'The *cure d'exercice*: understanding the therapeutic value of sport and physical exercise in the Paris region, c. 1880-1950'

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'[L]a gymnastique est une véritable arme médicale', Dr Henri Diffre,1934[1]

Introduction

In 21st-century France, physicians are able to prescribe physical exercise to certain categories of patient in the same way they do drugs.[2] Such a state of affairs raises the question of when, how and why physical exercise came to be understood within the medical profession and beyond as a therapeutic rather than purely leisure pursuit. This is the primary question that this chapter seeks to address. Without wishing to present an origin story that traces bold lines of influence across a long chronology, I argue that it was in the interwar decades that the institutional frameworks that facilitated this move were established in France, as long-lived medical, intellectual, and cultural currents gained deeper traction on the decision making of public powers in the wake of the First World War.

One might argue that organized sport and physical exercise had long been promoted – whether by commercial, associational or state actors – on the basis of their potential health benefits to individual bodies and to the national community. In the 1880s, the large-scale associative life around sport came into being just as the new Third Republic introduced compulsory primary schooling and universalized military service in which some kind of physical education was incorporated. If the *omnisport* associations of the late nineteenth century were mainly intended to meet the growing popular interest in the practice of codified sports, French state interest in the value of physical education was less innocent. In the wake of French military defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and the much-publicized stagnation of the live birth-rate, the idea that there was a necessary link between individual physical fitness (for both sexes) and national strength became deeply entrenched among political figures as well as in the medical profession. Boys needed to build muscular strength and endurance so they could become effective soldiers, while girls required bodily resilience for the purposes of reproduction. Such notions seeped into the rapidly growing popular press of the era, and thus circulated around a very large audience. [3]

The further physical trauma of the First World War, with its exceptionally high casualty rates among soldiers and unknown impacts on the adults and children who endured the conflict as civilians, compounded these features and prompted calls among political leaders and the physicians who had their ear to ensure that physical education programmes in schools were subject

to such measures as compulsory medical inspections for pupils.[4] Given this climate, it is easy to understand why the Paris-based physician Dr Henri Diffre, who took a special interest in children's physical education, could reach in the mid-1930s for the idea that gymnastics was a 'veritable branch of medicine', and to do so in language that evoked it as a key weapon: against tuberculosis, the physical effects of poor living conditions, and ultimately – not only for Diffre but for many others – the 'decline of the race'.[5] Thus by the interwar years, recognition of the therapeutic benefits of sport and physical exercise was already widespread and understood by politicians, medical practitioners and journalists, among many others, in terms of a degeneration that could be reversed by the acquisition of physical fitness that – via a neo-Lamarckian logic with special traction in France – would be passed on to their offspring. There was apparently nothing that the *cure d'exercice* [exercise cure] could not ameliorate.

As this chapter will show, however, while many interwar instances of the 'exercise cure' betray such social hygienist underpinnings they cannot be reduced to them. In what follows, I will demonstrate what the investment in the therapeutic use of physical exercise involved in the early to mid-twentieth century through two sets of grassroots examples. On the one hand, I treat the *écoles de plein-air* [open-air schools] that proliferated in the Paris region in the 1920s and 1930s, but which faded rapidly after the Second World War. On the other, I present the work of a tenacious civic association called La Maison pour Tous [Home for All], dedicated to the healthful education of children that was created in the wake of the First World War and continued its activity through the 1970s. Although these two institutions had distinct features, not least in relation to the place of formal education within them, their attitude to the value of physical exercise was similar.

In delineating and ultimately explaining the interwar uptick in the deployment of a state-sanctioned 'exercise cure', the chapter seeks to go beyond seeing these initiatives purely as the expression of a hygienist concern with staving off the decline of the race. That language does feature at times in the rhetoric of the organizers, but there is more to see and understand. Firstly, given that it was usually deployed in conjunction with other natural therapies (sun, air, water, rest and relaxation), the exercise cure points to the influence of medical naturism in these efforts to enhance the health of children and therefore to the early 20th-century neo-Hippocratic resurgence. Secondly, those providing the exercise cure habitually conveyed an implicit and sometimes explicit sense of a connection between body and mind, which is apparent in the common emphasis on rest and relaxation alongside physical movement, and which has not yet been fully recognized by scholars. Pushing at how contemporaries understood this connection goes some way to illuminating how 'wellbeing' emerged as a category of historical understanding across the period. Finally, exploring (public) open-air schools in comparative perspective with a (private) civic

association highlights the mutual dependency of public and private realms in the sphere of physical education.[6] Open-air schools engaged municipal actors who often worked in conjunction with the leaders of private bodies, while public subsidies flowed into private enterprises. The close association of public and private sector personnel in this work also brought cooperation and cross-fertilization across different forms of expertise, notably political, medical, and pedagogical, which helps to explain the traction and longevity of the ideas that underpinned the exercise cure.

The open-air schools movement and associative life

The First World War was decisive in the development of the *écoles de plein-air* movement, and it was also the prompt for the creation of La Maison pour Tous, a civic association based in the 5th *arrondissement* of Paris that grew out of social Catholic circles and began to take shape in 1919.[7] Both the French state and the Paris municipality were alarmed about the unknown impact of the war on the bodies and minds of impoverished children, so many of whom had been subject to the emotional pain of family separation and bereavement, poor nutrition, and the psychological trauma of bombardment.[8] To make matters worse, urban France was still blighted by exceptionally high rates of tuberculosis. In 1919, the Seine Department opened an office of hygiene, whose role it was to find a means of ameliorating this situation. The medical inspection of the region's school children was an obvious place to start. It was not long before the public powers landed on the potential of hybrid medical-educational institutions like open-air schools, which could serve as 'preventoria' (i.e., minimize the risk of children developing TB) while providing formal academic classes so that educational development was not neglected.[9]

The first international congress on open-air schools held in 1922 turbocharged the issue. Organized by the Ligue pour l'éducation en plein air [League for Outdoors Education] and held at the Paris Faculty of Medicine in June 1922, the event secured the support of state ministers, and its speakers included academic researchers, school medical inspectors and directors of existing open-air schools, many of whom extolled the merits of physical exercise and heliotherapy. A festival of physical culture held at the Arènes de Lutèce in the 5th *arrondissement* was incorporated into its weekend programme.[10] In the same year, the Minister of Public Instruction stressed the importance, especially for children who were 'malingre, débile, chétif' [sickly, imbecilic, puny] of taking both lessons and physical exercise in the fresh air, ideally in specialist schools created on the periphery of cities and under medical supervision.[11] The Paris municipality invested in several such establishments alongside *colonies scolaires* [school camps], holiday excursions and *terrains de sports* [sports grounds], based in part on the social Darwinist logic that such action would 'fortifier la

race' and prepare Parisian children to 'lutter pour la vie' [struggle for life].[12] Their number soon proliferated. By the end of 1922 there were several *écoles de plein air* operating in Paris, whether permanent or temporary (i.e., only open in the summer term). To accord with parental wishes and to keep down costs, which were shared by the Ville de Paris and the *caisses des écoles* [schools budget], the model that dominated was the day (rather than boarding) school.[13] For example, the Ligue d'éducation en plein air ran an open-air school for up to 50 children, many of them war orphans, in the boulevard Jourdan in the 14th *arrondissement*. Another was located on the historic fortifications in the rue des Epinettes near the Porte de Clichy in the 17th *arrondissement,* receiving 80 children at a time. Academic classes were kept light, with the largest place reserved for physical exercise and free play.[14] The public powers' commitment to such initiatives endured, and by the end of the 1930s there were dozens of open-air schools around the country.[15]

By the 1930s, even the private La Maison pour Tous benefited from state, municipal and communal funding for its efforts to improve the physical and social lives of socio-economically deprived children through open-air activity among other means.[16] The association had more in common with *colonies de vacances* [holiday camps], youth organizations like the Scouts and the *maisons de culture* [art centres] that proliferated under the Popular Front era in the 1930s than with open-air schools.[17] Yet it shared much with them, not only the important place of sun, air, water and exercise in its programme of activities but the rationale underpinning them. It also operated on similar pedagogical principles, in other words, child-centred learning that focused on observational and experiential methods, and which was attuned to the importance of emotional and psychological development. Both open-air schools and La Maison pour Tous subscribed to the so-called 'new education' that dominated progressive educational circles in the interwar years.[18] Recognizing the shared elements of otherwise quite different endeavours helps us to appreciate the depth and strength of the political, cultural, and intellectual currents that generated such faith in the therapeutic potential of physical exercise in this era.

Though focused on the Paris region, this chapter cannot be a purely Parisian story, nor even a French one. First, the impetus for open-air schools came from other nations, especially Germany, but also Switzerland, Italy and Great Britain among others, just as French ideas about physical exercise were borrowed from elsewhere, too.[19] Even the so-called 'French method' of physical education was eclectic, with its origins in Swedish gymnastics however much its proponents sought to correct and improve on it.[20] The expectation that the natural environment, including climate, would cure the ill and maintain the health of those free of disease was also a transnational phenomenon. Secondly, the examples discussed in this chapter proliferated around the country. Paris was not unique in developing a *cure d'exercice* [exercise cure]: *écoles de plein air* were

established in several provincial cities, notably in the flagship open-air school established in Lyon in 1907 under the aegis of the city's long-serving mayor and deputy Edouard Herriot.[21] Finally, the holiday camps and other excursions organized by La Maison pour Tous involved travel. The open-air schools that peppered the perimeter of the old Parisian fortifications may have been only a bus ride away from the children's homes, but for *colonies de vacances*, Parisian children were usually sent away from the capital for exercise and fresh air 'cures', often to coastal areas deemed beneficial to health, whether in Normandy, where La Maison de Tous owned two properties, or the Côte d'Azur. The same might be said for thermal resorts, some of which developed exercise cures for children, who visited from all over the country.[22] Influence and experience in this field was therefore multidirectional as well as transnational.

Deploying the exercise cure

In the scholarly emphasis on the hygienist and sometimes outright eugenicist underpinnings of the interwar drive to medicalize physical education, one might forget to ask how the *cure d'exercice* was actually supposed to work. On what specific physiological or other basis might systematic physical movement improve individual health? What variety, if any, existed in contemporaries' understanding of its therapeutic mechanisms, and how was their work rooted in (or resonant of) varied medical traditions? First, it is striking that the physical environment in which the *cure d'exercice* was to take place was itself usually deemed part of the therapy. When it came to long-distance excursions and *colonies de vacances,* locations either at high altitude or on the coast – as was the case for all thermal and climatic resorts – were prized for the purity and freshness of their air. The Maison pour Tous association may have been based in a crowded, noisy street in central Paris, but its regular Sunday outings and the coastal holidays it organized over Easter and summer vacations brought a natural tonic for its members. The association acquired two spacious, leafy properties with surrounding land in the 1920s and 1930s – in Montmartin-sur-Mer (Manche) and Saint-Sylvain (Calvados) – where young girls and boys could spend plentiful hours in the fresh air, taking part in sport and other physical activities, and leading 'the simple and healthy life of campers'.[23]

The emphasis on air quality and physical environment was there, too, in the open-air schools movement. Just outside Paris, the Ecole de Gally-Trianon *école de plein-air* created near the Grand Parc de Versailles by Dr Wapler in 1920 was located on a farm, its sheltered courtyard perfect for allowing children to take their 2-hr daily siesta in fresh air.[24] Trees and plants were crucial for the supposedly calming effects of immersion in the natural landscape, and directors strove to create a rustic habitat as far as possible, even for the schools situated on the nineteenth-

century fortifications of the city. 'Bastion 15' in the boulevard Mortier in the 20th arrondissement, for example, comprised wooden barracks and tents for shelter that catered to sixty children of both sexes.[25] Housing the open-air schools in such basic, even makeshift and rickety accommodation on the edges of the city at least had the virtue of dissolving the barrier between inside and outside that might otherwise have kept children encased in the rigid confines of a conventional school. That was the rationale, too, for the open-air schools that were built on modernist architectural principles in the 1930s, with huge sliding glass walls designed to achieve a similar effect. The well-known *école de plein air* built in the western Parisian municipality of Suresnes in the mid-1930s is the French exemplar in this respect, even if it remained exceptional.[26] Another way in which the 'natural' was incorporated into these establishments was through gardening. In many open-air schools in the Paris region, children were responsible for tending plants in small patches of earth that might even yield some of the herbs and vegetables consumed for lunch.[27] Their work not only took children into the fresh air, therefore. It was also productive, developing discipline and a sense of community as well as the kind of physical exertion that would make them fitter. Thus gardening in the open-air schools functioned doubly as moral and physical education, as it did, too, in La Maison pour Tous.[28]

This emphasis on the therapeutic value of the open spaces, fresh air and natural landscapes in which physical exercise took place resonated with the ethos of interwar medical naturism. If the great emphasis on personal and domestic cleanliness in both the open-air schools movement and La Maison pour Tous speaks to the entrenchment of germ theory in the wake of the so-called bacteriological revolution of the late nineteenth century, the conviction in the therapeutic value of the natural resonated with much older neo-Hippocratic medical traditions that rebounded in the early decades of the twentieth century among physicians who emphasized the importance to health not only of germs but of climate and individual constitution, or what was sometimes called terrain. In this view, bodies should be understood as more than the sum of their parts: so-called materialist science had failed to grasp both environmental influences on health and the intangible power of the human spirit.[29] The rest of this section will demonstrate how the exercise cure was deployed in open-air schools and in La Maison pour Tous, paying attention to how, in keeping with the medical naturism that appears to have animated it, the cure was intended to be combined with other natural therapies involving air, sun and relaxation, and in which emotional and psychological needs were addressed as well as physical ones.

Physical movement

If games and sports featured as a weekly or seasonal highlight in open-air schools and La Maison pour Tous, physical movement was incorporated into their everyday programmes. The situation at Bastion 47, led by the school medical inspector Dr Génévrier in the 17th *arrondissement*, was typical. In the early 1920s, some 60 primary school-aged children of both sexes caught the bus from a local dispensary to the school's premises on the fortifications at the Porte de Courcelles, returning each day around 7pm. Having changed into a 'costume de cure' [one-piece tunic] they undertook gymnastics at 9am and then again for 45 minutes each afternoon.[30] The same was true at the school at Bastion 15*,* run by another medical inspector of schools, Dr Dufestel, under the aegis of the Office d'hygiène sociale de la Seine [Seine Office of Social Hygiene] and the *caisse des écoles* of the 20th *arrondissement*. Only 2-3 hours were devoted to academic classes each day, with much of the rest reserved for games and gymnastics.[31] (See Figure 1.) In the open-air school at Bastion 42 in the boulevard Bessières (20th *arrondissesment*), the children began every day with a focus on breathing, before engaging in a series of physical movements carefully tailored to the perceived physical capabilities of each child.[32] (See Figure 2.)

The emphasis on breathing was ubiquitous within open-air schools and in much physical educational theory of the period. It was a form of corrective respiratory gymnastics that echoed the model developed in the nineteenth century by the Swedish physical education specialist Per Henrik Ling, and which informed the eclectic 'French method'.[33] The aim was to improve lung capacity, and thus strengthen the resistance of the child to tuberculosis. One advocate of open-air schools saw them as akin to a sanatorium offering a 'cure d'air' [air cure], claiming that '[l]a thérapeutique est simple: respire à pleins poumons' [the therapy is simple: breathe deeply].[34] Only if children were deemed by medical inspectors to have sufficient physical aptitude and strength, would they follow these breathing exercises with more strenuous forms of physical exercise. It was not unusual, as in the case of the open-air school in Villeneuve la Garenne (Saint-Denis) in the early 1920s, that only a minority of children were initially deemed strong enough for such further physical training.[35]

While one can trace the influence of Ling in the emphasis on respiratory gymnastics, what prevailed in terms of the physical exercises that followed it was the so-called 'natural method' of Georges Hébert, the influential naval lieutenant whose approach dominated French public institutions in the early to mid-twentieth century. Whether one looks at the armed forces, schools, sporting and leisure associations or open-air schools, one sees the *hébertiste* method of enacting movements such as running, climbing, and jumping outdoors, preferably *torse nu* [bare-chested].[36] Hébert had captured the attention of the public authorities through his pre-1914 work with athletes at the Collège de Reims, and had spoken at the international congress on open-air schools held in

Paris in 1922. It was his method that the Paris municipality and the Seine Department advocated where open-air schools were concerned.[37] What appealed so much about Hébert's approach was not only that it did not require expensive equipment, but also that it promised to protect the human organism from fatigue – what was widely described as *surmenage* [overwork] – thus making the body more resistant to disease, including tuberculosis.[38]

The results of this training were to be captured through a system of medical *fiches* that recorded vital metrics like height, weight, and lung capacity. The latter involved the periodic use of a spirometer. As Dr André Dufour attested for the case of the open-air school in Orléans, many children were so weak on arrival that they had insufficient puff at first even to register a result on the instrument.[39] Alice Jouenne, one of the organizers of the open-air school at Bastion 42, claimed that the children came to love blowing into the spirometer, boasting to their friends about how much they had improved.[40] Fresh air combined with physical exercise was thought to stimulate the appetite, explaining why children put on weight so readily, especially those – or so it was observed – from unhygienic households who had poor diets. Physical exercise would also cure children of their apathy so that they developed 'physical and intellectual vitality': the pale became tanned, rounded backs straightened, muscles strengthened, swollen bellies slimmed down, sleep improved.[41] In the initial experiments at Bastion 15, average weight gain ranged from 1.1kg to 2.6kg for boys and even more for girls, and both sexes gained over 7cm in height. The pupils were allegedly more resistant to fatigue and illness, too.[42] At the open-air school in Montigny-sur-Loing (Seine-et-Marne), something similar was reported for the early 1920s.[43] In a sign of how entrenched these methods were, both the medical *fiche* and Hébert-inspired physical aptitude tests, which had the virtue of showing the 'talented' their 'deficiencies' as well as highlighting the abilities of the 'chétif' [puny], were widely used in *colonies de vacances* as late as 1955.[44]

In La Maison pour Tous, there was no daily schedule that all members experienced, since they engaged with the association in different ways. While some members might have only used the association's library, stocked with travel writing and novels, or enjoyed the weekly evening classes in domestic management aimed at young women (classes taught cooking and sewing skills as well as house maintenance and childcare[45]), the association strongly encouraged participation in physical activity. (See Figure 3.) The children and adolescents who spent their summer weeks in the 1930s at the holiday house on the Norman coast played team games on the beach. As the association's leaders attested, the 'physical results' were excellent, but a combination of communal living and the challenges posed by the harsh climate, also improved character, especially for the older youth who took more responsibility for looking after the young.[46] Members of the association back in Paris could benefit from the manual work of tending the premise's small garden

as well as outdoor games and rhythmic gymnastics.[47] The Maison's extensive system of holiday camps had their charges hiking and swimming from the interwar years through the 1950s and beyond, and after 1945 the commitment to team sports, which included basketball, volleyball and judo, was formalized and extended.[48] Yet, the association was less concerned than were open-air schools with tailoring physical exercise according to children's perceived level of physical strength, there was little celebration of the *hébertiste* method or measurement of results, and it did not care to distinguish between the educative or beneficial value of physical exercise and that of competitive, team sports, which were in any case more prominent after 1945 than before.[49] All physical movement was deemed beneficial, providing a tonic that invigorated the body, developed social responsibility, and lifted the spirits of inner-city Parisian children and teenagers.

The natural health cure

The exercise cure was not expected to work in isolation. Just as the physical environment in which open-air schools and holiday camps took place was imagined to have a tonic effect on the children who experienced them, so physical movement was complemented by other natural elements to revivify and strengthen the organism. Most commonly, the *cure d'exercice* was combined with the *cure d'air,* the *cure de soleil* and the *cure de repos* [air cure, sun cure, rest cure].[50] In open-air schools, lessons were conducted outside as far as the weather permitted, sometimes under specially constructed awnings to protect children from the rain. At the Ecole de Gally-Trianon in Versailles, children carried their desks on their backs to a clearing in the woods to construct an open-air classroom, which made sure that an element of physical training was incorporated even in the academic-focused part of the programme.[51]

More calibrated was the sun cure, otherwise known as heliotherapy or the 'bain de soleil' [sun bath]. It occupied an important place in every open-air school, even if its proponents intuited the imagined health benefits rather than anchor their claims in the emerging medical research in actinology that pointed to the anti-bacterial properties of sunlight and the healing nature of ultra-violet rays.[52] It was enough that the leading supporter of the open-air schools movement, Professor Armand Delille, had proclaimed the 'cure miraculeuse' [miraculous cure] of his own therapeutic experiments with light and solar warmth at the international congress on open-air schools in 1922. Inexpensive and easy to administer, sun therapy 'reconstitue le tissu osseux, guérit le rachitisme, remplace l'huile de foie de morue, nourrit les tissus, fortifie les muscles et régénère tout l'organisme' [reconstitutes bone tissue, cures rickets, substitutes for cod liver oil, nourishes tissues, strengthens muscles and regenerates the organism].[53] Careful management was required, so that

the children exposed progressively more flesh for longer periods over time.[54] At Bastion 42 (20th *arrondissement*), at first the feet were exposed to the sun for a mere five minutes, and it was several days before whole legs and arms were uncovered. The children apparently enjoyed their new tanned skin: flushed with 'une vie nouvelle' [a new life], colds, 'mollesse physique, mines chétives et pâlotes' [physical softness, sickly and pale appearance] disappeared, so much so that their parents were eager to learn how to effect the cure themselves.[55] At the open-air school in Montigny-sur-Loing, children developed 'de mines superbe' [perfect complexions] through such healing rays; they were no longer pink like 'citadins anémiques' [anaemic urbanites], but brown and bronzed.[56]

The sun cure provided by the physical activities and holiday camps of La Maison pour Tous was no less prominent for being much less overtly medicalized. From the early 1920s, young members took obvious comfort and pleasure in sunning themselves on rocks after quick swims in cold rivers.[57] In the late 1930s, the association's Norman holiday camps were promoted on the basis of offering 'good summer sun' and the prospect of returning home with a tan; the same held for the mid-1950s.[58] If the Maison's sun worship had specific medical underpinnings, what they were is unclear. Unlike the case in open-air schools, for instance, there is no evidence that the association's leaders were inspired by the naturist physician Dr Paul Carton, who deployed sun cures in his own open-air school in south-eastern Paris (Brévannes) during the First World War.[59] It may be that the Maison was channelling nothing other than the growing interwar cultural openness to exposing one's body to the sun's rays for the loosely therapeutic purposes of relaxation and aesthetic enhancement.[60] In other words, at least by the late 1930s, the healthful benefits of heliotherapy and the physical movement that often accompanied it – at the beach, in the countryside – were so embedded in cultures of leisure, wellbeing and appearance that they did not need overt medicalized rationales in order to persuade anyone of their power.

Wellbeing and the emotions

An emphasis on rest and relaxation – often referred to as the *cure de repos* – was ubiquitous in open-air schools and other medico-social establishments such as *colonies scolaires,* preventoria and sanatoria, even if it featured in less calibrated ways in La Maison pour Tous. Typically, relaxation in open-air schools took the form of a post-lunch siesta of up to 2 hours, with the children lying down on beds placed outside if the weather was clement enough. In some establishments, such as Bastion 42, children were forced to observe silence during the rest period.[61] Their conviction that mind and body were connected meant that for the directors of *écoles de plein air* physical health depended upon the kind of (rest-induced) mental equilibrium, which conversely required a degree

of corporeal health. The ubiquitous mantra of the interwar press – that the goal of physical exercise was to achieve 'a sound mind in a sound body' – gestures towards this way of seeing. If we understand that slogan purely in relation to a eugenicist pursuit of 'improving the race', we are likely to miss the interest in psychological and emotional health expressed by those invested in the therapeutic use of physical exercise and other 'natural' cures. It was not so much that the rest cure was intended to treat those already deemed mentally ill or those presumed to be susceptible to mental instability, though at times that was the case. Rather, proponents of integrated natural cures often implied that physical fitness would improve one's mental health. For example, medics and pedagogues in the 1930s held that daily physical exercise for children in open-air schools was important both for assuring 'the normal development of the muscles' and 'the effective discipline of the nervous system' as well as 'the regular exercise of the senses'.[62] Even the much less medicalized framework deployed by La Maison pour Tous held that physical activity would help to 'balance' the child's nervous system 'harmoniously.[63]

Interwar proponents of the physical exercise and rest cures did not only feel an impetus to make people healthy in body and mind, but also to make them happy. While the term 'bien-être' [wellbeing] does not appear very often in these sources, a vocabulary of 'joy' is pervasive. It is there in the textured account of the open-air school at Bastion 42 published by one of its directors, Alice Jouenne. And it also peppers the more technical and theoretical writings of Maurice Boigey, the director of physical education at the military training college the École de Joinville, who was a *de facto* early practitioner of sport science.[64] La Maison pour Tous leaders spoke of the association's 'ambition to offer our friends in this working neighbourhood a bit more health, a bit more light, a bit more joy'.[65] And its early leader, André Lefevre claimed that the teenagers in its Éclaireurs branch [secular Scouts] would learn how to make their homes more comfortable, 'beau' [attractive] and 'heureux' [happy].[66]

What explains much of this concern with happiness is the commitment of many open-air school organizers, as well as the leaders of La Maison pour Tous, to the pedagogical principles of the so-called 'new education' movement. Alice Jouenne was explicit about what they were: a child-centred approach that eschewed book learning in favour of observational and immersive, experiential methods, which also took the development of the child's whole personality into account.[67] Open-air schools, she wrote, must not replicate the social hierarchy of conventional schools, in which children's autonomy was restricted.[68] Ball games should not be forbidden for fear that children might break a window, or climbing ropes banned because dust might make you blind; it was parents who needed correction if they complained that their children knew nothing other than how to play. Such games as hide and seek, wrestling, chasey and blind man's bluff not

only made children happy, they inculcated skills like memory, reason and 'mastery of self'.[69] According to pedagogues specializing in physical education in the 1930s, holiday camps for children, too, should develop in each child 'l'aptitude à réaliser en lui-même le maximum de ses possibilités humaines, sans altérer la fraîcheur de ses impressions naïves et sincères' [the aptitude to achieve his full human potential, without spoiling the freshness of his innocent and honest feelings].[70] Such active pedagogical methods required a three-stage process – observation, experiment, speculation. Children might be asked to observe angles in a garden that they could measure, and then work out how to calculate the surface area.[71] In the 1930s, the leaders of La Maison pour Tous asserted that its entire operation needed to 'respect the personality [character] of the child and to give each the means to develop it'.[72]

The 'new education' did not completely displace older and quite different frameworks for understanding the value of physical exercise and its interaction with other kinds of natural health cures. In the open-air schools at least, a language of nervosity reminiscent of nineteenth-century medical understandings of the heredity of mental illness sat alongside a more diffuse language of moral education, which harks back to more conventional nineteenth-century pedagogical models based on the importance of discipline. This was the case even in the most self-consciously progressive open-air school run by the socialist Alice Jouenne in the 20th *arrondissement*.[73] Children judged to possess a 'bad attitude' were made to take their daily siesta with their hands on the outside of their bed covers. Games that were 'calmes et reposants' [peaceful and relaxing] were all that 'enfants débiles' [imbecilic children] or the 'nerveux' [the nervous] could handle, that is, 'ces exercices qui amusent sans exciter' [exercises that entertain without agitating]. [74] Violent games were banned in the school because they were deemed to have a negative effect on both nerves and circulation.[75] Nonetheless, what is hiding in plain sight among such familiar interpretive frameworks, whether medical or pedagogical, is an enduring and quite serious interest in the emotional wellbeing of the subjects at the centre of the open-air schools' institutional attention.

The emphasis on wellbeing intensified after the Second World War, even as the open-air schools faded away in the face of the widespread availability of an effective pharmaceutical treatment for tuberculosis.[76] Specialist literature continued to attest to how children in the increasingly popular *colonies de vacances* embraced mandated periods of rest with 'joy' especially after the exertion of physical exercise, throwing themselves down on their beds spontaneously, 'avec leur slip mouillé sur eux' [with their underwear still wet on them].[77] After all, commitment to progressive pedagogies did not evaporate – whether in La Maison pour Tous or elsewhere – even as the 'new education' movement itself fragmented after 1945.[78] There were, moreover, new reasons to fear for the physical and emotional health of children, in particular that they had been

'nerveusement déséquilibrés par l'atmosphère de guerre et les bombardements' [emotionally destabilized by the atmosphere of war and bombing].[79] War-traumatized children, it was said, also had to contend with the noise and frenetic pace of modern life. They lived in a state of physical and nervous deficiency so that any 'cure de santé' [health cure] had to provide 'la recherche du calme nerveux' [the search for emotional peace], to combat poor sleep in overcrowded bedrooms, and the constant noises of the household – talking, chairs scraping the floor, mothers using the family sewing machine at all hours – if emotional exhaustion was to be averted.[80] Physical exercise, fresh air and sun, and rest continued to offer a tonic for such agitated souls.

Similar concerns informed the post-war work of open-air schools, too, as in the case of the school in the Isère whose pupils comprised many war orphans and children of deportees.[81] Indeed, after 1945 children were less likely to be recruited from among the 'pre-tubercular' but rather from those suffering from non-contagious chronic health conditions such as asthma and from what were increasingly described by a range of interested professionals as psychological problems.[82] Yet instead of expanding the open-air schools, the French state invested instead in a new system of *maisons d'enfants* [children's homes] to meet the needs of supposedly maladjusted – including war-traumatized – children, even if their therapies appear to have been underpinned less by medical naturism than by developmental models of psychology.[83] Such developments betray a more profound mid-century shift towards understanding individual behaviour in psychological terms. Even the criminal justice system that emerged from the war and Occupation experience was much more finely attuned to the emotional disturbances of delinquent youth, moving towards a therapeutic model of treatment rather than mere punishment.[84]

Conclusion

From the 1920s, some kind of *cure d'exercice* was commonly deployed in several grassroots organizations that received much public – municipal, departmental, state – funding and moral support. Despite clear differences in the provision of sport and physical exercise across these establishments, all actors were concerned with the physical and mental health of impoverished urban children, and their rationales for catering to such a demographic encompassed a crusade against tuberculosis, an awareness of how poor living conditions compounded problems of inherited (disposition to) disease, and a sensitivity to the longer-term implications of this state of affairs for the French nation. Yet, as I have emphasized, their efforts cannot be reduced to a hygienist mission that was both patrician and eugenicist. One striking feature of this field of activity is how consistently and deeply its leaders were responding to what they perceived to be the fundamental need of children to achieve emotional as well as physical health.

Furthermore, studying this commitment to the exercise cure ought to help us see beyond the framing of mid-20th-century state investment in leisure, education and physical training as tied exclusively to the initiatives of the mid-1930s Popular Front. To cite perhaps the best known example, Dr Pierre Dézarnaulds, the undersecretary of state for physical education, launched an experiment across the 1936–37 academic year: children in state primary schools in three provincial departments—the Aude, Loiret, and Meurthe-et-Moselle – underwent five hours per week of physical education, much of it spent in the open air performing Hébert's 'natural method' in order to strengthen their constitutions.[85] Open-air schools and the embeddedness of physical exercise in civic leisure associations may have been transformed in the interwar years but it was in the 1920s that their star ascended. They were a response to the First World War more than an anticipation of the social democratic turn of the mid-1930s, and they have their roots in even earlier periods, stretching back to the late nineteenth century. The work of the Popular Front itself owed a great deal to the shift towards the medicalization of physical education in schools and the army that took place the 1920s. Its apparent novelties thus speak more to continuity and expansion than to innovation *per se*.

Just as the caesura of 1936 ought not to be overstated, neither should we presume that military defeat and regime change in 1940 brought necessary rupture. Despite the disruptions posed by the German Occupation to the work of La Maison pour Tous – the ban on scouting activities, material shortages, the requisition of its coastal properties, and a decrease in engagement caused by fearful parents – the organization claims to have carried on as best it could between 1940 and 1944.[86] Open-air schools continued to be supported by French municipalities and were also authorized by the German Occupiers, even if in one case delays in construction meant that it fell to the post-1944 authorities to complete a project for a new one. Meanwhile, Vichy legislative innovation in this field bore the imprint of administrative conversations begun well before 1940.[87] Much of the Vichy regime's physical education policy, too, was inherited from the republican period. The undoubted hygienist concerns of the Vichy state were much more a product of developments in the 1920s and 1930s than a reflection either of Vichy's conservative authoritarianism or the presence of the German occupiers, who left the French to govern themselves in this respect.[88] Equally, the collapse of *écoles de plein air* after the war owed much more to longer-term medical and cultural developments than to the political shocks of the Liberation era.

In pointing to where these early to mid-20th century open-air experiments sit within longer trajectories, one might recognize the roots of contemporary sports science, physiotherapy and occupational health, as well as forms of stress management and even self-help. Ultimately, when

we appreciate how interwar contemporaries linked the exercise cure to other natural therapies and assumed an implicit mind-body connection, we might better understand 'sport-santé' as it developed across Europe in the 1990s as a fully-fledged transnational concept and institutional framework for associational sports bodies.[89] That this latter development caught the eye of French government ministries as well as the European Union in turn explains the official endorsement of sport and physical exercise as a therapy meriting formal prescription by medical doctors. Finally, that associational advocates of such 'sport-santé' tend also to insist on improving – while being careful to nourish – the self seems indicative of even deeper cultural transformations in the experience of subjectivity across the 20th-century, while also making it easier for us to identify the institutional underpinnings of today's pervasive wellness industry.

Notes

[1] Dr Henri Diffre, *Les Parcs d'enfants* (Auxerre: Imprimerie l'Universelle, 1934), 24.
[2] Bernard Andrieu, *Histoire du sport-santé: du naturisme à la médecine du bien-être* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021), 114-18.
[3] Philippe Tétart, ed., *Histoire du sport en France: du Second Empire au régime de Vichy* (Paris, 2007); Nye, Robert A. 'Degeneration, neurasthenia and the culture of sport in *Belle Époque* France', *Journal of Contemporary History,* vol. 17, 1982, 51-68; Nye, Robert A., *Crime, madness, and politics in modern France: the medical concept of national decline* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).
[4] Jean Saint-Martin, *L'Education physique à l'épreuve de la nation, 1918-1939* (Paris : Vuibert, 2005).
[5] Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the male body: masculinity and the uses of physical culture in interwar and Vichy France,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[6] Laura Downs has underscored this point in relation to *colonies de vacances* in *Childhood in the promised land: working-class movements and the* colonies de vacances *in France, 1880-1960* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 291-5.
[7] 'La Maison pour Tous : un centre social et une maison des jeunes dans un quartier populaire de Paris', n.d. type script, [1960s], 2-3, Archives de Paris [hereafter AP] D.76Z 8.
[8] It was to address this problem that the Enfant au Grand Air association, in collaboration with a newly created military Centre regional d'instruction physique (CRIP), sent almost 200 children from northern and eastern French cities to a summer camp on the Atlantic coast in 1920. The activities focused on physical exercise overseen by CRIP instructors. 'Rapport de M. H. Grumbach sur la colonie de Malakoff de « l'Enfant au grand air »', 31 July 1920-5 Oct. 1920, AP D2T1 16.
[9] Anne-Marie Châtelet, *Le Souffle du plein air : histoire d'un projet pédagogique et architectural novateur (1904-1952)* (Geneva : Metis Presses, 2011), 94-102.
[10] 'Premier congrès international des écoles de plein air', Faculty of Medicine, Paris, 24-28 June 1922, AP D2T1 16.
[11] Minister of Public Instruction and Beaux-Arts to the Inspecteur d'académie', 6 Sept. 1922, AP D2T1 16.
[12] 'Ouverture de crédit pour le fonctionnement d'écoles de plein air', *Bulletin municipal officiel,* 5 Jan. 1922, AP D2T1 16. Such language features not infrequently in the rhetorical defence of the open-air schools movement. See Frédéric Brunet, the progressive deputy and president of the *conseil général* of the Seine department in the mid-1920s, in his preface to Alice Jouenne, *Une Expérience d'éducation nouvelle: l'école de plein air* (Paris: Editions Rado, 1927), 7; and the views of medical doctors Louis Dufestel and Henri Méry cited in, Anne-Marie Châtelet, 'Des idées aux bâtiments: l'essor des écoles de plein air en France (1907-1940)', in Anne-Marie Châtelet, Dominique Lerch and Jean-Noël Luc, eds, *L'Ecole de plein air : une expérience pédagogique et architecturale dans l'Europe du XXe siècle* (Editions Recherches, 2003), 183.
[13] The 'preventorium' at Plessis-Robinson in southern Paris was an exception. Chaplain, *Les Ecoles de plein air*, 24.
[14] 'Ouverture de crédit pour le fonctionnement d'écoles de plein air'.
[15] Bellocq et al, *Les Ecoles de plein air,* 16-17 ; Châtelet, *Le Souffle du plein air,* 301.
[16] Statutes, 1930, 5 ; André Lefevre, 'Rapport moral', 18 Apr. 1937, 'Un peu d'histoire' in *La Maison pour tous,* n.d., 20, AP D.76Z 8.
[17] See Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: political culture in France, 1934-9* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 151-82, on 'maisons de culture'.

[18] Downs, *Childhood in the promised land,* 195ff.
[19] Inspiration came from open-air schools in Charlottenburg (1904), Mulhouse (1906), London (1907), Rome (1912) and Lysin (Switzerland). André Dufour, 'Organisation et fonctionnement de deux écoles de plein air : les résultats obtenus', Thèse pour le doctorat en médecine, Faculté de Médecine de Paris Orléans: Imprimerie Henri Tessier, 1923), 12, 17 ; Châtelet, *Le Souffle du plein air*.
[20] Jean-Michel Delaplace, *Georges Hebert : sculpteur de corps* (Paris : Vuibert, 2005), 41-130.
[21] Dr G. Chaplain, *Les Écoles de plein air* (Paris: Jouve et Cie, Editeurs, 1921), 20-21.
[22] For example, the children's park at La Bourboule (Puy-de-Dôme) run by Dr Henri Diffre, *Les Parcs d'enfants*.
[23] Lefevre, 'Rapport moral', 18 (for quotation) and 4 ; 'La Maison pour Tous, un centre social et une maison des jeunes dans un quartier populaire de Paris', 16.
[24] Chaplain, *Les Écoles de plein air,* 31. There are countless similar examples around the country, where open-air schools were set up on spacious, green land outside the supposedly toxic air of cities.
[25] Chaplain, *Les Écoles de plein air*, 36.
[26] Anne-Marie Châtelet, et al, eds, *L'Ecole de plein air,* and Châtelet, *Le Souffle du plein air.*
[27] This was the case at Montigny-sur-Loign. See the report by its teacher, M. Robinet, dated 24 Oct. 1923, AP D2T1 16. At the open-air school in Orléans the children were reported to love gardening, Dufour, 'Organisation et fonctionnement de deux écoles de plein air, 29.
[28] Jouenne, *Une Expérience d'éducation nouvelle,* 134-6.
[29] Proponents of open-air schools sometimes described the exercise cure as improving children's 'terrain', thus strengthening their resistance to TB. Christian-Laurent de Chorivit de Sagardibru, 'Les Préventoria et les écoles de plein air dans la lutte antituberculeuse', Thèse pour le doctorat en médecine, 25 June 1943, Faculté de Médecine et de Pharmacie, 1942-3, Université de Bordeaux (Bordeaux: Imprimerie Librarie Delmas, 1943), 49. For this wider medical context, see Sylvain Villaret and Jean-Philippe Saint-Martin, 'L'influence du naturisme sur les écoles de plein air en France (1900-1939)', in Châtelet et al, eds, *L'Ecole de plein air,* 230-37 ; Michael A. Osborne and Richard S. Fogarty write about the appeal of vitalism and humoralism among early twentieth-century French neo-Hippocratic practitioners, in 'Medical Climatology in France: The Persistence of Neo-Hippocratic Ideas in the First Half of the Twentieth Century', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, vol. 86, no. 4, Winter 2012, 543-63; George Weisz, 'Hippocrates, holism and humanism in interwar France', in David Cantor, ed., *Reinventing Hippocrates* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).
[30] Chaplain, *Les Écoles de plein air*, 34
[31] Ibid., 35-6. Such programmes were typical. See Dr Charles Perron, *Écoles de plein air dans les espaces libres des grandes villes* (Paris : Amédée Legrand, 1922), 37.
[32] Jouenne, *Une Expérience d'éducation nouvelle*, 117-125.
[33] The open-air school at Bastion 15 held two hours of Swedish gymnastics every afternoon, in which breathing exercises were followed by use of gym apparatus ('barre fixe' and climbing ropes) to build muscular strength. M. Leclerc, 'Rapport de fin d'année, École de plein air, 20e arrondissement, boulevard Mortier', 25 Sept.1922, AP D2T1 16.
[34] 'Les Écoles de plein air ont déjà un passé', *La Patrie,* 5 Nov. 1921, AP D2T1 16.
[35] 'Classe aérée et de perfectionnement physique de Villeneuve la Garenne. Rapport d'ensemble', n.d. [early 1920s], AP D2T1 16.
[36] Delaplace, *Georges Hébert : sculpteur de corps.*
[37] 'Ouverture de crédit', pour le fonctionnement d'écoles de plein air'.
[38] Perron, *Écoles de plein air,* 52-4.
[39] Dufour, 'Organisation et fonctionnement de deux écoles de plein air', 36.
[40] Jouenne, *Une Expérience d'éducation nouvelle.*
[41] Dufour, 'Organisation et fonctionnement de deux écoles de plein air', 30-32 (Orléans). Something similar had been observed at the EPA in Vernay (Rhône) in 1907, Chaplain, *Les Écoles de plein air,* 21.
[42] Chaplain, *Les Écoles de plein air,* 37. The EPA at Bastions 47 and 15 operated a system of *fiches sanitaires* and constant medical supervision, 42-7.
[43] M. Robinet, report dated 24 Oct. 1923, AP D2T1 16; 'Inspecteur primaire' of the 17th 'circonscription' to the director of primary education in the Department of the Seine, 2 Nov. 1923, AP D2T1 16.
[44] André Schmitt and André Boulogne, *La Cure de santé et les jeux des enfants : 'colonies de vacances'* (Paris : Les Editions du Scarabée, 1955), 29.
[45] Lefevre, 'Rapport moral', 14-15.
[46] Ibid., 7.
[47] Ibid., 4.
[48] Unsigned handwritten notebook, 'Maison p. Tous, Groupe Éclaireur, C/vac camp', 1921, AP D.76Z 12 ; 'Plein air', *La Touffe de Gui : journal de la Maison pour Tous,* May 1955, 4, AP D.76Z 8.
[49] Lefevre, 'Rapport moral', 4.
[50] De Chorivit, 'Les Préventoria et les écoles de plein air dans la lutte antituberculeuse', 11 ; Perron, *Écoles de plein air*, 41-49.
[51] Chaplain, *Les Écoles de plein air,* 31-32.

[52] Dr Laquerrière, 'L'influence des rayons ultra-violets sur l'organisme', *Guérir: revue bi-mensuelle de vulgarisation médicale & scientifique,* Feb. 1932, 2. The Institut d'Actinologie was created in Paris by Dr Jean Saidman in the mid-1920s, but medical research and application of the sun cure, including in thermal spa resorts, expanded in the 1930s. See J. Aimard et al, eds, *La Lumière solaire et artificielle, l'ultra-violet, l'infra-rouge',* 6e éd. (Paris : L'Expansion scientifique française, 1941).
[53] Jouenne, *Une Expérience d'éducation nouvelle,* 139.
[54] This was typical. Chaplain, *Les Écoles de plein air*, 50-54.
[55] Jouenne, *Une Expérience d'éducation nouvelle*, 140-41.
[56] Robinet, report, 24 Oct. 1923.
[57] 'Maison p. Tous, Groupe Éclaireur, C/vac camp'.
[58] Lefevre, 'Rapport moral', 1938, 2-3; 'Colonie de vacances', *La Touffe de Gui : journal de la Maison pour Tous,* May 1955, 4, AP D.76Z 8.
[59] Chaplain, *Les Écoles de plein air,* 55 ; Dr Paul Carton, *La Cure de soleil et d'exercices chez les enfants,* 3e éd. (Brévannes, 1935), 21-41. Carton's advocacy of combined physical exercise, water therapy and 'silent' rest cure still had purchase in *colonies de vacances* after 1945. Schmitt and Boulogne, *La Cure de santé et les jeux des enfants*, 36, 45-47.
[60] Christophe Granger, *Les Corps d'été, XXe siècle: naissance d'une variation saisonnière* (Paris : Éditions Autrement, 2009).
[61] Jouenne, *Une Expérience d'éducation nouvelle*. This was also the case at Montigny-sur-Loign. Robinet report, 24 Oct.
[62] Bellocq et al, *Les Écoles de plein air*, 22.
[63] Louise Rapacka-Cuisinier, 'Les Souvenirs sur Mère Louve' [Marthe Levasseau], n.d. typescript, 6pp, AP D.76Z 8.
[64] Dr Maurice Boigey, *Préceptes et maximes d'éducation physique* (Paris : Payot & Cie, 1920).
[65] Lefevre, 'Rapport moral', 4.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Jouenne, *Une Expérience d'éducation nouvelle*, 145ff. and 194ff, 'L'enfant devant la nature', which looks back to J.J. Rousseau.
[68] Jouenne, ibid., 125-7.
[69] Ibid., 126-7, 129, 132.
[70] Dr Philippe Bellocq, Isaïe Forceville and Dr M. Dumesnil, *Les Écoles de plein air* (Strasbourg : Libraire de la Mésange, 1937), 30. For the early 1920s, see Perron, *Écoles de plein air,* 64-76.
[71] Bellocq et al, *Les Écoles de plein air,* 24. A similar method was enacted at the EPA in Orléans, Dufour, 'Organisation et fonctionnement de deux écoles de plein air, 25.
[72] Lefevre, 'Rapport moral', 4.
[73] On Jouenne's politics, see Antoine Savoye, 'Écoles de plein air et éducation nouvelle en France (1920-1950)', in Châtelet et al, *L'École de plein air,* 282-3.
[74] Jouenne, *Une Expérience d'éducation nouvelle,* 130.
[75] Ibid., 134.
[76] Châtelet, *Le Souffle du plein air,* 302.
[77] Schmitt and Boulogne, *La Cure de santé et les jeux des enfants*, 49.
[78] Edward Montier, 'Le Sillon et l'éducation populaire', *Chronique sociale,* 1950, 96-100.
[79] Schmitt and Boulogne, *La Cure de santé et les jeux des enfants*, 10
[80] Ibid., 48-9.
[81] 'Aériums, préventoriums, colonies sanitaires, 1946-48' dossier, AN F17 14299.
[82] Châtelet, *Le Souffle du plein air,* 302.
[83] Savoye, 'Écoles de plein air et éducation nouvelle en France (1920-1950)', 286.
[84] Sarah Fishman, *The Battle for children: World War II, youth crimes, and juvenile justice in twentieth-century France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002). The attitude resonates in G. Bilbille, director of La Maison Pour Tous, n.d., 'Réflexions sur l'adolescence', AP D.76Z 8.
[85] Dr Paul Chailley-Bert, 'Les horaires de l'éducation physique dans l'enseignement secondaire', *Rapports du Congrès international de médecine appliquée à l'Education physique et aux sports* , Paris, 11–17 July 1937, 86; 'Expérience Dézarnaulds' dossier in the private papers of Jean Zay, AN 667, AP 61.
[86] Marthe Levasseur, 'Vingt-cinq années d'action directe dans le quartier Mouffetard', pamphlet, n.d. (1945), 9-12, AP D.76Z 8.
[87] Dominique Lerch, 'Que sont les écoles de plein air devenues ? Leur évolution en France après la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale', in Châtelet, et al, eds, *L'Ecole de plein air,* 391-3 ; Savoye, 'Écoles de plein air et éducation nouvelle en France (1920-1950)', 286.
[88] Tumblety, *Remaking the male body,* Ch. 6
[89] Andrieu, *Histoire du sport-santé,* 110-15.