being named for Mao Tse-Tung and other 'beloved militants', portraits of Stalin and Maurice Thorez hung high in the refectory, circulation of the Stockhom appeal by children from the colonie on nearby, bourgeois *stations balnéaires*).

The mayors from the 20 industrial cities in question protested vehemently, pointing out that the *colonie de vacances* is not a part of the national school system and is therefore not held to the same rules regarding a strict neutrality of religious or political opinion (*laïcité*). On the contrary, as an institution that arises from civil society, the *colonie* is by its very nature pluralistic and should reflect the diversity of civil society: "The voters have the right to choose a mayor with the political convictions that suit them…and they have the right to send their children to the *colonie* that suits them, where their children are well looked after, well-fed and enjoy the best conditions during their holidays."[8] The state's demand that communist municipalities cease their 'proletarian' education was, therefore, an infringement on their right to teach *their* children something other than the standard republican line on offer in the public schools. But the state was in no mood to negotiate and met this protest with the threat to send in the gendarmes and shut these *colonies* down by force if necessary.

What is interesting is that, even in these years of great political polarization, the state never chose to takeover the *colonies* and run them alongside the republican school, as it could so easily have done. Rather, it chose to pursue the politics of *subsidiarité* that have governed this sector from the outset, in which the initiatives rose from civil society associations and the moral, financial encouragement came from the State.

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[7] Archives Municipales d' Ivry, Secrétariat de la Jeunesse à Georges Marrane, 10 juillet 1951, cité dans les minutes de la séance du Conseil général de la Seine des 14-14 juillet 1951, reproduit dans le *Bulletin Municipal d'Ivry*, 28 juillet 1951, p 486. For a full account of the struggle between state and communist municipalities over this issue, see Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land*, ch 6.

[8] George Marrane, Séance du conseil général de la Seine des 13-14 juillet 1951, reproduit dans le *Bulletin Municipal d'Ivry*, 28 juillet 1951, 486.

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The postwar years thus saw a gradual reconfiguration of the para-political space of social protection in favour of larger structures that were more or less anchored on the left (most CE were initially controlled by the (Communist) CGT after the war, though the Catholic CFDT would gradually assume a more important role on these company-based welfare committees). Nonetheless, there were also important continuities across the period stretching from the 1930s through the mid-1970s as far as the organization and pedagogical orientation of *colonies de vacances* were concerned. In addition, the target population remained working-class, with an increasingly substantial admixture of middle-class children (sons and daughters of employés, cadres, teachers and civil servants), for whom time spent living away from home and in the company of one's peers represented an apprenticeship in the valuable art of negotiating social life.

Here, the social context (*mixité sociale et, parfois, géographique*) plus the fact that *colonie* directors and *moniteurs/animateurs* placed huge emphasis in these years on 'le vivre ensemble' as the core value of collective life in the *colonies de vacances* meant that the *colonies* met parents' aspirations for a summertime experience that would provide a bridge between family life and the wider social worlds that their children would have to learn to negotiate; an experience that could take children 'out of their mothers' skirts' and make them more autonomous and resourceful (*débrouillard*): "The *colonie de vacances* has its own, particular place in the social development of the child. Its function is complementary to that of the family and the school," wrote Marist pedagogue Philippe-Alexandre Rey-Herme in the mid-1950s. Twenty years later the communist municipalities of Bobigny and Drancy would laud the kind of social education proffered by *colonies de vacances* in remarkably similar terms: "A change of air, physical exercise, manual activities, the discovery of other milieux and that incomparable school of social education that is group life."

It is interesting to note that, at the turn of the 21st century, the 'vivre-ensemble' offered by the *colonie de vacances* remains a key source of its attraction for parents, 3/4 of whom declared in 2004 that the colo had taught their children 'the rules of social life and of solidarity,' while 65% judged that their children had grown more 'independent' as a result of the fact that "expectations in the *colonie* are organized around the transmission of the values

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of solidarity."[9] Small wonder then, that those who organize *colonies de vacances* today continue to trumpet that institution as one of the few places in society where, over a period of some weeks, the child is permanently confronted by 'others' (autrui): "At a time when the loss of social ties is widely lamented, it is good to recall that the colonies and centres de vacances have always put forth la vie collective as their primary pedagogical tool…Every child needs a social world and a time apart in which to construct him or herself, to enter into relationships with others outside the family and the school. But in the *colonie*, the point of reference is neither the school nor the family, it is a collectivity in which a group of children share the same experiences. It is, therefore, a question of constructing oneself not by 'constraint' or 'adhesion' but by being integrated into a little society of comrades of one's own age. One never forgets the time spent 'en colo.' This experience, lived collectively, has constructed within each of us the individual in progress whom the parents greet upon her return with the words 'my, how you've grown up.'"[10]

Finally, in a country where married women's labour force participation rates have always been exceptionally high, the *colonies* have also protected working class children from the dangers of the streets, dangers on which actors across the political spectrum have always agreed: ("it is better that the child live in organized groups supervised by trained *moniteurs* than hang out in the streets or in cinemas" declared one left-wing doctor in 1959.[11]

But if the organizational and pedagogical goals of the *colonie de vacances* have not shifted substantially over the past 70-80 years, the prolonged economic downturn after 1974 and subsequent (neoliberal) budget cuts during the late 1970s and 1980s produced a series of effects that have radically reshaped the *colonies* over the past thirty years to the point where I believe we can say that they have broken with the initial mission of the *colonie de vacances*, which was to assure inexpensive holidays to the children of those whom today we would call the working poor.

These effects can be summarized as follows: In the wake of prolonged economic downturn, municipalities and CE began to sell their *colonies*, often located on valuable

[9] Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land*, 337.
[10] Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land*, 336-7.
[11] Downs, *Childhood in the Promised Land*, 338.

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beachfront or alpine properties, in order to balance their budgets. They have since turned to third-party operators in order to send the local children *en colonies* that are increasingly expensive, thanks to competition from a growing commercial tourism sector. That same competition also began driving an internal transformation within the *colonies de vacances* away from the kinds of inexpensive educational projects around which they have long been organized and towards activities that have driven up the running costs - and hence the price of a séjour - in the allegedly non-commercial *colonie de vacances* (poneys, sailing, VTT, rock climbing).This at a time of waning subventions from the national state.

At the same time, assistance to working families has gradually diminished, with the result that the target *colonie* population has itself shifted away from the working poor toward children whose parents can afford to pay, on the one hand, and toward children whose families are so distressed that their *séjour en colonie* is taken over entirely by the DASS (social services), on the other. In the meantime, these *colonies de vacances* have been profoundly re-shaped by the recourse to intermediary tour operators and the loss of proximity to municipalities and neighborhoods. (Finally, the last thirty years has seen a concomitant withdrawal into family life across French society more broadly, as longer vacations for adults and the arrival of a mass consumer society promoted family vacations and/or brief day camps in the city at the expense of the child's departure to the country in the company of its peers and under the aegis of republican solidarity.)

This cumulation of cultural, social and economic factors has ended by creating a real rupture with the initial mission of the *colonie de vacances*, which was, in the words of one of its late-nineteenth century founders, to 'reverse the normal order of things' and give the privilege that is a summer *en colonie* not to the healthiest and wealthiest children but rather to the children of the poor, and, indeed to the 'puniest and sickliest' among those poor children (Cottinet). For the better part of a century, from the 1880s to the 1980s, this mission to the children of those working poor families as been central to the *colonies de vacances* movement. But for a variety of reasons, including, I think, the financial vulnerability of a social protection sector that is in fact located outside the state, on the para-political space of social protection, this traditional target population is no longer in a position to send its

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children on holidays in *colonies* that are increasingly serving the needs of middle class children, whose parents value the social education assured by the *colonies*' 'vivre-ensemble', and children from utterly impoverished families, who are sent thanks to the support of the DASS.

This was brought home to me during a radio interview I did in the spring of 2012 on France Inter. Near the end of the show, when people call in their questions and comments, a woman of perhaps 40 or 45 years of age called in to tell the story of her family. She and her husband were both SMICards (minimum wage earners), she told us, and though both of them had been sent *en colonie* when they were young, her own daughter, 17 years old, had never once been on holiday and indeed, had never seen the ocean. In the brief decades that separated the parents' childhoods from their daughter's, the world had changed, become a far more hostile place for the children of the working poor.

From its very origins, the colonie de vacances movement never ceased to promote the cause of working-class children's holidays as a matter of right, and of social justice. 'That the children of the people may one day soon scatter by turns to the mountains or the seaside' wrote pioneering *colonie* organizer Edmond Cottinet in 1886. In the profound crisis that post-oil shock transformations and subsequent neoliberal reforms have wrought in the very soul of the *colonie* movement, the claim that vacations for all children is a matter of social justice – an idea that appeared to have won the day in the post-1945 era – has once again returned to the center of *colonie de vacances* discourse, as militants in the cause of working-class childhood brandish such slogans as 'the departure of all children: a question of social justice' and point to the growing inequality of access to vacations that, since the late 1990s has divided children of the poor from their better-off peers.

The most recent incarnation of such protest, summarized in a parliamentary report of July 2013 decrying the transformation and decline of *colonies de vacances* over the past thirty to forty years, reveals a number of things, including the significant fact that citizen and politicians alike continue to see the *colonies* as a key element in France's cherished yet

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menaced welfare state. This despite the fact that everyone knows the *colonies* lie at the heart of civil society, in what the French call 'la sphere associative'

But perhaps people are not wrong in making this apparent category confusion/error. For France's para-political space of social protection has long delivered important social services to that nation's most vulnerable populations – children, the elderly, the homeless or disabled. In other words, precisely to those who languish outside the reach of more formal, work-based social insurance schemes. But as my very rapid survey of this one sector on a vibrant para-political space that teems with social services (Restos du Coeur or Médecins sans frontiers, to name but two of the more well-known cases) demonstrates, the para-political space of social protection is particularly vulnerable at precisely those moments when it is most needed, that is, at times of economic downturn. Is there not some way to capture the force of this way of doing things, in which the principle of *subsidiarité* guarantees both proximity to the people being assisted and a certain, militant energy (as well as a more democratic organization) in the job of assuring their well-being, without ceding to the economic and institutional fragility that existence on the para-political space of social protection implies?